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# The Role of Parental and Family Involvement in the Persistence of Freshman First-Generation College Students

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DePaul University  
College of Education

THE ROLE OF PARENTAL AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN THE PERSISTENCE OF  
FRESHMAN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

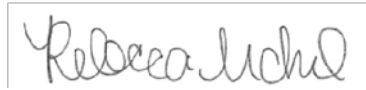
A Dissertation in Education  
With a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by  
Ray O. Grant

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
Doctor of Education  
June 2020

We approve the dissertation of Ray Grant.



May 15, 2020

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### **Certification of Authorship**

I certify that I am the sole author of this dissertation. Any assistance received in the preparation of this dissertation has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this dissertation according program guidelines, as directed.

Author Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ray L", written in a cursive style.

Date: May 15, 2020

## **ABSTRACT**

The number of first-generation college students has increased steadily over the years. These students faced many barriers to their academic success as they transitioned to college including limited support from family members. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to understand what role, if any, the support of parents and family helped first-generation students to persist in their academics during the first year of college. Six sophomore first-generation college students from a private Catholic institution in an urban setting in the Midwest were interviewed for the study along with six of their family members. The sophomore first-generation students reflected on their experiences during the first year of college. Participants discussed how they perceived and understood family support in their home life, the relationships between students and parents, and the way students interacted with their peers. Three findings emerged from the research: (1) the support provided by parents was instrumental in helping first-generation college students persist during their first year in school, (2) students and parents understood the college experience from different points of views, resulting in family tension and a “push and pull” dynamic that fostered an educational resilience among the students, (3) parents were more able to support students with financial resources and emotional encouragement and less able to address mental health issues. These findings showed the need for parental programming to support the educational experiences of first-generation college students and mechanisms to help parents become aware of the mental health challenges of students.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Administrators have long believed that access to higher education can lead to great opportunities for traditionally marginalized groups of students by enhancing their social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Earning a college degree “remains one of the most critical pathways to economic and social mobility in the United States” (Garriott et al., 2015, p. 253). Understanding more about the experiences of students from marginalized and underserved populations, such as those whose parents did not attain higher education, can provide an understanding of social mobility. The Higher Education Act of 1965 was passed by Congress in order to improve social and economic mobility in the United States. This legislation increased college enrollment significantly and for the first time many groups gained access to higher education.

One such group of students to obtain access to higher education in greater numbers was first-generation college students, individuals whose parents did not attend college, or who may have attended college and completed some coursework, but did not graduate (Nunez & Cucaro-Alamin, 1998). Between 1992 and 2000, on average 22% of college students were from first-generation backgrounds (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Recent data showed the number of first-generation college students attending colleges and universities is sizable and significant (Cataldi et al., 2018; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Jehanagir, 2010; Keup, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that from 1992 to 2015, the number of first-generation college students entering postsecondary education increased from 22% to 43% (Cataldi et al., 2018; Nunez & Cucaro-Alamin, 1998; Skomsvold, 2015). This increase, coupled with a gap in the educational outcomes between first-generation and non-first-generation college students (Pike & Kuh, 2005) and institutions implementing initiatives to increase retention and

graduation rates, meant it was important to understand the needs of first-generation college students (Gibbons & Woodside, 2012).

Many first-generation college students expressed pride being the first in their family to attend a postsecondary institution (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018). This achievement often came with pressure from their support system, including parents and loved ones, to continue to contribute to the home structure, thus placing stress on the student to succeed in their educational aspirations and at home (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). For some, attending college was disruptive to the expectations and obligations of family members (Covarrubias et al., 2015). Wang and Nuru (2017) found that during the transition to college, first-generation college students were apprehensive about leaving their family behind, and this made them feel less likely to persist in school. For first-generation college students, parental and family support was very important to a successful transition to college.

Parents of first-generation college students typically lacked personal knowledge about the college environment and were unable to relate to some of the stressors their loved ones encountered in college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). This dynamic often led to a lack of connection between first-generation students and their family members (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). However, while these parents might not have directly had college experience, they could still be supportive in other ways. For example, Ratelle et al. (2005) found college student perseverance increased when students perceived their family environment as involved and supportive. Research suggested conversations between parents and first-generation college students about obtaining better opportunities through education could be encouraging in helping students persist in their studies and obtain a college degree (Wang & Nuru, 2017). These

supportive conversations were especially important for students starting their first year of college (Wang & Nuru, 2017).

Freshman first-generation college students face a number of challenges as they transition to an environment that was very different from their previous experiences in high school. These challenges included academic preparation (Artherton, 2014; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2006) and academic integration (Engle et al., 2006). The skills and knowledge students needed to acquire in high school in order to be successful in college helped them to be academically prepared. Many first-generation college students were not as prepared academically when compared to their non-first-generation peers because their parents did not understand the importance of taking challenging courses in high school (Warburton et al., 2001). First-generation college students tended not to enroll in advanced level courses or rigorous coursework in high school, and were less likely to receive the academic preparation needed for academic success in college (Choy, 2001).

Many factors contribute to college success, including academic and social integration. Academic integration defined how students adapt to the academic challenges of college such as understanding curriculum and learning complex subject material, academic performance, and their intellectual development. Many incoming freshman students performed poorly or dropped out of college when they did not connect to their institutions' community in a meaningful way (Folger et al., 2004). Social integration, which consists of such activities as students' interactions with their peers and faculty and extracurricular activities, was important for first-generation college students in helping them to feel a sense of community at their new learning institution. Parental support might be a way to help freshman first-generation college students overcome some of the academic and social challenges they face in college.

## **Problem Statement**

The persistence of first-generation students has been a major challenge for colleges and universities. The 2011-2012 academic year showed that far fewer first-generation college students persisted through college when compared to their continuing-generation counterparts and more of them left post-secondary education without earning a bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). First-generation college students were four times more likely to drop out of college when compared to their non-first-generation college counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008). A longitudinal student survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics with data from 1992 to 2000 highlighted attrition challenges faced by first-generation college students. This study concluded that 43% of first-generation students enrolled in post-secondary institutions did not complete their college degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Although colleges and universities have increased their efforts to provide access for first-generation college students, these institutions have found that retention issues continue to be a problem (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

First-generation students faced many barriers to academic success such as being single parents, attending college part-time, and working full-time (Jehangir, 2010). In addition, first-generation college students experienced difficulties transitioning to college (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy et al., 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004). These challenges highlighted the need for strategies that could help close the gaps in educational outcomes between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

One such strategy could be support from the parents and families for first-generation college students. The relationships between college students, their parents, and their extended family could impact their experiences in college (Kiyama et al., 2015). Researchers, college administrators, and other stakeholders in higher education should understand how strategies like

parental and family support could be used effectively to help first-generation college students persist through to graduation.

### **Purpose Statement**

It is important to find strategies to address the persistence issues among first-generation college students and understand how parents and family members can play a role in this process. While the parents of first-generation students did not attend or complete college and may be unable to help their children navigate college or to relate to their experiences (Fann et al., 2009), recent studies identified the influence of parents as playing a critical role in the success of first-generation college students (Cheng et al., 2011; Fauria & Zellner, 2015). There is intrinsic value in researching constituents of higher education such as first-generation college students and the experiences they share with their parents. First-generation college students were often regarded as high-risk students in terms of academic outcomes. Better understanding the influences on them and their own motivations could assist in predicting positive forms of support for these students.

Learning about the experiences and dynamics between first-generation college students and their parents could also help college and university officials understand how to support and retain these vulnerable students. Families contributed resources and values to their first-generation college (Gofen, 2009). Understanding those values could help to inform higher education administrators, researchers, and other student-related personnel who have direct contact with the parents and families about ways to support the persistence of first-generation college students.



## **Research Questions**

In order to gain a clear understanding of how, if at all, parents and families played a supportive role in the academic and educational experiences of freshman first-generation college students, the following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways do parents and families perceive their involvement in helping freshman first-generation college students persist through college?
2. How do freshman first-generation college students perceive the role of parents and family in their persistence through college?

## **Overview of Methodology**

A qualitative study using a phenomenological approach was conducted to understand how, if at all, the support of parents and families of freshman first-generation college students helped their loved ones persist through their academics. This research examined the perceptions of current sophomore first-generation students who reflected on their experiences during the first year of college, in addition to the views of their parents. The study explored how each group perceived and understood family support in their home life, the relationships between students and parents, and the way students interacted with their peers. The research was conducted at UCM, a large, private, Catholic university located in a Midwest urban environment.

Drawing on the family capital (Gofen, 2009) and social constructionist (Crotty, 2015) theoretical frameworks, this research contextualized the insights of parents on their experiences supporting their first-generation children during their first year in college. The family capital framework (Gofen, 2009) illuminated the nonmaterial contributions of families toward the success of their children. A social constructionist lens (Crotty, 2015) generated further understanding of the perceptions of the parents of the sophomore first-generation college students. This study gave voice to the parents of sophomore first-generation college students in

understanding their perceptions of college and of their children's participation in the college experience. These findings added depth to the existing body of literature on first-generation college students.

### **Rationale and Significance**

The first year of college is an important time for students as they transitioned to a new academic environment. For freshman first-generation college students, college could be a daunting experience where they felt isolated and did not fit into the campus culture (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). American university culture is rooted in middle-class norms of independence that are foundational to American society (Stephens et al., 2012). This structure left many first-generation students at a disadvantage with regards to their academic success. Researchers who studied the cultural obstacles first-generation college students faced as they transitioned from high school to college found there was a cultural mismatch that negatively affected the academic performance of these students (Stephens et al., 2012). First-generation college students also lacked the cultural capital needed to navigate the unspoken nature of an institution's "hidden curriculum" (O'Shea, 2016, p. 63). The hidden curriculum referred to a set of unwritten norms and expectations of college students such as how to obtain good grades, how to advocate for themselves, and how to take advantage of opportunities in the academic environment (Chatelain, 2018). It is important to help first-generation college student comprehend these expectations in order to be successful in their academics.

This study aimed to discover and gain an understanding of how the parents of first-generation college students directly comprehended their support of the academic endeavors of their children. The research has the potential to benefit first-generation college students and their

families by fostering a deeper understanding of how parental involvement in the academic pursuits of their children may lead to successful educational outcomes.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher is a first-generation student who worked as a middle management administrator at undergraduate and graduate institutions of higher learning. He has experience interacting with parents in the academic environment. In addition, he has a passion for understanding how groups such as first-generation students view the role of their parents and families in helping them persist through college. The researcher is committed to providing students with quality support mechanisms such as family involvement and finding ways to effectively engage them in the academic environment.

Given his background and current job responsibilities, the researcher understands and acknowledges that he has trusting relationships with many of the study participants and these relationships could potentially bias the research findings. For this phenomenological study, a key tenet of the research is that the researcher must suspend his biases, assumptions, and preconceived notions in order to describe the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As a professional in the field of higher education for many years, the researcher is committed to conducting ethical research. Throughout the course of the relationship, the researcher did not have any influence over participant grades, financial standing or any other circumstances that could have compromised his ability to conduct and report the research.

The researcher assumed that participants in the study answered the questions in a truthful and candid manner. He also assumed that study participants had a genuine interest in taking part in the study. In addition, the researcher believed that parents were forthcoming about their level of involvement in the educational experiences of their children.

### **Definitions of Key Terminology**

**First-generation college students.** The primary definition used throughout this study defines first-generation college students as those whose parents did not attend college, or who may have attended college and completed some coursework but did not graduate from a four-year institution (Nunez & Cucaro-Alamin, 1998). Other first-generation college student definitions are often referenced. The National Center for Education Statistics defined first-generation college students as those who were the first members of their families to attend college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). First-generation college students were also simply those who are the first in their immediate family to attend a post-secondary institution (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

**Parental involvement.** Parental involvement is described as a “a multidimensional construct composed of parental support giving, parent-student contact, and parental academic engagement and provide a unified theoretical perspective on how changes in parental involvement are inherently linked to emerging adults’ development of self-efficacy” (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018 p. 29).

**Persistence.** Persistence describes the steps taken by a student in continuing toward their educational goals such as graduating and obtaining their degree.

**Retention.** Retention is associated with attrition and refers to the ability of an institution to continue to actively engage the members of a particular group or cohort of students. Retention and persistence are sometimes used interchangeably.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to explore how, if at all, parental and family support could help freshman first-generation college students persist in their college education. Understanding the relationship between first-generation college students and their families could help higher education

administrators and researchers create successful strategies to foster academic success among this disadvantaged population of students. This dissertation study sought to better understand what role parents and families played in enhancing the academic success of freshman first-generation college students, while contributing to the body of literature on how this group of students persisted through college.

Chapter II includes a review of the literature on first-generation students and the involvement of their parents and families in helping them persist through college. This section concludes with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks used for the study. Chapter III closely examines the research design and details of the methodology for the study. Chapter IV highlights study findings. Chapter V discusses the student and parent themes that emerged from the study and how these findings were grounded in existing literature. Chapter VI concludes with implications of the research findings, and recommendations for higher education and future research.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

First-generation college students face a number of unique challenges while navigating the college environment. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 43% of first-generation students enrolled in post-secondary institutions did not complete their college degrees (Chen & Carroll, 2005). These students dropped out of higher education at a rate of four times that of their non-first-generation counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Support during the first year of college is important for first-generation college students as they transitioned to a new environment. Freshman students transitioning to college and high school students who considered going to college reported that parental involvement helped them feel supported as they navigated the next phase of their academic journey (Engle et al., 2006). Research that explored parent-student communication about freshman grades in first-generation and non-first-generation college students found that parental support was an important component of success for both groups of students (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Understanding the experiences and challenges of freshman first-generation college students could help educators and family members provide the support students need to be successful.

Parental support could encourage college student persistence. Some studies showed that parental and family involvement in the academic and social well-being of first-generation college students can impact their academic success and persistence (Gibbons et al., 2016; Kiyama et al., 2015; Sy et al., 2011). Additionally, Reed et al. (2016) found that the behaviors of parents such as encouraging independence, problem-solving, and self-efficacy can have a positive effect on the well-being of students. These studies suggested that when parents understand the challenges and experiences of first-generation students, they can better help students to cope with the pressures of school.

In addition to parental support, other strategies encouraged college students' retention. First-generation college students who participated in first-year seminar (FYS) courses, showed significant positive effects on their grade point average (Vaughan et al., 2014). Additionally, these students were more likely to persist to the second semester when compared to students who were not enrolled in such a program (Vaughan et al., 2014). Students enrolled in a Freshman Empowerment Program for incoming freshman first-generation college students had significantly higher GPAs after the first and second semesters than those who did not participate in this program (Folger et al., 2004).

The extant literature has reported inconsistent findings regarding the influence of family support on the academic performance of students (Cheng et al., 2011). Some research suggested family support did not impact first-generation student success. For example, a study examining the role of environmental motivational characteristics and social supports such as family support did not find a strong correlation between family support and academic adjustment for first-generation college students (Dennis et al., 2005). Similarly, Purswell et al. (2008) found parental support did not impact the academic experiences of first-generation college students. Additionally, parental informational support did not seem to alleviate stress in a study among first-generation college students (Sy et al., 2011). Many parents and family members of first-generation college students may not comprehend the energy and effort required to be successful in college (Mehta et al., 2011), and thus may not have provided support that could have significantly impacted student's lives. A study that examined activities associated with college transition and the helpfulness of support networks such as parents, friends, and peers found that first-generation college students received less help from parents when compared to second-generation students (Smith & Zhang, 2010).

Other studies reported that family and parental support positively influenced outcomes for first-generation college students. Blackwell and Pinder (2014) found family support was among the motivational factors of first-generation minority college students. Emotional support from families helped low-income students earn higher grades and persist through to the second year of college (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). Appalachian first-generation college students reported family engagement and support fostered an atmosphere that was conducive to their academic success (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Additionally, research showed family and parental support had a positive impact on the GPA of all students in general (Cheng et al., 2011) and on the persistence of science students in particular (Ratelle et al., 2005). Family support could be a strategy used to help first-generation college students persist.

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

Research literature described first-generation college students as those whose parents did not obtain a bachelor's degree or may have attended a four-year institution, but did not complete a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001). First-generation college students were the first in their family to attend college (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). A profile of first-generation students revealed that they were older than their non-first-generation peers (Choy, 2001), were from minority and racially diverse ethnic groups, and most likely needed to be employed in order to pay college expenses (Jehangir, 2010; Martinez et al., 2009). In addition, first-generation students were more likely to be immigrants, single parents, and speak English as a second language (Bui, 2002). First-generation college students often come from a lower-socioeconomic status (Bui, 2002; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Oldfield, 2007; Smith & Zhang, 2010). Low-income first-generation students were disadvantaged by their parents' lack of information about



college and other social and economic constraints which limited their educational opportunities (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Other research on the characteristics of first-generation college students showed they had greater difficulty transitioning from high school to college (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy et al., 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996), were not as academically prepared as their non-first-generation peers (Bui, 2002), and graduated at a slower rate when compared to their non-first-generation counterparts (Dennis et al., 2005; Nunez & Cucaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004). On campus, first-generation college students tried to make sense of the explicit and implicit expectations, rituals, and norms of the higher education culture—a process which can be simultaneously exhilarating, overwhelming, and alienating (Jehangir, 2010). The parents of first-generation college students did not attend college and do not have the experience with or access to needed information to help students navigate college (Fann et al., 2009). This lack of knowledge left these students at a disadvantage in terms of their overall academic success.

Jenkins et al. (2009) found that first-generation college students were more likely than their non-first-generation peers to avoid asking questions or seeking help from faculty. Some of these students entered the college environment experiencing more stress than their non-first-generation counterparts do, and many were less equipped to cope with such pressures (Mehta et al., 2011). These characteristics of first-generation college students were some of the factors that placed them at risk for retention and persistence in college.

### **Academic Preparedness**

First-generation college students are typically less prepared academically than their non-first-generation counterparts (Choy, 2001). The National Center for Educational Statistics found that a low number of first-generation college students took college entrance exams compared to

their peers whose parents had some college experience (Warburton et al., 2001). Those first-generation students who did take the exams typically earned lower SAT scores (Bui, 2002). Additionally, a significant number of first-generation college students took remedial courses upon entering college (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

The academic preparedness of first-generation college students was further impacted by the fact that their parents did not attend college. The families of first-generation college students were not able to support their children in instrumental ways such as navigating the college environment or assisting with homework since they did not have experiences in these areas (Purswell et al., 2008). This may explain why first-generation college students had low SAT and ACT scores (Bui, 2002) and low grades in college. While the parents of first-generation college students were a resource for their children in areas such as emotional support, they were not likely to be a source of support for them in their academics (Purswell et. al, 2008). This lack of support further contributes to first-generation college students not being academically prepared for college-level work. These students relied on other sources of support to experience academic success especially as they transitioned to the college environment.

### **The Transition of Freshman First-Generation College Students**

One of the critical experiences for first-generation college students was their transition to college. Support from families was important for their academic success during the first year of transition. Freshman students often find that the new environment in college was very different from high school. In college, students had to take full ownership of the way they manage their time and attend to responsibilities and expectations. Research showed that first-generation college students entered college with lower ACT scores compared to their non-first-generation counterparts (Martinez et al., 2009) had greater difficulty transitioning from high school to

college (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy et al., 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996), and felt disconnected from the college experience (Jehangir, 2010). The transition process to college was a significant step toward retention and persistence for these students (Inkelas et al., 2007).

Understanding how to best support freshman first-generation college students during their transition to college is important for their post-secondary success. Many students dropped out of college during their first year (Tinto, 1993). During the first year of college, first-generation students received less support from their parents when compared to non-first-generation college students (Smith & Zhang, 2010). They were also more likely than their non-first generation peers to earn fewer credits per semester, had lower grade point averages, and repeated or withdrew from courses (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini, et al., 1996). Many of these challenges negatively impacted the academic success of first-generation college students as they transitioned into the college environment.

The transition of freshman first-generation college students was also important for a successful adjustment to the new learning environment. Freshman first-generation college students entered college with expectations, challenges, and life experiences that were often different from their non-first-generation counterparts (Purswell et al., 2008). Many of these expectations were drawn from content viewed on social media (O'Shea, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2018; Wohn et al., 2013). Freshman first-generation college students routinely struggled with expectations of college such as spending extra time outside of the classroom on assignments in order to do well, prioritizing commitments, and understanding expectations of faculty (Collier & Morgan, 2008). They also experienced difficulty with time management and maintaining a full-time course load (Collier & Morgan, 2008). These students were successful academically when

they learned how to navigate the college environment, found their social niche, and felt a sense of belonging (Azmitia et al., 2013).

Research showed that feeling a sense of belonging in college was a predictor of academic outcomes and motivation for students (Sanchez et al., 2005). A study of the effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on the sense of belonging of Latino students found that getting involved in social activities on campus fostered a sense of belonging, affiliation, and identification with their institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students became involved socially in activities such as student organizations, sororities and fraternities, student government, and peer groups as a way to transition into college. Peer relationships also fostered college success for students (Dennis, et al., 2005; Tang et al., 2013). First-generation college students who lived in residential halls and participated in academic and curricular environments with faculty and peer interactions experienced a more successful transition to college (Inkelas et al., 2007). As first-generation students entered college, they had to find ways to navigate a new academic and social culture on campus in order to be successful since their parents who did not complete college, were unable to relate to the experiences of this new environment (Inkelas et al., 2007).

### **Parent and Family Involvement**

The support of parents was critical to narrowing the gap between ambitions and educational achievement for first-generation college students (Rood, 2009). Family relationships created an atmosphere that was conducive to the academic success of first-generation college students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). First-generation college students often experienced a lack of parental involvement in their academic pursuits (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Parents of first-generation college students who do not understand the experiences and expectations of college

were unable to support their children with their academics (Purswell et al., 2008). When first-generation students entered the higher education environment, they often experienced a “culture shock” because college represented a fundamentally different environment when compared to the way of life for their parents (Gofen, 2009, p.106).

Despite these challenges, parental support was important in helping first-generation college students cope with the experiences of college life (Sy et al., 2011). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found that parental involvement was a sound predictor of educational aspirations among first-generation college students. The support parents provided was an important asset for students in their first year. Research analyzing outcomes between first-generation and continuing-generation college first-year premedical students showed that support from parents of first-generation college students was critical in helping them persist through their academics (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Parental support was also essential to the overall academic success of Latino first-generation college students (Early, 2010).

Emotional support from families and parents helped students manage the many stressors of college life (Sy et al., 2011) and improved their well-being (Chao, 2012). This was important to note since first-generation college students experienced stress as they transitioned to college (Mehta et al, 2011) which caused them to feel overwhelmed (Hertel, 2002). Students were able to persist in their academics when their families provided an environment that was involved and supportive (Ratelle et al, 2005). A qualitative study on the experiences of first-year first-generation female college students found that emotional support from their families was instrumental in helping them transition to college and persist in their academics (Nunez, 2005). First-year students who received emotional support from their families were more likely to

obtain higher GPAs, and this achievement allowed them to persist through the second year of college (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018).

### **Family Achievement Guilt**

For students, being the first in the family to go to college brought about feelings of guilt especially when other relatives did not have similar opportunities (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). First-generation college students experienced family achievement guilt because many felt that their pursuit of a college degree broke family tradition and norms (Terrenzini et al., 1994). These students had close family connections and felt guilty that their academic accomplishments were disruptive to expected family roles and dynamics (Covarrubias et al, 2015). Family ties and connections were very important to the lives of many first-generation college students. These relationships impacted their decision-making and outcomes concerning academics.

A study examined the relationship between the well-being of students and family achievement guilt and found that students experiencing feelings of family guilt had high levels of depression and low self-esteem (Covarrubias et al., 2015). It was stressful for family members when students left for college and parents found it difficult to adjust to their child's new autonomy (Reed et al., 2016). First-generation college students entered the college environment feeling significant levels of stress and were not always equipped to cope with high-pressure situations (Mehta et al., 2011). Many of these students also felt anxiety, sadness, and a loss of connection with their loved ones because of the family's lack of knowledge about college life (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). These studies highlighted family dynamics that were important to understand when seeking to find ways for parents and families to support first-generation college students in an effort to increase their self-efficacy.

## **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy refers to “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required” to produce a certain result (Bandura, 1997 p. 3). Given the many challenges faced by first-generation college students, one can conclude that beliefs (internal cognitive processes) about their abilities negatively impact them, resulting in lower academic achievement outcomes (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). There was a correlation between self-efficacy levels and academic outcomes. Wang and Castaneda-Sound (2008) examined the experiences and outlook of 367 students (34.9% first-generation college students and 65.9% non-first-generation students) from a large, public university on the West Coast to ascertain the impact of non-academic factors such as self-efficacy on their academic performance. After controlling for the effect of race and ethnicity, the researchers found that first-generation college students in the study scored significantly lower in academic self-efficacy and reported more somatic symptoms than their non-first-generation counterparts (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008).

Another quantitative study conducted by Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) explored the association between self-efficacy and academic outcomes of first-generation college students and supported previous assertions that non-first-generation college students generally perform better academically than their first-generation college peers. Conducted at a private liberal arts university on the West Coast, this research used a sample of 191 students consisting of 33.3% first-generation college students and 66.1% non-first-generation students. Both studies confirmed previous findings by Bui (2002) of different academic performance outcomes for first-generation college students and for non-first-generation college students.

## **Socioeconomic Status**

First-generation college students often come from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Smith & Zhang, 2010). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) reported that low-

income first-generation students were disadvantaged by their parents' lack of experience or knowledge about college and other social and economic characteristics that restrict their educational outcomes. Many of these students enrolled in college in order to improve their socioeconomic status. At the same time, first-generation students were also likely to report a lack of monetary contributions from parents (Martinez et al., 2009) and struggled to finance their education (O'Neal et al., 2016). As a result of these challenges, first-generation college students were more likely to take on full-time or part-time employment than their non-first-generation peers (Martinez et al., 2009; Smith & Zhang, 2010).

Ultimately, first-generation college students did not have as much time to engage in their coursework and this limitation impacted their overall academic success. Smith and Zhang (2010) found that first-generation college students worked more hours and had lower GPAs than their non-first-generation peers. Because first-generation college students often came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bui, 2002; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Oldfield, 2007), their access to cultural capital and financial resources was limited, thus impacting their ability to persist in college.

### **Social and Cultural Capital**

First-generation college students lacked both social capital (Wohn et al., 2013; O'Shea, 2016; Schwartz et. al, 2018) and cultural capital (O'Shea, 2016). Social capital referred to the social networks and relationships that were valuable and helped students navigate unfamiliar environments (Bourdieu, 1977), including relationships students developed with faculty and staff (Baker, 2013). Cultural capital is defined as the language skills, social assets, and information that produced social mobility (Bourdieu, 1977). Social and cultural capital reflected social relationships, cultural practices, and knowledge used to obtain social and economic benefit



(Monkman et al., 2005). For example, first generation students may not recognize that participation in extracurricular activities could positively impact their academics (Pascarella et al., 2004).

First-generation students could benefit from social and cultural capital to help them to succeed in college. However, since the parents of first-generation college students did not attend college, their children were at a disadvantage when compared to non-first-generation students because they were not equipped with the knowledge about college (cultural capital) and the connections (social capital) to assist them in their college experience.

The weight of evidence from research indicated that first-generation college students lacked basic knowledge about post-secondary education (Pascarella et al., 2004). On campus first-generation students had to learn how to meet college expectations. For instance, faculty members expected first-generation college students to demonstrate their academic ability and to meet the challenges of college coursework (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Understanding how social capital and cultural capital are useful in the academic environment for first-generation college students could help to foster a climate of success for these students.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

The foundation for this study viewed parental involvement and family support of freshman first-generation college students through the theoretical frameworks of family capital (Gofen, 2009) and social constructionism (Crotty, 2015). Utilizing family capital (Gofen, 2009) as a framework for the study helped to present first-generation students and their families from a non-deficit perspective. This theoretical perspective highlighted that families contributed to the success of their children through “nonmaterial resources such as priorities, time, and behavior for

the accomplishments that are usually achieved by resources that were not within the family's reach" (Gofen, 2009 p. 106).

Family capital also placed emphasis on resources first-generation college students' families contribute to the success of their children such as values (Gofen, 2009). Some studies indicated that the families of first-generation college students lacked resources such as the cultural capital needed to be successful in college (Mehta et al., 2011). Another study showed there was not a strong correlation between family support and academic adjustment (Dennis et al, 2005). Other research found that the families of first-generation college students "were often a key resource rather than a constraint" (Gofen, 2009, p. 114). Gofen (2009) pointed out family capital incorporated all aspects of the contributions families made for their children's benefit so that they could have a successful future.

The social constructionism lens (Crotty, 2015) provided the study with "a theoretical rationale for the concentration upon the social context within which individuals live their lives" (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010, p. 342). Social constructionism references one's cultural experiences in order to make meaning of a phenomenon (Crotty, 2015). It also provided that all reality was socially constructed (Crotty, 2015). Coffman (2011) argued that first-generation students' culture impacted their college attendance and success.

A social constructionist approach (Crotty, 2015) provided the study with a framework to better understand how parental and family involvement could influence the academic success of first-generation college students, thus informing their decisions to progress and persist in college. Looking at the cultural perspectives of first-generation college students helped to explain how their background contributed to a lack of support and strong social networks, weak motivation levels, low educational ambitions, and poor academic performance (Coffman, 2011). These

disadvantages from a cultural perspective helped to inform how parental and family support could help freshman first-generation college students persist and succeed in their academics.

### **Conclusion**

Supporting first-generation college students is important to their academic success. These students faced a number of barriers to their academic success in college. For first-generation college students, many of the challenges they encountered stemmed from a lack of academic preparation in high school (Ishitani, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006), low self-efficacy levels (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008), and difficulty transitioning from high school to college (Chen & Carrol, 2005; Choy et al., 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation college students were four times more likely to leave college when compared to their non-first-generation counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Support in the early stages of college was important because many freshman first-generation college students dropped out during their first year (Tinto, 1993), and were at risk of leaving school if they did not feel connected to their university (Folger et al., 2004).

In addition, first-generation college students were often at a disadvantage because of their low socioeconomic status, lack of parental involvement, (Ishitani, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006) and lack of social and cultural capital (O'Shea, 2016). Strategies such as family and parental support potentially had a positive impact on the academic success and persistence of first-generation college students (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cheng et al., 2011). Much of the research conducted on first-generation college students has been quantitative in nature. While this is beneficial, it does not give voice to the lived experiences of college students and parents that can be found through qualitative studies.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study aimed to better understand how parental and family support could help first-generation college students persist through their academics. This chapter will outline the research methodology for the study including the rationale for the use of a qualitative approach, the design of the study, the procedures for sample recruitment and selection, and the methods of data collection and analysis.

#### **Rationale for Research Tradition and Methodological Approach**

This research employed a qualitative methodology in order to gain a deep understanding of a phenomena from the perspective of the study participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Qualitative research emphasized the meanings of a particular topic from the participants' perspective (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research also helps to explain the meaning participants derive from their lived experiences and how they made sense of it all (Atkinson et al., 2001). Students who participated in the study completed their first year in college and reflected on those experiences.

The use of a qualitative approach for this study also assisted the researcher in capturing the experiences of the parents of first-generation freshman college students and how they understood the significance of their roles in the lives of their children in college through exploration, discovery, and description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Meaning and meaning-making are components of qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A qualitative research methodology allowed the researcher to understand how parents and family members made sense of their experiences and interactions with first-generation freshman college students. Qualitative research methodology also helped the researcher to gain clarity about how students made sense of their parents' involvement in their academics through an examination of the lived experiences of the student participants collected from the data.

This study employed a phenomenological approach as the research framework. Phenomenology is the study of conscious phenomena and an analysis of the way things or experiences presented themselves (Sanders, 1982). This narrative described the essence of the shared experience of the phenomenon by each individual (Creswell, 2014). Through phenomenology the researcher examined and understood the phenomenon of parental and family involvement in the lives of first-generation college students. Phenomenological research captured the lived experiences of a person (Lavery, 2003) and analyzed the significance of statements in order to generate meaning (Creswell, 2014) and an explanation of the essence of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology focused on the experience of the participants in an examination of their commonalities (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). With a phenomenological design the researcher could describe in-depth the lived experiences of a phenomenon experienced by participants (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology allowed the researcher to interpret the meaning of the lived experience of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Essences are derived from an examination of the relationship between the objective and the subjective analysis of that object or experience (Sanders, 1982). The goal of phenomenology was not to propose a theory to explain a phenomenon, but rather to facilitate a deeper understanding that could help the researcher to appreciate that phenomenon (Smith et. al, 2009). Phenomenological research explained “what happened” (textual description), “how the phenomenon was experienced” (structural description), as well as the essence of the experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 241). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how, if at all, parents and families played a supportive role in the academic and educational experiences of freshman first-generation college students.

### **Research Setting**

The site selected for the research was UCM, a large private, Catholic institution located in the Midwest, and in an urban environment. Overall, UCM consisted of ten colleges and professional schools, and as of spring 2018, had an enrollment of 22,769, of which 16,000 were undergraduate students and the remaining attended graduate schools. There were over 300 undergraduate and graduate programs at the institution with a global population of students from over 114 countries. The enrollment at this institution was diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity, with approximately 43% over 24 years of age, 53% female, 38% students of color, and 7% international students. In addition, 33% were first-generation college students. According to the university's website, in 2018, the institution admitted 846 freshman students from families in which neither parent completed a college degree. This institution offered programs that provided academic services to first-generation college students. These programs did not include a parent component to support the informational needs of first-generation families.

### **Research Sample and Source of Data**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of UCM provided approval to conduct this study. The researcher was trained to conduct studies with human subjects and successfully completed the CITI certificate program. The target population sample for this study was first-generation college students who had completed their first year in college and their parents. At the time of data collection, the students were sophomores who were asked to reflect on their experiences during their first year in college. The student participants were selected from a student support program for first-generation college students and from the general population of first-generation students at UCM. This method of criterion sampling involved seeking individuals who fit predetermined criteria (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Six sophomore first-generation college students agreed to be participants in this study, four of whom had participated in a program that supports first-generation college students. The primary criterion for the student participants was being a first-generation college student. The definition used to describe first-generation college students was those students who were the first in their immediate family to attend a post-secondary institution (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). First-generation college students were also those for whom neither parent attended college, or they may have attended college and completed some coursework but did not graduate (Nunez & Cucaro-Alamin, 1998). Other key criteria used for the selection of students for the study were:

- a) Admitted as a traditional-aged first-year freshman
- b) Enrolled as a part-time or full-time student
- c) Achieved good academic standing (minimum 2.0 GPA)
- d) Earned between 16 and 50 credits at the end of the summer 2019 term
- e) Provided consent to participate in the research study

From a research perspective, it was important to select student participants who had earned a minimum of 16 credits and achieved at least a 2.0 GPA as these attributes demonstrated student academic success and persistence. At the end of the first year of college, full-time students were expected to complete approximately 50 credits of coursework. Completing this amount of credits as a freshman meant that students were able to detail a full year of college experiences for the study. Also, the similarities in characteristics of the freshman first-generation college student participants allowed for rich and descriptive narratives for the research.

The researcher accessed the student participants with the assistance of an administrator of a student support services department on campus. This administrator worked closely with the

target student population group and his program directly supported first-generation college students. The administrator used his email distribution data to solicit participants for the study. This partnership was critical in gaining access to student participants. Students who consented to participate in the research shared their email information and available times to be interviewed. The researcher next contacted these students via email to confirm a time and location for the interview.

Student participants identified a parent to take part in the study who they felt contributed to their college persistence. The student forwarded an email to the identified parent that contained a survey link with information about the study. In total, six individual parents consented to participate in the study. Each individual parent corresponded to a student participant. Student and parent participants each received a \$25 gift card upon completion of the study.

Participation in the study was voluntary and the researcher explained the potential benefits, risks, and safeguards to both the students and their parents. Both family members and first-generation students who took part in the research consented to participate in the study. The researcher made documents about the proposed research available to ensure participants understood their rights and responsibilities. In addition, participants received the contact information and names of university personnel from the IRB office to contact in the event they had any questions about the study. The students and their parent participants acknowledged their right to withdraw from the study at any time, including before or during the interview process. The researcher kept participants' information confidential by assigning their data files pseudonyms and securing these documents in a safe. After transcription, he deleted all the audio



recordings. He secured notes and other hard copy data in a file cabinet to which only the researcher had access.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The researcher collected data from two qualitative research instruments, online questionnaires and in-person interviews in order to obtain information with great depth and richness. The interviews for the study consisted of “unstructured and generally open-ended questions to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell, 2014 p. 90). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

In the beginning of the winter 2020 term, after consenting to participate, study participants received an online questionnaire utilizing a Qualtrics link that asked for demographic information. There were two sets of questionnaires. One asked the students for information such as their class status, credit hours completed, employment status, tuition payment coverage, communication frequency with parents, and residential status. The other questionnaire asked parents to provide demographic information such as their relationship to student participants, highest level of education, employment status, and communication frequency with the student relative involved in the study. Both questionnaires assessed the nature and extent of student-parent interaction and communication during the first year of college.

Data collection also consisted of interviews with all the participants. Qualitative research often considered interviews a main form of data collection because this method provided rich and thick descriptions, and the researcher can probe for additional information and follow-up with participants as necessary (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Interviews were a useful research instrument for the study because this method of data collection helped the researcher to understand how individuals made meaning of their lived experience (Seidman, 2006). Students

and parents respectively participated in one face-to-face interview each. Each interview lasted approximately 40–45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted at the convenience of the participants at a location that ensured their privacy. The student interviews were conducted on campus at UCM in a private room selected by the researcher. Parent participants were interviewed at a location of their choice.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The researcher analyzed the collected data manually. Upon completion of all questionnaires and interviews, he then transcribed and coded the data. Coding involved assigning words or phrases to chunks of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) as the first step in the data analysis process. The researcher next categorized the statements with similar codes into themes (Nazir, 2016). The development of themes was an important component of qualitative research. During qualitative data analysis themes emerged (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). A theme was a repeated phrase or sentence that identified what a “unit of data is about and/or what it means” (Saldana, 2013 p. 139). These themes were then refined and revised (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) by reviewing the entire data to decide if the themes accurately mirrored the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is important to ensure the rigor, validity and reliability of the study. Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In phenomenology the researcher must suspend their biases, assumptions, and preconceived notions in order to describe the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Examining one’s subjectivity and bias was a good way to reflect on how these elements could influence the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

This self-reflection could lead to an open and candid outlook that could reverberate with the readers of the research findings (Creswell, 2014).

Credibility ensures that the results of a study are credible and believable. The researcher established credibility of the study by member checking and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involved sending transcribed interviews or research summaries to participants for review (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). With triangulation, information was collected from multiple sources in order to obtain data with great depth and richness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Using multiple methods of data collection was essential to finding a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that was being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Confirmability in qualitative research was important to “acknowledge and explore ways that biases and prejudices mapped into the interpretations of data and to mediate those to the fullest extent” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016 p. 190). Reflecting on one’s bias established trustworthiness in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This was done through the use of bracketing assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). Reflexivity also allowed the researcher to be transparent about how the findings were informed by aspects of his background such as culture, gender, or history (Creswell, 2014).

Dependability and transferability were other important elements of qualitative research. Dependability established that the findings of a study were consistent with the research argument (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Tracking the methods used to collect and interpret data was an important element of dependability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Transferability was a “way in which qualitative studies were assessed to be applicable or transferable to broader contexts while still maintaining the context-specific richness” of the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016 p. 189). Transferability referred to the fit or match between the research context and other contexts as

judged by the reader (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The amount of detailed information provided by the researcher on the context and/or background established transferability in a qualitative study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

### **Limitations**

As with every research endeavor, there were limitations to this study. One such limitation was selection bias. The study participants were recruited from a sample of students that described the phenomenon being studied. Four of the six students were selected from a student support program for first-generation college students. This method of sampling could potentially skew the data in comparison to the larger population (Collier & Mahoney, 1996).

Since the research was conducted with students from a large private, Catholic institution in the Midwest and their parents, the study was limited in that the research may not have reflected the experiences of first-generation students from other types of institutions such as public and private non-religious colleges and universities. Another limitation of the study was the residential status of students. Five of the six student participants lived with their parents. Many students resided at home during college to cut costs and maintain family relationships. These experiences with their parents and relatives could be different compared to if they were living on campus. Thus, a different set of results may have emerged from the study.

Also, there could have been social desirability bias among parents in the study. Social desirability bias occurred when participants responded to questions in a way that seemed favorable to the researcher (Nederhof, 1985). During in-person interviews with parent participants, if these families thought that support of their children in their academics was what the researcher wanted to hear, they may have provided the “right answers” to the researcher in

order to look favorable. Those responses could skew the data to show more parental involvement than was actually the case.

All students who participated in the research identified their mothers as the parent who supported them during the first year of college and helped in their persistence. The inclusion of only mothers in the study may have likely impacted the findings in terms the role of parental involvement in the persistence of the first-generation college student participants.

### **Conclusion**

The researcher conducted a qualitative study to better understand how the support of parents and family could help first-generation students persist through their studies during the first year of college. A phenomenological approach was used in the study. The research participants consisted of six sophomore first-generation college students who attended an urban, private Catholic university in the Midwest, UCM, and their parents. These sophomores reflected on their experiences during the first year in college. Four out of the six student participants were selected from a student support services program at UCM.

The research study used two qualitative instruments, questionnaires and in-person interviews, to collect the data. Study participants shared their lived experiences and perspectives on parental and family support during the interviews. The researcher transcribed their interviews and analyzed the qualitative data through coding. The coded data was further analyzed for emergent themes as the basis for a framework for communicating the essence of what the data showed in relationship to the research questions guiding the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS**

This chapter highlights the findings from a study on the role of parental and family engagement in the persistence of freshman first-generation college students. It begins by presenting demographic information and profiles of the study participants. It is then followed by a report of key themes and supporting qualitative data in relation to the research questions that framed the study:

1. In what ways do parents and families perceive their involvement in helping freshman first-generation college students persist through college?
2. How do freshman first-generation college students perceive the role of parents and family in their persistence through college?

### **Participant Demographics**

Twelve participants (six students and six parents) participated in this study. Student participants met the inclusion criteria of having been admitted into college as a traditional-aged first-year freshman, were enrolled as a part-time or full-time student, remained in good academic standing (minimum 2.0 GPA), earned between 16 and 50 credits at the end of the summer 2019 term, and consented to participate in the research study. The parent participants were mothers of the selected students who consented to take part in the research.

For the six student participants, three identified themselves as Hispanic, and the other three were of white, multiethnic, and mixed ethnicity. Three male and three female students participated in the study. Five students lived off-campus with their families, and one resided in an on-campus housing facility. Four of the six students in the study held jobs and worked between 20 to 35 hours per week.

The six parent participants had a range of educational experience, from some high school to some college. None, however, had completed college. Four out of the six parents were

employed and worked between eight and forty-five hours per week. The parents supported households that ranged from two to seven people. All of the parent participants communicated regularly during the week with their college sophomores.

### **Participant Profiles**

The researcher created profiles for each of the twelve participants (six students and six parents) who took part in the study in order to introduce the research subjects. The profiles highlight some of their beliefs, values, expectations, perceptions of education, and interactions with and understanding of the college environment. In addition, the participant profiles captured the experiences and perceptions of students and their parents in terms of their involvement with each other as the students persisted through the first year of college.

### **Student Participants**

The six sophomore students who participated in the study were excited about the opportunity to attend college. Each student envisioned a bright future for themselves and wanted to make their families proud. These students also understood the challenges they faced in college during their freshman year and appreciated the support they received from their parents. Students believed that going to college was the right decision. Each student participant selected a pseudonym prior to the beginning of the study.

#### *George*

George was a 19-year-old student who reported a great relationship with both his mom and dad. The eldest among his siblings, George was also very close to other family members. According to George, his parents introduced him to the idea of college, and from an early age he wanted to be the first in his family to attend a four-year institution. He figured that college was “the best way to get job security for the future.” As a child growing up, George saw his parents

struggle to make ends meet. These experiences motivated him to work hard in school in order to create opportunities for a brighter future for himself and his family.

Being the first to attend college when his parents had no prior experience of college proved to be more of a challenge than George anticipated during his freshman year. College was not only new to George, but also to his family. George's struggles in college began to mount. He was thankful that both of his parents were able to support him with financial resources so that he could attend college. He also received emotional support from his mom. However, at times these forms of support did not seem adequate to help George with his academic struggles because he felt that he needed to isolate himself as a way to cope with some of the challenges he faced in school. He was thankful that his parents understood when he was struggling with his academics. However, George recognized that when it came to his studies, he was on his own because his parents did not go to college and therefore were not able to provide any support with his classwork. He shared,

When I'm struggling with work, I usually do my schoolwork alone in my room just to be able to focus. But when I'm struggling, I tell them I'm struggling, and I can't do it right now. And so, they are like, "oh, take a break and come back to it. It will come back to you." So, they are like open. I'm open to them about it and they understand that I'm struggling and that I'm pretty much alone in doing the work.

Even as George battled isolation and feeling alone when it came to support from his parents with homework assignments, he believed that his mom and dad were still a valuable resource for him. The fact that he could have conversations with them about his college experience made him feel supported by his parents. George wished that his parents understood that college posed many challenges especially in the classroom. One of his major challenges was managing his course



workload. He also struggled with maintaining a healthy balance between academics and spending time with his family. George felt fortunate that at least he could communicate his struggles to his parents.

### *Rachel*

Rachel was a 19-year-old student who described herself as gregarious and someone who enjoyed new adventures and making friends. She shared a close relationship with her mom with whom she lived, and at the same time relished her independence. Rachel's mom owned a catering company and attended culinary school. Thus, she had some idea about higher education. In addition, Rachel had high expectations of her mom in terms of helping her navigate the college experience. Unfortunately for Rachel, her expectations did not seem to correlate with what her mom hoped she would get out of college. While Rachel was looking for guidance about academics and financial aid, her mom saw college mainly as a place for socializing. Rachel explained,

I know that she says this [college is for socializing] all the time and it's annoying that she says it because she says it to my friends who go away. She says that college is just like a social experiment. A lot of that is kind of her favorite thing to say (laughing).

As a result of her mom's views on college, Rachel found herself being away from home longer than she would have wanted. She made this decision so that she could socialize more in school as a way to please her mom. Rachel ended up in a no-win situation because she found that when she socialized more in school and returned home late, she would be questioned by her mom about being away. When Rachel would arrive home early, her mom would wonder why she returned so soon. These experiences with her mom were just not what Rachel had hoped for when she started college.

Rachel and her mom both had expectations for each other. Rachel's mom wanted her to obtain good grades, meet new friends, and take advantage of social opportunities on campus. At the same time, Rachel expected her mom to be active in her college experience. This included helping her to figure out financial aid and understanding the challenges of being a first-generation college student. In addition, Rachel acknowledged that there was pressure on her to perform well in school, and this tension caused her to feel stressed out. However, her mom did not seem attentive to these mental health struggles. Also, Rachel did not feel that she could approach her mom with these issues because she might not understand the challenges involved.

Overall, Rachel felt that her mom was very supportive of her academics and college experience. In addition to financial support, Rachel's mom helped her with driving directions to school and with math homework if needed. These supports proved instrumental to helping Rachel succeed in college during the first year.

### *Carlos*

Carlos was a very playful 19-year-old student. He readily admitted that he had an ego, and from an early age, had a desire to make lots of money when he grew up. Under that ego, however, is someone who cared deeply for his family. Carlos worked for his dad's construction company and was happy to be in the family business. Even though the work was laborious, he felt that his dad instilled "lots of" good values such as work ethic, responsibility, and being self-sufficient. One of the deals Carlos made with his dad was to somehow pay back some of the money his parents spent on his tuition. Carlos also lived with his mom who was a stay-at-home parent while she helped run the family business and took care of him and his other siblings. Carlos admitted that enjoyed a "good life."

When Carlos attended high school, he obtained good grades easily. After he entered college, he quickly realized that his playful demeanor was not going to serve him well if he wanted to succeed academically. He came to college with great enthusiasm and the hope of turning his college degree into a money-making enterprise. As a result, he decided to pursue a business major as a way to develop a lucrative professional career, but also to utilize the skills learned to help grow and develop his family's construction business. For him it seemed that college was a means to an end. However, to obtain that end goal, he realized he was going to have to work harder than he anticipated.

Carlos was the first in his family to go to college, and he felt immense pressure to succeed academically while making his family proud. On a daily basis Carlos wanted to succeed in college so that he was not seen as a failure. In addition, his parents were not able to assist him with academic issues such as homework assignments. At times, Carlos felt alone with no one at home to turn to for help. He felt that his dad in particular did not understand that going to college could at times be a stressful experience. Even though his family provided the financial and emotional support he needed, he wished that his dad did not minimize his mental health challenges with stress because his struggles were real.

Carlos was proud of his parents and the struggles and sacrifices they made to be able to send him to college. He believed the stress would be all worth the return on the investment in his college education. The pressure he has felt has also motivated him to do well. He said that his "mindset is that I'd rather lose an arm than not finish college."

### *Milo*

Milo was a mild mannered and soft-spoken 19-year-old student. The eldest child in the family, he lived with his mom and sister. Milo and his mom enjoyed a close bond of which he

was very proud. The family had been through a lot and he often reflected on the hardships of his life growing up as a kid. Much of those years were spent moving from one location to another for various reasons. Transferring to other schools was a challenge for Milo because he did not have a mode of transportation to the new school. Sometimes he would miss as many as thirteen days during the school term. His father was absent from his life and his mother struggled raising two children on her own.

In high school, Milo developed a passion for learning. Even though he described that his high school was located in a “rough neighborhood,” he enjoyed going to school every day and getting involved in clubs and other activities. Because his high school was very racially and ethnically diverse, he was able to experience many different cultures. Success in high school opened his eyes to future possibilities. He undertook leadership roles and started a sports club with classmates. His mom convinced him to challenge himself by taking International Baccalaureate classes and he discovered that he was academically gifted. At that point he began to dream about college as a future possibility. Milo was very appreciative of all the support his mom had provided. He explained,

College is definitely not easy. And even though I can't depend on [my mom], you know, in terms of academics, or being a resource in helping me find, you know, careers and internships and jobs like that, that her being there for me, you know, supported me emotionally, supported me sometimes financially is enough. That I really appreciate.

Milo and his mom both valued education and viewed it as a way to build a good career for him. He was interested in pursuing a career in finance and believed that this career could provide him with a financially secure future. He wanted to make “a lot of money” when he graduated in

addition to eventually obtaining a Ph.D. degree. Milo's family also expected him to have a good career after he graduates. When asked about the expectations from his family, Milo remarked,

I guess I would say they want to see results. Sometimes I get asked like "what are you going to do?" or "why are you doing that" and not just my mom. I just have this expectation of me thinking "how am I going to walk out of here with a job? Not just any job, a good paying job, a stable job, a career, so then they can be proud of.

Milos's experience with his family highlighted the pressure he felt to succeed academically in college. During his first year in college he received financial, emotional, and motivational support from his mom. He believed these supports were important in helping him to persist during that critical first year. However, at times, Milo felt that his mom did not fully understand the challenges he faced as a college student when he had to stay at school late to complete homework assignments. He would rather do his homework at school because he felt that his mom was not able to help him with his academics.

Although Milo faced many hurdles as a child, academics were the one constant in his life from which he found peace, solace, and stability. He was slowly learning how to navigate the college environment in order to be successful in his academics. Milo had also begun to make friends in order to build a career network. He intended to make his family proud by graduating on time and obtaining a successful professional career.

### *Donna*

Donna was a determined 19-year-old who wanted to blaze a career path that is totally different from her family's background. She was happy to be in college, and despite all of the challenges of this learning environment, Donna believed that college gave her a different outlook on life. She also believed that education had given her a progressive mindset that would help her

to thrive in life. Her drive to be a success and to utilize education as that vehicle to better herself was reflected when she said,

I just know that I don't want my life to look anything like theirs. And so, I have this pressure to succeed. That's probably why I feel I wanted to graduate on time just to be like I have this degree and nobody else has this degree in my family except for my sister. But I think that's why I have such a drive to be here because I don't want my life to look like theirs. I'm not bashing them. It's just I saw how hard it was for them. I don't want to have to suffer in that way.

Donna was also very social on campus. One of her early challenges in college was making friends and this was something that she would complain about to her mom. Dancing had been one of Donna's passions from the time she was in high school. She was happy to be able to join a dance group on campus during her freshman year and proclaimed that this activity brought her joy. For Donna, joining a dance group was significant because she was able to make friends and feel a sense of belonging on campus. She also joined a sorority but had negative experiences with some members of the group who she felt created a toxic environment.

Donna also felt that she was not in favor of some of the sorority's values and that was problematic. Her mom did not approve of the choice of sorority. Donna's freshman year was challenging in terms of academics and finances. She had to learn to manage her time better if she wanted to do well in her classes. In addition, it was a struggle financially for her mom to pay the tuition. Eventually, her mom took out a loan to cover tuition. Donna reflected on the financial sacrifice her mom undertook and her appreciation when she said,

My mom ended up taking out a loan which wasn't until a few weeks into the first term. That's when she said that this [going to college] means something to you. If I'm taking

out this loan, she didn't have to give me any expectations. I kind of know that if she was willing to do this for me that I'm willing to finish school for her.

Donna and her mom shared a close relationship. She tried to discuss her academic experiences with her parent anytime she could so that her mom might better understand what college is like for her. These conversations include talking about classmates, faculty, and other experiences on campus. Donna felt that the pressure to succeed in school can be overwhelming and at times stressful. Expressing these feelings to her mom was her way of coping with some of the anxieties of college life. However, she wished her mom would be a little bit more understanding of her frustrations. She noted,

I don't have hard expectations of my mom because I'm still experiencing new things. But I guess more of a generic expectation is just to accept that I'm going to complain about [college] a lot and it's not always going to be a positive experience, and so to be there when I need to say I want to drop out of school or I want to go to a different university. I just would like them to know that that's just me freaking out and it would be nice for them to ration through my thoughts.

Overall, Donna was enjoying her experiences in college. Even though her first year was challenging, she now felt comfortable with the learning environment. She had begun to manage her time better and had even found a member of the faculty who served as a mentor to her. She was excited about the future and making her family proud.

### *Sylvia*

Sylvia was a 19-year-old student who cherished her independence from her family. According to Sylvia she had been making her own money since the age of thirteen. Prior to attending college, she lived with her mom and two siblings. Her mom was an immigrant from

Eastern Europe and a hard worker. Sylvia was the oldest child in the house, and growing up, she always had to take care of her siblings while also attending to other family matters. College was an escape for Sylvia. She immediately jumped at the opportunity to live on campus during her freshman year. Eventually, Sylvia had to explain her feelings to her mom. She shared,

I felt like ... she's always watching my back in high school. I couldn't go out past 9:30 and I wasn't independent in the sense that I worked on my own. I financially supported myself and I could do almost anything that I wanted. But I was still kind of restricted because of her. It was kind of hard for her to hear because she didn't realize that her actions toward me made me want to leave so bad.

Even though there were tensions between Sylvia and her mom with regards to her independence, she cared deeply for her family. Sylvia always wanted her family to remain close. She and her mom both inspired each other. Sylvia was inspired by the stories her mom would tell about her overcoming hardships in Eastern Europe. Her mom was inspired by Sylvia's commitment to doing well in school and how her daughter had become a role model to her siblings.

Sylvia was very proud of her mom and enjoyed sharing stories about her in class. She was also in awe of her mother's work ethic. Sylvia lived on campus and was not able to see her family as often as she would have liked. However, she found a way to incorporate her family experiences into her college life by sharing stories about her mom with her classmates. Sylvia shared,

At some of my classes when we talk about history and immigration, Chicago always pops up because Chicago's a very Polish populated city and she's from Poland. So, her experience is brought up when I'm in the classroom, I will talk about her. There's always



good things never anything bad. But her experience has taught me a lot and I've been able to use that in the classroom.

Sylvia and her family believed in utilizing various networks in their ethnic community.

According to Sylvia, her mom always talked about family friends from whom she had learned about their college experiences. She was quick to point out as examples to Sylvia the many children in the community who had dropped out of college. She was very happy that her mom's network of friends was very supportive in terms of offering her part-time babysitting jobs. This was a good way for Sylvia to earn some income to support herself, while creating less financial stress on her mom.

### **Summary of Student Profiles**

The six student participants were all 19-years-old sophomores. Each participant reported they had a close relationship with their parents. They were happy that their parents were supportive of their academics even though there were times their loved ones could not help them in areas such as homework. Student participants shared a sense of pride being the first in the family to attend college and also understood the pressure that came with this accomplishment. Students relayed how they would like to persist and graduate in order to make their family proud. In the face of challenges, each student was proud to have successfully completed the first year of college.

Table 1: Student Demographics

	<b>George</b>	<b>Rachel</b>	<b>Carlos</b>	<b>Milo</b>	<b>Donna</b>	<b>Sylvia</b>
Age	19	19	19	19	19	19
Sex	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female
Class status	Sophomore	Sophomore	Sophomore	Sophomore	Sophomore	Sophomore
Race/ Ethnicity	Hispanic	Mixed	Hispanic	Hispanic	Mixed	White
Work status	Not employed	Part-time job	Part-time job	Part-time job	Part-time job	Part-time job

### **Parent Participants**

The six parent participants were all hard-working mothers who relished supporting their first-generation children during the first year of college. For these moms, supporting their student participants was important to them as they wanted their loved ones to succeed in their academic pursuits. These parents watched with pride as their children transitioned to college and came of age during their freshman year. Each parent participant selected a pseudonym prior to the beginning of the study.

#### *Rio*

Rio was a hardworking mom. She and her son had a very close relationship, and according to her, they enjoyed an open line of communication. Rio admired her son because he had never been in trouble, and he achieved good grades in school. She was proud of her son attending college and was looking forward to him being the first in the family to complete a four-year degree. For her, it would be an amazing accomplishment to have her son achieve something

that she was not able to do herself. It was easy to understand her dedication and commitment to supporting her son in persisting through college. Rio remarked,

I always try to be there for him. He knows that since he started school, since he was little, I've always had expectations and I think I've tried to tell him all the time you know, you can do your best. If you didn't do so good in a class or on a test, that's okay because at least you tried. And I think just being supportive and encouraging him has had a lot to do with how he is at this point, because he doesn't feel alone.

One of the things that Rio had noticed about her son was his growing maturity during his first year of college. She felt that her son has been very inspirational to his siblings. Rio said,

I've told him and I've noticed that he's the oldest so he's the role model to his younger brothers. If for any reason they weren't thinking of going or they don't like school, they see what he's accomplishing, and they look forward to that. So now they talk about, okay, well, when I go to college, I'm going to be this and when I go to college, I'm going to be this. And if he didn't go out of the state then I'm gonna go out of the state, so it's nice to see that because he's their role model.

Rio was also engaged in her son's college experience. She was always curious and felt that it was important to understand some of the experiences of her son in college in order to better support him. During his first year in college, Rio enjoyed having conversations to learn about her son's social experiences including making new friends. They also had chats about his academics.

When asked about what she had learned about her son's college experiences, Rio remarked,

I've learned that it's a good thing [chuckles]. He explains to me he wants to do slideshows just to help me understand and I'm all for it. I will listen to him and I will try to learn from what he learned and hope that I can help him more. And just understand because he

does get frustrated, so I try to support him in any way just by listening to what he's learned. And so far, he's happy with the experience, so I'm happy for him.

Rio said that her son's attendance at college involved a "rollercoaster of emotions." On the one hand, she was happy that he was attending college, obtaining good grades, and making new friends. On the other hand, Rio felt powerless, for instance, that she was not able to help her son with his homework assignments. Regardless of some of the anxieties she might have felt not being able to help with his academics, she was very optimistic about his future and "can't wait to see him graduate."

### *Karen*

Karen enjoyed being a parent to her daughter. They shared a close relationship and communicated every day. According to Karen, "she is the best mom." She did not complete a four-year college degree, but had some sense of college studies since she earned an associate degree. Karen relished guiding and supporting her daughter through college and had told her that whatever decisions she had made in terms of her education, she would be there to support her. Her daughter knew that if she wanted to take a year off from college, she would be supported.

Karen believed that "having a good education is important." She asserted that, years ago, college degrees were not necessarily needed since going to a trade school, for instance, allowed people the opportunity to do well in life. Karen felt that when it came to careers outside of traditional ones (such as teachers, nurses, and doctors), more education was needed to succeed in those fields. According to Karen,

So, I think that, you know, teachers, doctors, nurses, I mean there's things that we always need. A lot of degrees don't necessarily take you somewhere. And I think now like having a bachelor's degree just isn't enough. You know you have to go on and get your

masters or a couple masters and get even a Ph.D. But I think it's hard for kids to know at 18 or 17-years-old, what they want to do. So, I think that, you know, even if they start out doing one thing and they change their mind and they want to do something else but all of that is completely trying.

Parents of first-generation college students often find it challenging to guide their loved ones to obtain help from their institution. Even though Karen may not have known which campus office or staff member her daughter should contact for assistance, she advocated for her to go out and find the support needed.

Karen was very proud of her daughter for persisting in college and achieving academic success such as Dean's List accolades. She was always happy to see her daughter blossoming into a mature and an independent-minded adult. College had provided her daughter with experiences that would prepare her for the future. Even though college was an expensive undertaking for Karen, she truly believed that after her daughter graduates, she would have the job she desired and the ability to support herself and live well.

### *Marina*

Marina was a proud mother. Along with her husband, she managed the daily operations of the family business. She also enjoyed watching over her son who was now a sophomore in college. Marina thought her son was a bit playful but admired the hard work he put into being successful in his academics. She admitted that her son felt pressure in school to perform well, but she has been a calming influence on him in providing emotional and motivational support. She would like to see her son obtain at least a master's degree. For the time being, she was preoccupied with ensuring her son completed college.

In reflecting on one of the lessons about finishing something you started, Marina said,

Actually, when [my son] was little, we always told him, “when you start something you have to finish. Never drop off, or I don’t know, don’t quit.” So, any kind of job, or like soccer. When he was young and wanted to quit the soccer team, we told him “no. You have to finish the season, and then if you want to go to another team, ok.”

Parents of first-generation college students could find it challenging to keep their children enrolled in school. Regardless of the obstacles she might face, Marina was passionate about helping her son persist in school. She believed that he would do great things with his life.

*Claudia*

Claudia was pleased with her son’s many accomplishments. For example, in high school her son performed well in many Advanced Placement classes. Claudia was also pleased that her son had shown improvement in many of his challenging college courses. She noted,

I’m most proud of his persistence. He is very persistent .... He might struggle in one thing, and then some things come easy to him, like math. He's very good at math and it's easy for him. Reading, it's a little bit struggling, but he is very persistent. He will stay in school until he finishes whatever he has to do.

Going back to school could be a future possibility for Claudia. Recently, she felt inspired by her son’s dedication to succeeding at school. She valued education and could envision herself back in the classroom. Claudia also motivated her son to seek out resources on campus in order to obtain the support he needs. She remarked,

When he was having trouble communicating with his instructors or finding classes and stuff like that, I’d let him go ask for help. It could be a little awkward to ask for help. If I didn't know where to send him, you know, or guide him, I heard there were counselors

because we went to orientation. I think they're called orientation. And I've written down little things that I thought were important, and I knew that they were like counselors.

*Patricia*

Patricia had a close relationship with her daughter and was happy to see her now flourishing in college. When her daughter first started college, Patricia had concerns that she was more into socializing and was not taking academics seriously. Patricia had previously participated in many parent-teacher conferences where she had learned the importance of students completing their homework assignments. She was persistent in relaying the message to her daughter that if she completed her assignments first, she would then have time to socialize with her friends in school. This message has paid off and Patricia was very happy with how her daughter was performing academically.

Patricia recalled many proud moments during her daughter's first year in college. She was very happy when her daughter was able to finance an immersion experience on her own. Patricia said,

She used her own money. She had a little bit already, and then she got some scholarship through the school. She earned her own money and did all the research type stuff for the trip. That made her happy. I could see she was happy. That's always good.

Patricia also enjoyed learning from her daughter's personal experiences in school and about college life in general. She indicated that her daughter had "taught her a lot," including about financial aid. Patricia helped her daughter search for scholarships online. However, she was very skeptical of some information she encountered, because she believed some could have been scams. Patricia wished there was a program that would provide parents with important

information about college. She believed this would help her better support her daughter. In the meantime, she continued to be supportive of whatever her daughter needs. She is a proud mom.

### *Goldie*

Goldie was very engaged with her daughter's education. She wanted her child to succeed. For Goldie, it was important that her daughter saw college through to the end. As a result, she had checked in regularly with her daughter to ensure that nothing had changed and that she was on track. Goldie even admitted that she is thinking about the possibility of going to college herself. Her daughter attending college was a source of pride for Goldie. She realized that her daughter had grown up and that things are a little different. She said,

It's so different. The first year, I realized she was smarter: the way she was talking about stuff. Then I hear other people talk about this different stuff that she knows. She's confident in what she thinks, and I like that. She is spending time with what she believes. I like that.

Goldie believed her daughter had a bright future. Her goal for her daughter was to complete her second year in college and then persist toward graduation. She will be cheering her daughter on to the finish line and will be there for any support needed. In the end, Goldie wanted her daughter to be happy.

### **Summary of Parent Profiles**

The six parents who participated in the study were all female-identified mothers. They each enjoyed a close relationship with their first-generation children and cared deeply for them. These parents said that they adjusted well to their children attending college and being away from home. In addition, parents reported that they were proud of their children asserting their independence during the first year of college.



Many were inspired by the hard work and dedication their children demonstrated in succeeding in their academics. They relished providing support and any resources they could to help their children persist in college. Parent participants perceived education as a gateway to personal and career success. These parents were especially proud of their children being the first in the family to attend college.

Table 2: Parent Demographics

	<b>Rio</b>	<b>Karen</b>	<b>Marina</b>	<b>Claudia</b>	<b>Patricia</b>	<b>Goldie</b>
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Relationship to student	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother
Highest level of education	Some high school	Some college	High school	High school	High school	Some college
Work status	Not employed	Full-time job	Full-time job	Not employed	Not employed	Full-time job
# of family members in household	7	4	5	5	2	4

### **Emergent Themes from Student Participants**

The researcher analyzed the data gathered for this qualitative study to understand what role, if any, the support of parents and family helped first-generation college students to persist in their academics. The responses from the student participants focused on their perception of how the support they received from their parents allowed them to reach their goals of persistence

and graduation, their understanding that their parents could only support their college experience up to a certain point because their mom or dad did not attend college, and their expectations and hopes for other forms of support from their parents. Based on analysis of the student data, four major themes emerged: (1) Family support, (2) Barriers to student success, (3) Student expectations of parents, and (4) Persistence in the face of challenges.

### **Family Support**

The family support theme described the factors that were important in helping students progress toward their goal of persistence and graduation. Students identified key parental resources and experiences that supported them through the first year in college. Analysis of these resources and experiences resulted in the emergence of three subthemes: (a) financial support (b) emotional support (c) parents' beliefs and attitudes toward education.

#### *Financial Support*

Financial support was one of the factors that contributed to students reaching their goals during their first year in college. While students acknowledged that receiving financial support from their parents was critical in their academic success, they also recognized, along with their relatives, that college was an expensive undertaking. Without financial support, students would not be able to remain in school.

Students also indicated that their parents worried about the cost of college and how to pay for this expense. Some parents visited the financial aid office to find out what other financial resources were available to pay for their child's college tuition. Parents also encouraged their first-generation students to seek out financial resources on campus to supplement the cost of college. Even though parents worried about and sometimes struggled to pay for college tuition, they believed that their sacrifices would be worth it in the end.

Many students highlighted the sacrifices of parents in order to support their first-generation college students during the first year. In addition, they understood that their parents were also making the financial sacrifice as a way to ensure their happiness. Sylvia remarked,

Financially, it was like a big thing because we were constantly going to the financial aid office and trying to figure financial stuff out. And I know it was hard on her to take out another loan. So, I mean compared to this year, she's really happy and she's supporting me a lot more.

When asked what support she received from her parents during the first year of college, Donna responded,

I mean financially in every realm. Financially my mom took out the Parent Plus loan because she knew that it was important for me to go to school. And she knew that I wanted to be a different person in the family.

Students acknowledged the sacrifices their parents made to support them in college, and some felt that they should alleviate some of the college expenses. Some students worked part-time jobs. For example, Sylvia explained,

Finances have always been kind of a stress in my life. So, that was definitely a big thing because a lot of people that like I hang out with or go out with would have all these nice and expensive things and like just to them money was kind of like whatever. But for me it was like if I didn't have this in my bank account, I would freak out and like, go back home on the weekends to work because I need to make sure that I had that.

Carlos, who worked in his family's business, said,

The financial support they give me is probably the most support they could give me right now. I expect them to help me pay for it, like don't get me wrong. I want to pay them back. I will pay them back.

### *Emotional Support*

Emotional support from parents was important to students. This parental support included displays of empathy, compassion, and care for what the students were experiencing in college. Emotional support gave students reassurance that their parents noticed and valued their children's experiences in college. Students then felt positive about their decision to attend college. Emotional support motivated students to stay on track with their academics. George explained,

My mom would support me more emotionally if I had a tough time during school or with balancing work and school. Or she would be there to comfort me and talk me into getting my mood back up. And my dad I would say, he kind of talked to me in a way to motivate me to work harder and better in school to make sure I do better, not only for the family, but for myself.

For students, emotional support took on many meanings for them. Students wanted their parents to respect their decisions and also recognize their independence as budding young adults. In addition, for some students, emotional support meant parents acknowledging that, as part of the college experience, they might struggle with academic issues or failures. It also seemed that students expected their parents to be willing to listen to them vent about various experiences in school such as interactions with faculty, their classwork, and the attitudes of their peers.

Overall, students were very thankful for the emotional support they received from their parents. These gestures motivated them to succeed in college. Donna shared her experience about receiving emotional support from her mom. She said,

She would send me a lot of words of affirmation, or like care packages of the things she knows that would comfort me even though I lived in the area. Just things to remind me that, even though she didn't go through this, she's still there to support me.

#### *Parents' Beliefs and Attitudes toward Education*

The beliefs and attitudes of parents toward education served as a form of support for students. Students indicated that the views of their parents on education provided them with motivation and encouragement to achieve their goals of graduation and career success.

According to students, their parents believed that education was valuable, important, and a conduit for successful career outcomes. Students in this study also pointed out that their parents felt that education represented a way to achieve financial security for the family. In discussing how family beliefs about college and education influenced her academic experiences, Donna remarked,

I feel like it is now more of a positive motivating experience because I go to them with all these cool things that I learned and so now it's like I have a desire to learn. I feel like their beliefs showed that they think differently now more than they ever did because I get a lot of positive reinforcement.

Parents expressed their support for their first-generation students taking advantage of a college education by expressing how proud they were of their loved ones. This support could also motivate students. Carlos expressed this when he remarked,

I feel like my dad's proud of me. He is always talking to me about business or how he is running his business, or where he's making money. He actually talks to me about these things because he trusts me. I like when he talks to me about those things. He was telling me that once I graduate, we are going to do big things. And I believe and agree with him.

### **Barriers to Student Success**

Student participants discussed some of the barriers and limitations they faced due to their parents' lack of knowledge of the college experience and information on resources. They also related how these challenges impacted their educational experience. Further analysis of these lived experiences resulted in the emergence of two subthemes: (a) limited knowledge of information, resources, and the college experience (b) lack of awareness of mental health issues.

#### *Limited Knowledge of Information, Resources, and the College Experience*

Students reported that one of the barriers to their success in college was that their parents did not have the knowledge of information and resources needed to support their academics. At times, students seemed frustrated that they were not able to obtain guidance from their parents on academic matters.

Many student participants also discussed the need for support from their parents to help them figure out how to select a major and a career path. However, their parents were not able to provide them with this type of information or support. These students felt that they had to make these decisions on their own without much parental guidance. In explaining what support, she was expecting from her parents, Donna said,

I mean it was the big things like, do you think I should go to Oakton Community College back home? Do you think I should drop out of school or just go to Oakton because this is a financial burden on the family? Or what should I change my major to? Should I go back

to psychology? Or should I do this or do that? I feel like those were the more direct things I wanted to know.

Students also indicated that they wished their parents could have supported their studies by helping them with their coursework. When asked about other forms of support he would have liked to have received from his parents during the first year in college, George said,

As a science major the classes are very difficult, so I wish they could have helped me with the academic work themselves. But I know they couldn't be there for me for that. So that's something which they could have helped me with, but I understand how it would be hard for them.

Milo realized that he too could not depend on his parent to help him with his homework. He said,

There was a certain point where my mom couldn't help me with my homework anymore. Not because she didn't want to, but because she didn't even understand what the homework was about. It was beyond her level of comprehension especially when it came to math or stuff like that. So, a lot of things I had to teach myself, you know, and I had to become self-dependent. Nobody told me to do my homework.

Students mentioned that because their parents did not understand the college experience, this limitation caused them anxiety. They said that sometimes they had to stay later in school to complete assignments or attend social events. However, their parents had the expectation that students would be home at an earlier time and this led to tense moments in the household. Milo remarked,

My mom always likes to know where I am, but if I tell her I'm at school, then I hope that she trusts me. And, she will say "where's my son? He's at school." Instead of me having to remind her, "hey, I'm still at school right now. Or like, hey, I need to finish up a

project or I'm going to be out late.” or what time are you coming home? I feel like she should trust that “I got this.”

Rachel had a similar experience with her mom in terms of expectations and being at home. She explained,

It would be midnight and my mom would call to say “where are you? You need to come home.” I told her that I can't have a college experience if this is going to be her mentality. Nobody's going home at 12 because their mom told them to. That's not the reality for a lot of people.

#### *Lack of Awareness of Mental Health Issues*

A recurring theme among students was their struggles with mental health challenges and their attempts to help their parents understand the issue. Student participants reported they experienced stress during their first year in college. Many students felt pressure to meet the expectations of their parents and faculty, manage their time, and make friends in school. They also felt overwhelmed with coursework and frustrated trying to navigate the college environment.

Donna related her experiences with stress when she said,

I feel like my first year went so fast that I wasn't able to identify my stress. It was just like; okay I don't really have time to be stressed. Like I am stressed, but I don't have time to deal with it.

Carlos's experience of feeling pressure to succeed in college captured the stress and strain of all of the first-generation students. He said,

Pressure is an understatement. I think I feel like I have a boulder on my shoulders sometimes and I stress out because being the oldest brother, you know. You have these



standards you have to meet. Don't get me wrong; I fail to meet standards at times. And then I'm seen as a failure. I feel like I see I've been a failure. And sometimes I get depressed in that manner. But I have to pick myself up and be an inspiration to my siblings too.

Many of the students in the study reported how the pressure to succeed had resulted in struggles with mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Students shared that these challenges were either borne out of experiences of the college environment or from internal pressures. Students who experienced mental health issues during their first year in college sought support from their parents as a way to cope with their struggles. Their efforts to find parental support for their mental health challenges were not successful. Sylvia's mom did not seem to understand her mental health struggles when she reflected,

I realized that I needed mental help. And from my mom, she doesn't believe in mental health. She thought it was just like if you're sad. You have to push through it like that's all just made up. You don't need medication. So, it was difficult to communicate with her because I was struggling mentally, and she really didn't accept that. She is of the view of me being weak, I guess. But once I decided to go into psychology, I started looking at things and learning more. I would try to educate her and inform her.

In reflecting on what she would have wanted her mom to know about her experiences and supports during her freshman year in college, Rachel said,

I think a lot of just mental health stuff that's something that's really hard to talk to my mom about. It's always been like that. I don't think she is always appreciative of the ways in which people are stressed out and their stressors. And so, college is a huge transitional period and there's lots of things like academic pressure, there's social

pressures, there's financial pressures. And especially as a commuter I think those look a lot different than kids who live on campus...And so I don't think she (mom) was as attentive. It's always been hard to reach out to her about that stuff and I don't. Her responses are not always the most welcoming because she can be stubborn. So, I think probably the biggest thing would be understanding mental health, especially in a transitional period.

Carlos and Rachel had similar experiences with their parents when seeking support for mental health issues. He too did not feel that he could discuss with his parents his experiences with mental health issues such as feelings of being stressed out. Carlos felt that his parents minimized his experiences and remarked,

I needed somebody to talk to about what is going on and if I was in the right state of mind. Because I guess they had it rough they think that whatever I'm going through is nothing compared to what they had. So, they always make it seem that I don't have anything to worry about. My dad always says you have nothing to stress about and I tell him that's not the case. I do have things to stress about. I have standards to meet. He says that I don't have bills to pay. I said I have standards to meet and I don't want to be a failure. So, you know what I mean?

### **Student Expectations of Parents**

Another major theme among the student participants was the expectations they had for their parents. Students acknowledged that their parents had limited knowledge of the college experience, but they still expected their families to help them navigate the college environment. This dynamic caused a tension that expressed itself in a "push and pull" between students and

their parents. Sylvia's response referenced below captured the angst of students who expected to receive tangible support for their academics. She related,

This is not their fault, but I wish that [my parents] just knew more about [college] so that when I did go to them for advice that I was actually able to get some. It was like, oh well, just do what you want. It does matter what I think. But it's like know you are much older than me and you haven't gone through this, but if you did, you would be able to actually point me in a direction and not just be like, well, either way you're supported. I just wanted more guidance of a direct path.

Student participants recognized that even though their parents never attended college or had a limited understanding of the environment, they expected that their parents still should be able to guide them in such areas as academics and finding resources on campus. Students wanted tangible advice from their parents about navigating college rather than being told to "do what's best or what you feel is right." When asked what direct advice or support she expected from her parents during the first year of college, Donna responded,

My mom was like, well, what do you think you should do? Stuff like that. It's just like, oh, you do whatever feels right. Well, that's why I'm asking you because I don't know what's right...It made me feel uneasy because it was like, okay, well, that's not the answer that I was hoping for. Or I don't even know if I was like hoping for a specific answer. I just know that is not what I wanted to hear.

Parental involvement in the academic experiences of students gave families more knowledge about college and the academic environment. This involvement enabled parents to understand how to provide encouragement and support for their children. Rachel expected her family would

be more engaged in her college experience. Her mom, however, was not active in her college life. Rachel shared,

I thought my mom would like be a little more active in the experience. I feel like a lot of parents are so proud of their kids and their kids going to college or this is a big part of their life, but for my mom her perspective on education and stuff, it looks a lot different than I think a traditional parent...I kind of wanted her to at least express that she's more proud of me, or just be more active in things. The only thing that she plays a prominent role in terms of my education is financing it, and even at that, she's not too eager to do it. It's just because she knows it makes me happy and that I have a game plan, and she's going to support me through that because she's my mom and she cares about what I want to do with my life. But yeah, she's not... she never feels excited about anything I tell her. She's just kind of like, okay. So yeah, I just thought she was more engaged in it. She doesn't have a set path for anybody, she doesn't have any expectations for any of her kids. She wants them to succeed, but it's by their understanding of that.

During the first year of college, students and parents seemed to have different expectations about college. Students expected their parents to provide financial, emotional, and motivational support. They wanted them to acknowledge and try to understand their struggles around such mental health issues as stress and feeling pressure to succeed in their academics. They also expected them to offer tangible advice about navigating college.

Students perceived their parents' expectations for them were mostly in the areas of academic and career success. This included obtaining good grades and completing college. Carlos shared his perception of his parents' expectations when he said,

First and foremost, I have to finish. My parents don't tell me, but I feel their energy like I can't be a failure. I have to finish; I have to finish college. My mindset is I would rather lose an arm than not to finish college.

Sylvia's perception of her parents' expectations mirrored the expectations of some of the other parent participants. She noted,

Yeah, it's mainly 'I'm helping you pay for school. I'm helping you financially, and in any other ways. As long as you do what you like, happy with, and make sure that you're doing it well.

George explained his expectations when he remarked,

I expected them to you know, be there to support me as they are now. Because I've heard people saying college is difficult and hard, and it can actually make people feel like mentally break down and be emotional to the point where they just stopped going. But I expected my parents to always be there to support me and to make sure that doesn't happen to me.

Students from the study sometimes sought guidance for their parents about college. Rachel said,

I have to be a lot more independent because [my mom is] so chill, she kind of was just like, yeah, you're your own person, so do whatever you want. And sometimes that's challenging because I kind of need a parent perspective, and she sometimes doesn't know how to assert that.

Most parents of first-generation college students never attended college. As a result, many do not have any knowledge or understanding of the college environment and the experiences of students. This limited view of college can affect parents' understanding of how they can support their loved ones. Student participants discussed the need for institutional programs to support

their parents. They said their families could utilize the information shared to help them navigate college successfully. Students suggested that the programs should include workshops to help parents understand how students can select classes and majors, information sessions on how parents can support students, workshops to give parents an overview of campus resources, and opportunities for parents to meet with financial aid counselors and other resources personnel on campus. Rachel shared ideas for what a parental support program would entail when she said,

I feel like workshops or like even like having like a program where, especially for first gen students where their parents shadow them. They have to shadow their kids for a day and see what they're doing in their classes and seeing what college actually looks like because that's where that translation and understanding is lost is that they don't have this experience so... they can't connect. And they can be proud of you, but that's about it. And so, I think something like a shadowing program or having parents have to have mandatory meetings with financial aid advisors and counselors and stuff and just almost forcing parents to build connections with the same resources out there, students do.

Carlos shared the same thoughts as Rachel about a support program for parents when he said,

There should probably a program for parents that would show them what a college student goes through day to day or explains what they're going through.

According to Sylvia,

A program should probably have an overview of a lot of the different student benefits on campus. And have it be split up between like commuter students and housing students. I feel like being first gen and living on campus like that's huge. Because my mom can't baby me anymore, she doesn't have an eye on me all the time. So, having parents

understand that students share a room with two people, and they live in a big building with a bunch of other students that's watched by staff at night will be good.

Donna shared her recommendations for a program to support parents when she said,

I feel like a program could just be a lot of like students coming in saying what they would wish to get advice on or what they wish they could go to their parents with. And then the parents attempting to give them advice and then being told what would be a really beneficial piece of advice.

### **Persistence in the Face of Challenges**

The first-generation students participating in the study faced many challenges and hurdles to succeeding in college. Many of these students took pride in being the first in their family despite of the obstacles they faced each day. Some of these challenges included lack of financial resources, not being able to receive proper guidance about college from their parents (due to their parents' lack of knowledge about the campus environment), and other issues such as trying to fit into the college setting and transitioning from high school. Remarkably, students in the study were able to persist in college during their first year even though they faced these difficult challenges. Their ability to persist in the face of the many hurdles emerged as a theme from the study. Two subthemes explain how students persisted in light of the challenges they faced. These subthemes were: (a) motivational support received from parents (b) asserting independence.

#### *Motivational Support Received from Parents*

Student participants reported that the motivational support they received from their parents was instrumental in helping them cope with some of the challenges they faced as they strived to succeed in their academics during the first year of college. This support provided students the confidence to persist in their studies. Students discussed the importance of their parents showing them care through motivational support. Milo remarked,

My mom definitely cares. She always asked me every time I see her, how was your day? You know, like, how was class. And whenever I have anything important, you know, like an interview, or like a big test, you know, midterms, final, she's like, good luck, you know, you can do this even though I know that she really doesn't know what it's like to have to prepare for something for that long and to go to a test that is going to be three hours long. I feel very warm inside, you know, like a good feeling like, you know, that she cares, that she acknowledges that it's something that I'm doing for myself.

Motivational support gave students in this study the confidence and belief they could achieve their academic and career goals and reinforced in them a sense of accomplishment. Rachel said,

I do get very good grades and I work very hard and I am like resourceful and I am kind of able to do things on my own.

Donna commented,

I feel like it was a lot of my parents being like, don't give up, this is your first year. You can be unhappy with it, but don't give up. Because you don't know what it's gonna end up turning out to be and you suffered through the other years of this, and why would you give up now when you like barely even started? Yeah, I feel like it was something that I knew in the back of my head but just really needed an outside source to tell me.

Students appreciated the feedback and encouragement they received from their parents about their academic experience. Sylvia remarked,

I mean, my mom definitely encouraged me to continue my education, and when I told her that I'm thinking about going into my masters and possibly a Ph.D., she was surprised. I want to be a good role model for my brothers and show them that education is important and if they want to do anything, they really need to have higher education.



### *Asserting Independence*

Student participants believed that during their first year in college they were coming of age and needed independence to make some of their own decisions. Students felt that being independent was part of the college experience. Some of them negotiated their independence from their parents. This process was emotional at times, but students reported that parents understood why independence was important as they transitioned to college. Sylvia recalled always having to babysit her siblings in high school. During her first year in college, her mom expected that she would continue caring for her brother and sister. Sylvia discussed decisions she made during her freshman year in college and said,

When it came down to committing to a school and choosing a dorm, that is when I told [my mom] I needed my independence. I mean it kind of hurt. I didn't mean to hurt her and seeing her hurt, hurt me. So, it was just pain both ways. But she understood where I was coming from. And I kind of gave her an overview and examples of how I don't really have the independence that I should be getting at eighteen and going to college.

Rachel asserted that,

I think it was really hard at first. I just had to be upfront about it. I have my own car. I paid for my car, you know where I am, you know, going with; I should be allowed to have this experience. I think once she acknowledged that, she calmed down a bit. And I think she also treats me more like an adult now. I definitely think she's looked at me even though she's always treated me very, very independent I think even more so now on top of that.

Table 3: Student Themes

	<b>George</b>	<b>Rachel</b>	<b>Carlos</b>	<b>Milo</b>	<b>Donna</b>	<b>Sylvia</b>
Family support ( <i>financial support</i> )	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family support ( <i>emotional support</i> )	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family ( <i>parents' beliefs and attitudes toward education</i> )	X	X	X	X	X	X
Barriers to student success ( <i>limited knowledge of information, resources, and the college experience</i> )	X	X	X	X	X	X
Barriers to student success ( <i>lack of awareness of mental health issues</i> )	X	X	X		X	X
Barriers to student success ( <i>student expectations of parents</i> )	X	X	X	X	X	X
Persistence in the face of challenges ( <i>motivational support received from parents</i> )	X		X	X	X	X
Persistence in the face of challenges ( <i>asserting independence</i> )		X		X		X

## **Emergent Themes from Parent Participants**

Themes generated from the parents in the study related to the amount of support parents felt they could offer, their views on education, and relationships with their children. The major parent themes that emerged were: (1) Providing support, (2) Perception of education, (3) Barriers to student success, and (4) Student independence.

### **Providing Support**

Families shared the importance of providing financial, emotional, and motivational support to their children during the first year of college. These forms of support were important in helping the student participants persist through the first year in college. Financial support from parents was important in keeping students enrolled in college. All the parent participants pointed out that financial support was a challenge for them because college was an expensive proposition. Marina remarked,

The only thing is that the hardest thing is financially. After that, the emotional, because this is a big step. So, my son told me, mom, in college nobody is doing this, like doing that. It's your own. So, you don't do it, you fail. So, I am glad that you're learning and doing it.

Goldie thought it was important that she knew for sure that her daughter was serious about going to college because of the huge financial commitment involved. Goldie remarked,

I want [my daughter] to be sure if that's what she wanted to. It's my only thing. My only issue and I keep asking her, you know, then she's like, oh, Mom, yes, yes. I think last year, it was sometimes she was like, Okay, I'm not sure. And I was like, 'What?' It's better now than later.

Each parent in the study discussed the topic of providing emotional support to student participants. Even though parents were not familiar with the college environment or comfortable

providing advice about college, they felt that it was important to provide emotional support for their child. Their emotional support provided students with the care and comfort needed to persist in school. Rio explained how she provided emotional support for her son when she said,

I think he's always expected and known that mom's support will always be there. I've told him regardless of anything you can always come to me. I might not agree with everything, but I'm here to listen and overall, I'm not just your mom, I am someone that you can talk to. And he knows that, and he's expected that from me. He would come to me and say, I need to talk to you. Can you talk to me? And yes of course I'll listen, and tell me, and whatever advice I can give you, I'm there.

Parent participants also discussed providing motivational support to their first-generation college students. Motivational support manifested itself in such ways as providing encouraging words, advice to continue to do well in college, or gestures to let students know they could succeed in their endeavors. A common thread among parent participants was their willingness to help their children to advocate for campus resources in order to support their academics. Claudia encouraged her son to seek help and to ask questions of professors when he was struggling in one of his classes. She said,

I would tell him I had a teacher once that I would ask him to explain it to me in a different way. And it was just the same thing that they will repeat so I did tell him I will go after school maybe to let the teacher know that you don't understand. If there's anything else that you can do, or if there's another way that I can explain it to you, just so you can have a better understanding of it. And show him what he asked you to do, you did it. If you have a question, ask if you don't understand. Ask questions just so you can get a better understanding of what's going on.

Even though some parents did not know much about college academics, they understood the importance of homework based on their limited experiences with schooling in general. Parents provided students with reassuring words of comfort to motivate their loved ones to perform their best in their academics.

Marina recalled her experiences with not completing homework assignments when she attended school in her youth. Now she encouraged her son to complete his homework before classes. She remarked,

Before going to college, I told him to do his homework before the night. Because in my experience nobody told me when I was little to do your homework. So the next day when it was time for me to be in class with the teachers, if they ask me if I did the homework I would say I didn't (laughing).

### **Perception of Education**

Parents believed that education was valuable and important. For them, education was also a way to earn an advantage in life. Parent participants perceived that education could lead to career opportunities and financial security for their families. When asked about her views and beliefs about education, Patricia said,

It's important, you need it. Like you need it to get ahead. I mean, as opposed you know, every resume shows it and then the next person's didn't go to college, that type of thing. It would benefit that way. Basically, to get ahead in life better, keep your brain working, you know?

Rio remarked,

I think it's great. I think that if you have the chance you should definitely take it. I do think it's hard for a lot of kids to attend school just because it's so expensive, but if you

have the chance and you can do it, I support it 100%, because it's something that every kid should be able to have.

Parent participants saw an economic value in education. One of the key expectations these parents had for their children was that they perform well in their academics and finish the first year of college and beyond. It seemed that for parents, academic success helped to validate their efforts in supporting their children, especially financially. When asked about her views and beliefs about education and college, Claudia responded,

I think it's something very important. I think that when you're educated, you do better in life, financially and just in general. I have always told him, when you learn it's something that nobody could take it away from you. It's something that stays in you forever. And for me, I think it's the key to success. If you want to be successful in any way in life you need to be educated.

Karen shared her views about education when she said,

I mean you know my daughter knows she's attaining a degree and that is, you know, very epic. She will have jobs and degrees in whatever she's interested in. It is having that and being able to support yourself. Being able to live very well.

Parent participants believed that education is important in itself, but they also saw the economic value to it. For them, education is practical and can lead to financial security for their children, so it is important that they persist in college.

### **Barriers to Student Success**

Parent participants reflected on their experiences helping their children navigate the college environment. Since these parents did not attend college or earn a four-year college degree, their knowledge about college was very limited. This lack of knowledge and information

could become a barrier to students' success in college. For example, many parents did not have an understanding of the resources available to support their children when they saw them struggling with academics. Parents seemed to be aware of their limited knowledge about college and seemed frustrated not being able to help their students navigate college. Claudia discussed her struggles trying to support her son when she remarked,

I just feel frustrated right now. I cannot go with him to campus and ask questions and I feel like, you know, if I had the opportunity of going with him I will, you know, take him to the campus and ask questions. As you know, ask the questions and be there more, you know. As a parent, for me, I feel like I'm struggling in that way.

Goldie seemed aware of her limited knowledge about college. When asked how she felt about not knowing much about college, she said,

Not good. Not good. Because I like to know. And this area is definitely not good.

Because even you know, all my friends have the same issue with that. So, when we talk about this and I hear this story and that story, in my head it's even worse than it was before. But I know every situation is different. Every child is different. I shouldn't compare but we do. Right. So that's how we do this.

Goldie also shared that she wished she knew more about college before her daughter started. She seemed resigned about the knowledge gap as she further reflected on what may lay ahead for her other kids. Goldie said,

I still feel the same for my boys. And I don't really understand the way I can help them to choose if they want to, you know, what is good for them, which way it's like, for example, the people talking about going to try going to [community] college first and [then] university. So many thoughts about saving money.

All parent participants were enthusiastic about their children attending college. They all recognized the importance of supporting their children during the first year of college in order to help them persist. However, some parents felt a sense of powerlessness because they were not able to provide the informational support about college their children needed. Rio remarked,

I didn't attend college. I wish I had. I actually dropped out of school my sophomore year of high school and I think that if I would have continued, I would have been able to support my son more because I would understand more of what he was going through. I can only do and say as much as I can just by trying to understand and hearing him out. But as an experience I didn't have it. I wish I had it, just so I can have more support for him in that way.

Parent participants understood some of the barriers to the success of their children during the first year in college. Many were motivated to take action to acquire the necessary skills and information to understand the college experiences of students. This dynamic was apparent when Claudia acknowledged that she “would love to go back to school.” Another parent, Patricia, who advised her daughter to seek out resources on campus, talked about reading a lot of parenting books and taking a couple of parenting classes in order to learn about school. Claudia was inspired by her son attending college and would like to follow a similar path. She explained,

I feel like it was my job to give him support. He has been my inspiration of like, moving forward in life and going back to school. And I feel like I cannot tell him ‘you have to finish school’ if I haven't done it myself. So that's one of the reasons I went back because sometimes he asked me questions, and I am totally ignorant and you know, and I feel like I'm ignorant because I wasn't in school. There's a lot of things for us to learn.



Claudia discussed how her husband sought outside support to obtain knowledge and information on how to be emotionally available for their son. She shared that her husband was not emotionally supportive of their son during his first year in college. Their son did not receive any compliments from his dad or validation for his efforts in school or at home. This caused some tension between father and son. Claudia then realized the importance of emotional support for their son and intervened by advising her husband to seek the help of a life coach. This practitioner helped her husband become emotionally supportive of their son. In discussing the results of the lessons given by the life coach, Claudia remarked,

We took the session for four weeks. The first one he said he wasn't prepared for that.

Because it was so hard. The second one he said that yeah it was good because he saw how his dad behaved. He didn't tell him because they were, you know, a lot of things.

My husband doesn't want him to do the same things that he's done.

In order to help students persist, parents in this study seemed to work through some of their challenges and limitations of understanding campus resources by promoting help-seeking behaviors among their loved ones. Parent participants advised their children to self-advocate for resources on campus. Parents understood that they could not advise their children in areas such as academics. However, they supposed that there must be resources on campus to support their children. Patricia asserted,

When [my daughter] was having a hard time, I would just always you know, tell her to find a tutor or go for counseling or something like that. Or do a study group now. I was just giving her ideas where to go to get help.

For Karen, it was important that her daughter take advantage of the resources on campus. She said,

I think just that, you know, you have to take advantage of those resources. But that's one thing I'm kind of like, if you have a question go talk to somebody. If you have a question, go find the person that you need to talk to, and go get the answer. There's so many people at that school that can help you...So, I mean, I think, just, you know, the advice would be just to take advantage of all the resources you have and not to be afraid to talk to people, to ask for help. And to demand the support that you need because you're entitled to them as a student and as a parent.

Claudia had a similar attitude to Karen's in pushing her son to seek out support on campus when he was struggling. She noted,

I think he still is a little confused, like what major he's going to pursue. And you know, not having experience. I have very little to guide him. I feel like I don't have experience, you know, to guide him correctly. So, I just recommend him to ask questions and go for whatever he feels like it's correct. So, I feel like I'm learning with him at school.

Goldie solicited advice from her boss to help her daughter with selection of courses and a major. This strategy helped to break down the information barrier to the success of her daughter in college. Goldie explained her rationale for seeking support for her daughter when she said,

I don't understand the way it is here. So, I asked my boss and she was helping my daughter to understand this. And plus, I believe finding the ways, you know, what makes sense and what not. But I always encouraged her to talk to people and find out because I said I can't help you. I can help you with accounting, but not with psychology.

Parent participants also discussed how a program offered by the educational institution could help them better support their loved ones in college. Such a program would be tailored to the

needs of parents by providing information that would teach them about selecting classes, majors, and career paths, and how to take a test. The program would educate parents about the college experiences of students, offer opportunities for parents to communicate with faculty, and provide parents with an overview of campus resources and activities. Parents believed that support in these areas would allow them to provide the guidance and support that were important in helping their loved ones persist through college. Claudia captured the sentiments of all parents in the study about having a support program for families when she said,

I would like to see a program educating parents on what's going on in school, where they can go when the students have questions regarding financial aid, or regarding changing classes, you know, stuff like that. I don't have that information or that knowledge to tell [my son] what to do. And I feel confused and frustrated at the same time that I don't have that answer. So programs like that I think will help the parents and I feel like I'm not the only parent struggling with that.

### **Student Independence**

Parents discussed how their children asserted their independence during the first year of college. They recognized and acknowledged the growth and development of their children and were proud to see this happen. Parents recognized that their children were becoming independent as they matured into young adulthood. The student participants welcomed this recognition as a good form of support. When commenting on any change in the relationship with her child after she started college, Patricia remarked,

[My daughter] was very independent. She didn't want my advice or anything; she wanted to do everything herself. She was determined. I didn't want to intimidate her because I felt I was just, you know, proud of her for that. She wanted to do it herself. Most kids

like, they don't, you know, they lean on their parents too much. And I was very proud of her not to. I mean, I was there to catch her when she fell a couple times (laughing).

Claudia reflected on her relationship with her son and how that dynamic changed after he started attending college. She said,

Our relationship has changed but I think it has changed for the good. He's been more depending on himself and you know he doesn't depend on me all the time. Now he's more independent. But things that he needs to be done, it needs to be done on his own. So, I think it's good. It is one step of letting that son become you know, an adult.

Table 4: Parent Themes

	<b>Rio</b>	<b>Karen</b>	<b>Marina</b>	<b>Claudia</b>	<b>Patricia</b>	<b>Goldie</b>
Providing support	X	X	X	X	X	X
Perception of education	X	X	X	X	X	X
Barriers to student success	X		X	X	X	X
Student independence	X	X		X	X	

### **Conclusion**

Six student and six parent participants shared their experiences and perceptions of family support during the first year of college. The themes that emerged from students who participated in the study were: (1) Family support, (2) Barriers to student success, (3) Student expectations of parents, and (4) Persistence in the face of challenges. Students related their expectations and how they understood the support they received from their parents and how that helped them to

achieve their goal of persistence. Students also shared their appreciation of the support they received from their parents and how they overcame some of the challenges they encountered.

The themes generated from parent participants highlighted how they perceived the support they provided to their children, their views on education, and their relationships with students during the first year of college. The parent themes that emerged were: (1) Providing support, (2) Perception of education, (3) Barriers to student success, and (4) Student independence.

Chapter V discusses the student and parent themes and how these findings relate to existing literature. The chapter also presents the implications of the research findings for university administrators and student affairs professionals. Chapter VI concludes with recommendations for higher education and future research.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings from a phenomenological study on the role of parental support in the persistence of freshman first-generation college students. The discussion section highlighted the research findings, explained how these results were grounded in existing literature, and drew on scholarship to explain the meaning of the data. The overall findings of this study revealed that although both students and their parents faced barriers to understanding the college experience, the support provided by parents was instrumental in helping first-generation college students persist during their first year in school. Students and parents understood the college experience from different points of views, resulting in family tension and a “push and pull” dynamic. Differences in expectations and understanding of support between students and their parents created the tension. It seemed this tension, however, fostered an educational resilience in students which allowed them to persist through their first year of college. These findings supported and extended existing literature demonstrating that parental support had a positive impact on student persistence.

Culture played a role in the decision making of participants in the study. Coffman (2011) asserted that the success of first-generation college students was influenced by their culture. Similar to Coffman (2011), the beliefs and values of first-generation college students impacted their decision making in terms of transitioning to college during the first year. Although first-generation college students came from low income backgrounds (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Smith & Zhang, 2010), student participants related that they were not only motivated by their first-generation status, but also by their parents’ attitudes and beliefs toward education.

Parents who participated in the study believed that education would provide their loved ones with a path to career and financial success. This is consistent with previous research that

showed students' "pre-college beliefs and values promoted hard work and college attendance as a means of financial success" (Rice et al., 2017, p. 415). The beliefs of parent participants in terms of culture could have impacted how first-generation college students were able to cope with some of the challenges they faced in college as they persisted during the first year in school.

Students were asked to identify a parent for the study who they felt contributed to their persistence. All students selected their moms. This outcome highlighted the important role of mothers for this sample of students in providing important support for first-generation college students during their freshman year in college. A possible explanation for the participation of only mothers in the study could be the role expectations in the homes of participants based on gender and culture. Among family and loved ones, mothers provided the greatest support to students as they transition from high school to college (Smith & Zhang, 2009). Sy and Romero (2008) suggested that Latina women for instance were expected to fulfill caretaker responsibilities in the family. Raffaelli and Ontai (2004) found that the attitude of parents toward gender roles were reflected in the behaviors of females who were expected to engage in activities in the home such as caretaking. One parent in the study, Marina specifically referenced that based on the division of roles in the home, her husband worked and she was responsible for "teaching and helping" their son in school.

### **Emergent Themes from Student Participants**

#### **Family Support**

Students identified three important factors that played a major role in helping them to persist during the first year of college. These factors were: (a) financial support (b) emotional support and (c) parents' beliefs and attitudes toward education.

### *Financial Support*

Financial support was an issue raised throughout the study. Students discussed their concerns about money, whether it was worrying about paying college tuition or finding additional sources of income. First-generation students struggled to finance their education (O'Neal et al., 2016). Many first-generation college students came from low-income backgrounds, and as a result of their socioeconomic status, were vulnerable to persisting in college (Bui, 2002; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Oldfield, 2007). All students in this study received financial support from their parents.

Students discussed the challenges of receiving financial support from their parents. Previous research suggests parents were primarily responsible for paying for college (Choy & Berker, 2003). Smith and Zhang (2010) found that financial aid in the form of loans supported enrollment and retention of first-generation college students. Many students related that their parents took out loans so they could attend college. These resources proved important for students to stay in school and persist.

Student participants worried about the tremendous financial stress their parents experienced because college tuition was expensive. Many students discussed witnessing the financial struggles their parents endured in order to provide financial assistance for them to go to college. For these students, the hardships their parents faced reminded them of the barriers they themselves faced in persisting in college. Wang (2014) explained that messages received from parents during students' transition in college served as a reminder of the importance of never taking family for granted. Similarly, students in this study were determined to use their educational opportunities to provide a better way of life for themselves and their families. The



sacrifices made by parents in sending their loved ones to college motivated students to succeed in their academics, which is consistent with existing literature (Tate et al., 2015).

All student participants appreciated the financial support they received from their parents. Studies showed that first-generation college students were grateful that their families were a major source of support including providing financial resources (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018). Students in the study reported the financial help they received from their parents played a critical role in their success in college.

Existing literature showed that lack of financial resources resulted in first-generation college students being more likely to take on both full-time and part-time employment when compared to their non-first-generation peers (Martinez et al., 2009; Smith & Zhang, 2010). Employment was also important for many students in the study. Jobs allowed students to earn income to supplement the financial assistance received from their parents so that they could purchase important school-related items such as books and supplies.

### *Emotional Support*

Emotional support helped students transition to college and persist during their freshman year. For students in the study, emotional support manifested in such ways as their parents listening to their experiences in college, sending them care packages to brighten their day, and providing words of comfort when they felt sad. Many studies highlighted the importance of emotional support for first-generation college students. Gibbons et al. (2016) and House, et al. (2019) found that emotional support was instrumental in helping students persist in college. Emotional support from family members provided first-generation college students with the social support that helped them successfully transition in and out of college, while also giving them a strong sense of well-being (Budescu & Silverman, 2016). In addition, emotional support

from families was a determining factor in helping low-income students earn higher grades and persist through to the second year of college (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018).

Student participants reported that emotional support took different forms, but had the same result. Every student participant discussed how valuable receiving emotional support was to their college experience. Emotional support for some students included parents respecting their independence to make their own decisions. For example, students wanted parents to support them in their selection of a major. Students in the study also indicated that for them emotional support consisted of parents showing compassion and understanding of their college experiences during challenging times. Other students felt supported when parents were “hands off” and served as a sounding board for their college experiences (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018 p.12). These forms of emotional support from families and parents helped students cope with the many stressors of college life (Sy et al., 2011) and improved their well-being (Chao, 2012). Student participants related that the emotional support they received from their parents showed an appreciation for what they were going through in college. Research on the experiences of first-year first-generation female college students found that emotional support from families helped them to transition to college and persist in their academics (Nunez, 2005).

#### *Parents' Beliefs and Attitudes toward Education*

Students indicated that their parents' beliefs and attitudes toward education served as a form of support and motivation for them. Many students said that their parents believed education could create a pathway toward a stable career and financial security. These views were consistent with existing literature which showed that parents of first-generation college students perceive education in terms of value and financial stability (Pike & Kuh, 2005). From the

perspective of students in the study, it seemed they shared some of the same views about education as their parents.

Students reported that their parents encouraged them to take advantage of their educational opportunities. Research showed that conversations between parents and first-generation college students about obtaining better opportunities through education was encouraging in helping students persist in their studies and obtain a college degree (Wang & Nuru, 2017). These supportive conversations were especially important for students starting their first year of college (Wang & Nuru, 2017). The compliments many students received from their parents for their educational accomplishments during the first year in school further motivated them to succeed in their academics. For students, this approval reinforced their parents' supportive attitude toward education and validated their decision to pursue a college degree.

### **Barriers to Student Success**

#### *Limited Knowledge of Information, Resources, and the College Experience*

Students discussed how their parents' lack of knowledge and information on resources impacted their academic experiences during the first year of college. This theme was consistent with existing scholarship which indicated that students were aware of their parent's lack of knowledge about college life (Bryan & Simmons, 2009), and parents of first-generation college students were unable to provide assistance with information on navigating college (Choy, 2001). Students in this research study were frustrated their parents could not provide them with tangible advice on how to navigate the college, especially in areas such as academic support. These students wished they had received parental help with homework assignments, finding resources, tutors, classes and major selection. This is not uncommon. Existing literature showed that since families of first-generation college students did not attend or complete college, they were not be

able to support their children in ways such as navigating the college environment or assisting with homework (Purswell et al., 2008).

Student participants expressed regret that their parents did not understand some of their experiences in college. For example, students reported that parents thought school supplies such as books were covered by tuition, they could not relate to their major or career interest, expected them to be home at an early hour even though they had projects to complete on campus, and were unable to understand that stress was a part of the college environment. These experiences highlighted some of the barriers students faced when engaging their parents for support.

#### *Lack of Awareness of Mental Health Issues*

Many students in the study indicated that one of the challenges they encountered with parents during their first year in college was their parents' perceived lack of understanding of mental health issues. Students discussed their experiences with anxiety, stress, and depression. Some students detailed how stressful the college environment was during the first year in college and wished their parents would have understood these experiences. First-generation college students experienced stress as they transitioned to the new college environment (Metha et al, 2011). In addition, students felt pressure being the first in their family to attend college (Nunez, 2005). This stress caused students to feel overwhelmed (Hertel, 2002). Many student participants also felt stressed because of the pressure to succeed in school and to graduate.

Students in the study internalized their mental health struggles because they felt their parents would not be receptive to their feelings. These student experiences were consistent with research showing that parents of first-generation college students lacked personal knowledge about the college experience and their children often felt a lack of connection with their family members who they believed could not relate to some of the stressors they encountered in college

(Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Parents' lack of understanding of stress and other related problems could be attributed in part to the stigma sometimes associated with mental health issues (Smith & Applegate, 2018). In addition, first-generation college students were less likely to discuss issues such as stress and anxiety with their families (Barry et al., 2009).

There appeared to be a generational divide among the older and younger generation with regard to discussing mental health issues. This dynamic might explain the perceived attitudes of parents. Every student participant was 19 years old. Young people from Generation Z (those between 15 to 21 years of age) were more likely to express mental health challenges than their parents (Bethune, 2019). This generational divide might explain the reluctance of students in the study to report their mental health struggles to their parents.

### **Student Expectations of Parents**

Students discussed the kinds of supports they expected from parents. On the one hand, students acknowledged that because their parents did not attend or complete college, they were unable to provide them with tangible information on how to navigate this environment. On the other hand, they expected their parents would provide information and guidance about navigating college. This struggle is consistent with the overarching family tension theme of the dissertation, which demonstrated a “push and pull” dynamic between students and parents.

The fact that students in this study expected their parents to still support them with information about college was a deviation from existing literature on family support for first-generation college students. Some students in this study perceived that their parents being the adults should have had the knowledge to support their academic pursuits. For these students it was not enough for their parents to say, “try your best” or “do what’s right.” Student participants wanted tangible information about navigating college. Kranstuber et al. (2012) noted that the

advice parents gave their children about college was based on their own experiences and included phrases for example “work hard,” “play hard,” “my two cents,” and “don’t do this.” Students also reported their parents tried to motivate them by sharing words such as “try harder” and “study more” (Nichols & Islas, 2016).

Although these verbal messages from parents mirrored existing literature, they seemed to show some disconnect between students in this study and their families. Students expected their families to provide something, for example, informational support, that parents were unable to provide. Scholarship on parental support for first-generation students indicated that families were unable to provide information and guidance about college due to the fact that they did not attend or complete post-secondary education (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). These outcomes were at odds with the student participants who expected more informational support from their parents. Studies showed that parents of first-generation students lacked informational knowledge about college, and this deficit became a barrier to students’ success (Fann, et al., 2009; Gibbons et al., 2016).

This study also highlighted a fundamental difference in expectations between student participants and their parents. Students expected their parents to guide and advise them on college, in addition to providing financial, emotional, and motivational support. They also expected their families to understand and be supportive of the mental health challenges they faced due to some of the stressors of college. Students perceived their parents’ expectations of them were connected to academic and career success. The findings from this study suggested that parents focused their attention on their child’s academic and career success based on their belief and values about education. Existing literature showed that parents encouraged students to seek a college degree in hopes of creating a better future for themselves and their families (Tang

et al., 2013). Also, Wang and Nuru (2017) found that parents of first-generation college students emphasized the importance of earning a college degree as a way to gain access to opportunities they did not have.

Students participating in this study discussed the need for parental programs and what this support resource would look like for them. They felt that support programs for parents were needed to help their families understand the experiences of students in college. This view was reflected in research which found that support programs for parents positively impacted student success (Jeynes, 2007). Such programs would provide parents with information that could be helpful to students and their parents during the first year of college. For example, parents would benefit from learning about selecting classes and majors, completing financial aid documents such as FASFA, campus resources to that help students with their academics, and shadowing students for a day at college.

In general, student participants expected more support from parents than seemed realistic considering their families had not attended a 4-year college themselves. However, they offered numerous suggestions for parental programs they thought their institution should consider implementing in order to empower their parents to better support their overall college experience and, in particular, their persistence through to graduation.

### **Persistence in the Face of Challenges**

#### *Motivational Support Received from Parents*

Students in this study encountered numerous challenges and barriers to their success but persisted through their first year of college. Motivational support from their parents provided students with encouragement to focus on school in order to succeed in their academics. Many students reported that motivational support was a factor in their persistence in college during the first year. These findings were consistent with research that showed students relied on

motivational support from family relationships as a way to help them manage some of the challenges they faced as they transitioned to college (Wang, 2014). Students reported that motivational support was a “boost to self-esteem,” “gave them confidence around exam time,” and served to “reinforce positive experiences in college.”

### *Asserting Independence*

Another factor that allowed student participants to persist in the face of challenges was exerting their independence as young adults. All students related the importance of having their independence recognized by their parents. For students, exercising their independence meant having the space to make some of their own decisions. Existing scholarship highlighted that as part of the college experience, students wanted their freedom to be responsible for their own schedules without having to worry about parental expectations or advice (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018).

All students in the study enjoyed a close relationship with their parents. Some students had to negotiate their independence from their parents. Existing literature highlighted that students who had positive relationships with their parents tended to successfully negotiate their independence with their families (Nunez, 2005). This dynamic of negotiating independence represented another aspect of the “push and pull” tension between students and parents in the study. For student participants, having their independence played a major role in how they felt about their college experience. Many students in the study explained the importance of being independent to their parents. Students explained to their parents that having independence was not just a rite of passage as they were emerging into adulthood, but that separation was necessary for them to be successful in their academics. Fortunately for study participants, their parents were supportive of their independence. This is aligned with previous research finding parent



encouragement of decision-making and independence led to a feeling of support, a decrease in stress, and increased resilience among students (Dawson & Pooley, 2013). Student participants related how they asserted their independence from their parents and this separation contributed to their persistence during their first year in college.

### **Emergent Themes from Parent Participants**

#### **Providing Support**

Parent participants discussed the different kinds of support they provided to their first-generation loved ones. They believed these supports helped their loved ones persist during the first year of college. Parents reported they provided financial, emotional, and motivational support. Since parents of first-generation college students did not attend college and offered little relatable experiences, they provided support within the confines of their knowledge and abilities (Aaltonen & Karvoonen, 2016). Existing literature pointed out that parents of first-generation college students also provided their loved ones with support in the form of encouragement, understanding, and belief in their children's goals (Sy et al., 2011). Parents in the study understood the importance of supporting their loved ones and encouraging them to perform well in college. To motivate students, some parents shared educational experiences from their youth and discussed how homework was expected from their teachers. Another strategy is for parents to remind their loved ones to complete their homework before leaving school for home (Nichols & Islas, 2016).

Parents reported that financial support was a significant struggle and sometimes a challenge for them. All parents related that college tuition was expensive. These struggles were in line with existing literature as parents of first-generation students were perceived to be less able to support their loved ones financially (Choy, 2001). Parent participants discussed ways to reduce some of the expenses for college. These attempts included researching scholarship

opportunities for their loved ones to cover tuition costs, suggesting that loved ones commute to school each day instead of living on campus, and having loved ones work in the family business to alleviate tuition expenses. One student worked a part-time job to pay for expenses such as books. These solutions to reduce costs matched existing literature which showed that paying for college expenses was no longer only the responsibility of parents of first-generation college students (Choy & Berker, 2003). In this study and in existing scholarship, parents remained a source of financial support for students during college (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018).

Providing emotional support was another way parents perceived that they helped their loved ones persist. Parents served as a sounding board for their loved ones and listened to their experiences in college. One parent sent care packages to her daughter as a way to show emotional support during the first year in college. Some of the memorable messages parents sent their children were focused on encouragement, support, and general advice based on their own experiences, which is similar to the findings from previous research (Kranstuber et al., 2012). Many parents assured their loved ones that they were there to support them in whatever decisions they made with regards to college. Wang (2014) said that parents were committed to supporting their first-generation college loved ones regardless of the outcomes of their academics.

Parents offered motivational support in numerous ways, including encouraging their loved ones to try their best on their exams. Existing literature showed that when families encouraged their loved ones to focus on college, this advice served as a motivator for students (Tang et al., 2013). This study confirmed earlier research showing parents provided students with encouragement and motivations, even inspiration (Nichols & Islas, 2016). In this study, parent participants also showed motivational support by encouraging their loved ones to advocate for campus resources, while pushing them to find their own solutions to navigating the college

experience. One parent mentioned that she taught her daughter to self-advocate in school so that she could problem solve for herself. Parents fostered help-seeking behaviors in their children to nurture their independence (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). This parent was proud that her child understood how to navigate resources on campus.

### **Perception of Education**

A common theme among parent participants was their perception of education. Many of the parents viewed education and obtaining a college degree as a means to financial security for the family. Parents perceived that education would lead to career opportunities for their loved ones. Some of the comments from parents about education included, “creates a good future,” “builds financial security,” “makes people competitive,” “is the key to success in life,” “can make a living from,” and “needed to succeed.” These perceptions aligned with existing research on first-generation college students that suggested parents valued education and supported their children’s career aspirations (Auerbach, 2007). Pike and Kuh (2005) found education to be a valuable commodity that helped first-generation college students attain social mobility. It seemed that parents in the study wanted their loved ones to achieve with education, what they were not able to accomplish, a college degree. First-generation families saw a bachelor’s degree as a way to obtain financial gains, which is consistent with previous research findings (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Parents understood the importance of their loved ones performing well in their studies. Some parents also envisioned their children attaining additional degrees upon graduation, such as master’s or doctoral degrees. All parents in the study expected that their loved ones would do well in their academic endeavors. Some parents acknowledged that their loved ones felt pressure to obtain good grades. Consistent with existing literature (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Herbert,

2017), parents in this study perceived that their children were motivated to succeed in school to make their family proud. Parents were also proud of accomplishments of their loved ones such as obtaining good grades, achieving academic honors, and completing the first year of college. They complimented their loved ones on those achievements and encouraged them “to keep up the good work”. Encouragement from parents was a motivator for first-generation college students (Tang et al., 2013). Parents’ perception of education motivated students to persist during the first year of college.

### **Barriers to Student Success**

All of the parents in this study were aware of their own limitations and lack of knowledge about the college experiences of their loved ones. Parents expressed regret that during the first year of college they could not provide adequate informational and academic support to their children. These sentiments were reflected in such comments as “I wish I could have helped with homework,” “I wish I understood what he was going through,” “I wish I had advised my daughter to slow down,” and “I wish I could have helped my daughter apply for scholarships.” Not having knowledge about academics and the college environment was to be expected given the fact that parents of first-generation college students did not attend or complete college (Choy, 2001). Many of the parent participants expressed frustration at not having the necessary information about college to guide their loved ones (Purswell et. al, 2008). It seemed that parents felt powerless being unable to provide their children with tangible information about college. Parents recognized this lack of information could be a barrier to the success of their loved ones in college. One parent expressed the frustrations experienced by all the parents in the study when she proclaimed, “I wish I understood how college works.”

Parents were cognizant of their limited knowledge of college and understood how this challenge impacted the experiences of their loved ones. They tried to overcome these obstacles by engaging in activities that provided some of the information needed to relate to their loved ones' college experiences. These activities included returning to the classroom to pursue a GED, reading parent magazines to gain knowledge on how to be a better parent, utilizing the services of a life coach to learn how to be emotionally supportive, reading books, and seeking the advice of a supervisor at place of employment to assist with information on how to navigate college experience. Some parents also expressed a desire to enroll in college to obtain formal education. These practical strategies undertaken by parents in this study reflected the families' attitude toward education and also illustrated their willingness to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to better motivate and support their loved ones in college, while also advancing their own knowledge and skills. Gofen (2009) found that parents of first-generation college students pursued activities that helped them acquire informal education, read books and magazines, and engage in lifelong learning. The actions by parents in the study could be perceived as strategies that were used to break down some of the barriers to the success for their students.

Parents suggested ideas for programs they believed could help them learn about the college experience. Many parent participants felt helpless at not being able to fully participate with their loved ones in academic activities at the beginning of the college year such as selecting classes and majors. Parents suggested participating in a program that could teach them information about financial aid and the FASFA application, applying for scholarships, and learning about the college experience for students would be beneficial to them. It was understandable that financial aid information was a main area of interest for these parents. Resources were scarce for these parents. First-generation college students came from low-

income backgrounds. The financial aid process was controlled by institutions and seemed mysterious to students and parents. For parents, support programs that provided financial and other information could help them to better support their loved ones as they persist in college.

### **Student Independence**

Parent participants discussed how their children matured after starting college. Prior to college, parents were responsible for almost all of the decision-making regarding the well-being of their children. Upon entering college, parents reported all of the first-generation college loved ones began to assert their independence and take the responsibility for much of their own decision-making. According to parents, their loved ones demonstrated their independence in many ways such as making the decision whether to commute or live on campus, selecting their own majors, coming home later than parents expected, and organizing and paying for an immersion trip out of state. Student separation from their parents during their college years allowed for the development of independence and promoted successful college adjustment (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). Existing scholarship showed that students enjoyed having freedom from their parents in order to dictate their own schedule (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018).

Parents in the study understood that recognizing the independence of their loved ones provided students the space needed to succeed in school. Reed et al. (2016) found that the behaviors of parents such as encouraging independence, problem-solving, and self-efficacy had a positive effect on the well-being of students. Some parent participants expressed difficulty watching their child grow up. However, all parents were proud to witness their children come of age during the first year in college. Parents became comfortable with the independence of their loved ones but reminded students that they were also available to provide support if needed. Existing literature showed that when parents supported the independence of loved ones, this

separation fostered resilience among students (Dawson & Pooley, 2013) and a more satisfying college experience (Pederson, 2017).

Parent participants who had multiple children also recognized a change in the attitudes of their loved ones since they started attending college. Parents reported that their first-generation college students became role models to their siblings. According to parents, many of the brothers and sisters of students who took part in the study were very proud of their college-attending siblings. The younger siblings now saw enrolling in college as a goal for themselves. Parent participants were proud to see these shifts in attitudes in the home and how their loved ones in college were now viewed as role models by their siblings. These findings were consistent with research showing that older first-generation siblings usually served as role models to their younger siblings (Gofen, 2009). Parents in the study recognized the importance of “letting go” by fostering the independence of their first-generation loved ones. These actions provided students the opportunity for personal growth and academic success.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study focused on understanding the perceptions of parental support from the perspective of students and their parents. The voices of the student and parent participants established an understanding of the various supports provided by parents such as financial and emotional. Students shared their first-year college experiences while parents provided their perceptions on how they supported these experiences. Both students and parents perceived that the support students received from their families was instrumental in empowering them to succeed and persist in school.

The students who participated in this study provided their perceptions of how the support they received from their parents was effective in helping them to persist during their first year in

college. The research highlighted different ways parents and students coped with the same issue of support. Students seemed to understand some of their parents' limitations in providing tangible advice about the college experience and obtaining resources but believed that as adults their parents should have been more able to deliver this kind of information. Parents, on the other hand, were aware of their shortcomings and drew on their strengths by providing students with important financial, emotional, and motivational supports.

At times, tensions between students and parents resulted in a “push and pull” dynamic as they both coped with the challenges of the college environment. However, regardless of these stressors, parents wanted nothing but the best for their children. Although these parents faced numerous barriers to providing support, their college freshmen nonetheless showed resilience in overcoming these challenges to persist during their first year in college. The findings of this study were consistent with existing research that showed parental support helped first-generation college students persist in their academics. Chapter VI examines implications of the research findings, recommendations for higher education in areas such as parent programming and student mental health, and recommendations for future research.



## **CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION**

### **Implications of Research Findings**

This study examined how freshman first-generation college students perceived the role of parents in their college persistence. The findings from this research provided further understanding of the role parents played in supporting their first-generation college loved ones during their first year in school. This research upheld findings from existing literature, showing that parental support had a positive impact on first-generation college student persistence (Cheng et al., 2011; Fauria & Zellner, 2015; Gibbons, et al., 2016; Kiyama et al., 2015; Sy et al., 2011) and extended beyond existing scholarship by revealing that first-generation parents were more able to support students with financial resources and emotional encouragement and less capable of addressing mental health issues among their loved ones.

The study further added to existing literature by showing that first-generation college students and parents understood the college experience from different perspectives and these views resulted in family tension and a “push and pull” dynamic that fostered an educational resilience among students. Parent participants provided their loved ones with financial, emotional, and motivational supports. These supports assisted their children in persisting during their first year of college.

Despite the support that parents provided to their students, the first implication of this study is that that parents of first-generation college students need additional support structures from the college. These support mechanisms could provide parents with resources and information to better guide to their loved ones in the college environment. For example, institutions could create programs that provide parents with support and tools they need to engage students in their academics. This is explored further in the section below on parent programming.

The second implication from this research is that institutions should intentionally engage first-generation college students when they are on campus. Some students in this study struggled to find information about resources to support their academics. Their parents lacked the knowledge about college, so they were not able to help their loved ones with information on resources. Informational support was important in helping freshman first-generation students learn about institutional resources. Colleges could provide first-generation college students with information on programs and resources available to support their academics and mental health. This information could be displayed on a website designed to share information on college resources with first-generation college students and parents. Recommendations are provided below to build upon these two primary implications.

### **Recommendations for Higher Education**

Institutions of higher education should focus attention on supporting parents of first-generation college students so these families can better understand the college environment and the academic experiences of their loved ones. Parents of first-generation students should be treated as key stakeholders in the educational outcomes of their children. The student participants in this dissertation study showed great resilience in the face of many barriers to their academic success. Students participating in this study also had resilient parents who supported them the best way they knew how. This assistance was sufficient to pull the students through their first year in college. Parents are, and can continue to be, one of the secrets to success for first-generation college students. Institutions need to recognize and treat these parents as key participants in their loved ones' success. Some recommendations for focus by higher education include parent programming, information about college student mental health, and supporting parental interest in education.

## **Parent Programming**

The responses from parents and students in the study highlighted the need for programming to educate first-generation families about the college-going experiences of their loved ones. This need pointed to a gap in programming and services that could help parents understand not only college experiences, but also the needs and expectations of their loved ones. Such programming should be specifically tailored for parents of first-generation college students. Programming for parents should include ways to engage families in the educational experiences of first-generation students. In addition, programming could provide parents with the knowledge and the skillset to understand the complexities of the college environment.

Parents should receive support to be able to understand the needs of their loved ones in such core areas of college life as academics, finances, social and cultural experiences, career outcomes, and health and well-being. Programming should teach parents where to obtain information and resources on these key areas. Institutions could explore a more hands-on approach to parental involvement such as providing shadowing opportunities for families of first-generation college students. This parental engagement activity would allow parents to shadow their first-generation loved ones for some part of a day. Prior to this shadowing event, students could create “a day in the life of a college student” presentation to share with their parents. This project could be in the form of a video, PowerPoint slides with pictures, or any other format students feel could be effective in articulating their daily college experiences to their parents. The presentation would be a useful tool for engaging first-generation parents in the college experiences of students, and could be incorporated into classes for first year students. The core of such programming should include a commitment by the institution to promote parent engagement as an essential component of college student retention.

### **Exploration of Parental Interest in Education**

Some parents in this study were inspired by their children's accomplishments and expressed an interest in exploring the possibility of going to college. This sounds like a win-win for students, parents, and perhaps institutions that would commit the resources to implement such an idea. Having parents back in the classroom could benefit everyone involved. This outcome could create a bonding experience for students, families, and the institutions. The universities win because they could potentially have more students enrolled (possibly both first-generation students and their parents) and who will be motivated by the support they receive, thus improving their retention rates. Students would benefit from having well-informed parents about academics who should be able to guide them in navigating the college environment. This is something college admissions offices could consider exploring in the future if they have not already.

### **College Student Mental Health**

Another finding that emerged from this dissertation study was the need for a focus on mental health awareness for the families of college students. Student participants reported their parents were either skeptical or dismissive of their mental health concerns. Many students discussed their experiences with stress, anxiety, and depression. First-generation students in the study experienced stress as a result of transitioning from high school to the new college environment and managing college expectations. Unfortunately, the support and understanding they expected from their parents was not forthcoming. As a result, students coped on their own with these mental health issues, thus increasing their feeling of being further overwhelmed.

First-generation parents should be educated on recognizing mental health issues in their loved ones. Today more than ever, young people are open to discussing their battles with issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Bethune, 2019). Parents should be equipped to recognize

and address these issues should their loved ones report these experiences to them. It would be beneficial for students to have parents who are understanding and supportive of their struggles in college, including mental health challenges.

Institutions should provide information on mental health support specifically targeted to parents of first-generation college students. This information could be disseminated in a special orientation program. Some key components of this orientation should include helping parents to build trust with their first-generation loved ones so that their students feel comfortable sharing their struggles with mental health issues. Information could also help families to recognize when students are struggling with mental health issues and how to intervene. When parents have a better understanding of their children's mental health struggles, this knowledge will likely help to remove some of the stigma associated with these issues (Smith & Applegate, 2018) and increase help-seeking behavior when necessary. This trust with parents can open students to seeking support on campus when they experience mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study supported existing literature that parental support had a positive impact of the persistence of first-generation college student. Student and parent participants overcame obstacles to some of the barriers they encountered. The research highlighted the informational needs and challenges of parents in understanding the college environment and being able to confidently guide their loved ones to finding resources and other forms of support on campus.

Parent participants in the study were all mothers who were identified by their first-generation loved ones as contributing to their persistence during the first year of college. The

results of the study may have been different if fathers were involved. Future studies could intentionally recruit fathers to participate in order to have another perspective of how parental involvement could impact the persistence of first-generation college students.

Another area for future research should examine how parental support of first-generation college students impacts their career aspirations. It seemed that many of the students and parents from this study had different opinions about student career choices. The parents were, nonetheless, supportive of the career decisions of their loved ones. Research can explore how the views of parents influence, if at all, the career aspirations of first-generation college students in order to gain a better understanding of how students make career choices. This information can then help parents understand how to support the career goals of students. Finding ways to connect parents to the academic experiences of students can only strengthen the student-parent relationship, thus reducing some of barriers to student success.

Future research could stratify for various family constellations such as cultural identities, immigrant communities, urban, suburban, or rural communities as these impact relationships between first-generation students and their parents. Many first-generation college students came from racially diverse ethnic groups (Jehangir, 2010; Martinez et al., 2009) and were more likely to be immigrants (Bui, 2002). Student participants did not specifically mention how the cultural background of their parents, who could have been immigrants, influenced their outlook and expectations of education and the college experience. A look at how these parental identities could have impacted students' outcomes would be worth exploring. Immigrant identity was established as a factor that boosted the self-confidence of first-generation college students (Schwartz et al., 2013). Understanding how the views specifically of immigrant parents might

play a role in the persistence of students would add further insights into outcomes for first-generation college students.

Finally, a focus group methodology could be used to collect data as part of a similar study to gauge parental involvement in the persistence of first-generation college students. Utilizing separate focus groups for students and parents could allow for a deeper exploration of the “push and pull” dynamic that fostered resilience among students in this study. The “push and pull” dynamic manifested itself in a tension between students and parent participants as they both struggled to make meaning of the college experience. A focus group follow-up among study participants would add further understanding of the perceptions of both parents and students in coping with challenges they faced in learning about the expectations of college.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation examined the role of parental and family involvement in the persistence of freshman first-generation college students attending a large private, Catholic institution in the Midwest. There were many important findings and implications of this study. One finding was that the parents of first-generation college students provided support that was instrumental in helping their loved ones persist during the first year of college. However, despite their efforts, parents expressed a need for additional structures from the college to better support their children. Students who participated in this study struggled to find information on programs to support their academics and mental health. A clear implication is that institutions should intentionally engage first-generation college students and their parents in order to provide them with information to support their academics and mental health. Another way colleges can engage parents of first-generation students is to support their own expressed interest in furthering their

education. These college-based interventions should include intentional student and parent programming and engagement.

Future research can build upon the findings of this study. Students and parent participants related some of the difficulties they encountered as both struggled to learn about academic resources and to understand the expectations of the college environment. Future research could utilize a focus group methodology to explore the “push and pull” dynamic from this study that emerged in the tension between students and parent participants as they both struggled to comprehend the college experience. Additional research could also explore what influence, if any, parents may have on the career aspirations of first-generation college students.

This dissertation highlighted that although parents faced numerous barriers to providing support to their loved ones, first-generation college students were resilient in overcoming these challenges while persisting during the first year in school. The continued success of first-generation college students will require a concerted effort of parents and stakeholders in higher education. Parents can better help their first-generation loved ones succeed in college when they receive support and education from the university. Institutions should actively engage parents in order to achieve the optimal academic performance, persistence, and success of first-generation college students.



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## APPENDIX A

### Initial Recruitment Email to students

Dear Students,

You are invited to participate in a college research study by doctoral student Ray Grant on the role of parental and family involvement in helping freshman first-generation college students persist through college. The study seeks 5-6 first-generation college students who completed their freshman year of college. Each participant will receive a \$50 gift card after 1-2 interviews.

The study will look at whether the relationships between first-generation college students and their parents can impact how they respond to challenges, deal with adversity, and make decisions. The study also seeks to understand how families can play a supportive role in the academic and educational experiences of freshman first-generation college students.

#### **Participation in Study:**

Participation in this research is voluntary. Students must be at least 18 years old, a first-generation college student, and agree to be audio recorded during the face-to-face interview. Your participation will be kept confidential. There are no known risk involved in participating in this research. Because the study looks at the role of family involvement in helping students persist through college you will need to obtain permission from one of your parents or guardian to also take part in this research.

Students and a parent/guardian are **both** required to participate in the study and will be interviewed separately. A student cannot participate without a family member or vice versa. Students must have earned between 16 and 50 total credits at time of participation in study. It is highly recommended that students and parents/guardians live in the Chicagoland area.

#### **Study Information:**

For this study, 1-2 face-to-face interviews will also be conducted with each student participant and their selected parent/guardian. Skype communication is also an option. It is estimated that first interview will last approximately 50 minutes and the second about 30 minutes. The interviews will be audio-recorded and conducted. Student interviews will take place on the DePaul campus and family interviews will be conducted at the home of parents/guardians or at a location that is private. A \$25 gift card will be distributed after each interview (total \$50).

To participate in this study please complete the consent form and questionnaire below:

[http://depaul.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_08IYirzqS29CkER](http://depaul.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_08IYirzqS29CkER)

For any questions you can contact the researcher Ray Grant:

#### **Principal Investigator:**

Ray Grant

**P:** (917) 705-0792

**E:** [rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu](mailto:rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu)



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Consent to Participate in Research – Student**

(This information is contained in the survey link in the recruitment email Appendix A)

**Title of Study:** The Role of Family and Parental Support in the Persistence of Freshman First-Generation College Students

**Principal Investigator:** Ray Grant, MS (doctoral student) at DePaul University

**Faculty Sponsor and Supervisor:** Rebecca Michel, Ph.D. (DePaul University)

#### **Purpose of Research**

This study will examine the relationships between freshman first-generation college students and their parents, and how these experiences were supportive to students in their academic and educational pursuits during the first year of college. The research has the potential to benefit first-generation college students and their families by fostering a deeper understanding of how parental involvement in the academic pursuits of their children may led to successful outcomes.

#### **Participation in the study**

The study seeks the participation of first-generation college students who are in their first year of studies or just completed their freshman year of college, and one of their parents/guardian. Participation in this study is voluntary and this means that you can choose not to participate. As a participant you are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time.

Students must have earned between 16 and 50 total credits at time of participation in study. It is highly recommended that students and parents/guardians live in the Chicagoland area.

For the purposes of this study a first-generation college student is defined as a student whose parents did not attend college, or may have attended college and completed some coursework, but did not graduate.

### **Compensation for participation in study**

Each participant (student and parent/guardian) will receive a total of \$50 in gift cards for participation in the study. Of that amount \$25 will be paid upon completion of the first interview and another \$25 at the end of the second interview.

### **What does participation in the study require?**

- If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to take part in two in-person interviews. The first interview will last approximately 50 minutes and the second around 30 minutes.
- During the first interview student participants will be interviewed to learn about how their relationships with their parents/guardians help support them during their freshman year in college. Parent/guardian participants will be asked to discuss the support they provide to their first-generation college student during their child's first year in college.
- The interviews will be audio recorded and study participants will consent to the interview being taped. Each interview will be transcribed into written notes in order to maintain an accurate record of what was said.
- Before in-person interviews are conducted each participant will complete an online demographic questionnaire that may take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

### **Confidentiality**

Information obtained in the process of the study will be kept strictly confidential. Prior to the study each participant will be requested to choose a pseudonym that will be used instead of their real name. There will not be any identifying information in the data collected or the results analyzed. All research records and data collected will be stored in a private and secured location.

### **Are there any risks involved in participating in study?**

Participation in the study does not involve any risks nor harm. The topics and questions that may be asked during the interview could be sensitive and evoke strong feelings or emotions. You are not required to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable.

### **Are there benefits to participating in this study?**

You will not personally benefit from participating in this study. Results from the study will help the researcher learn about the experiences of first-generation college students and how parental and family support can help freshman students persist through their academic career.

**Contact information about research**

If you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to me Ray Grant (the researcher) at 917-705-0792 or via email at [rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu](mailto:rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu). You may also contact the research supervisor Dr. Rebecca Michel for additional information at [Rebecca.michel@depaul.edu](mailto:Rebecca.michel@depaul.edu).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Should you have any questions about or concerns about your rights as a research subject you can contact the Director of Research Compliance in the Office of Research Services Susan Loess-Perezat 312-362-7593 or by email at [Sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:Sloesspe@depaul.edu).

**Statement of Consent**

I have read all of the information provided above. By signing below I indicate my consent to participate in the research and fully understand and agree with the information provided.

Student Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C**

**Student Demographic and Participant Information**

(This information is contained in the survey link in the recruitment email Appendix A)

**Name of student:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone #:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Born in the US? (Yes/No):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student Status (full-time/part-time):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Year in College (Jr., Sr., etc):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Credit hours completed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you live?:** \_\_\_\_\_ on campus

\_\_\_\_\_ off campus (private housing)

\_\_\_\_\_ (off campus with family)

**Do you have a job?: (Yes/No):** \_\_\_\_\_ **If yes, # of hours worked each week:** \_\_\_\_\_

**How do you finance college? (Check all that apply):** Grants \_\_\_\_\_ Loans \_\_\_\_\_

Scholarships \_\_\_\_\_ Out of pocket \_\_\_\_\_ Other source \_\_\_\_\_

**If it were up to you, how far would you like to go to complete your education?**

Bachelor's degree \_\_\_\_\_ Master's degree \_\_\_\_\_ PhD \_\_\_\_\_ Law \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**How much school did your mother (or mother-figure) complete?:**

- a) Less than high school graduate
- b) high school graduate
- c) technical school or 2-year degree
- d) some college
- e) I don't know
- f) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**How much school did your father (or father-figure) complete?:**

- a) Less than high school graduate
- b) high school graduate
- c) technical school or 2-year degree
- d) some college
- e) I don't know
- f) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Types of contact with family members (mom, dad, or guardian) / (check all that apply):**

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

Text \_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one)\_\_\_\_\_

Email\_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one)\_\_\_\_\_

In person\_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one)\_\_\_\_\_

Other\_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one)\_\_\_\_\_

**What dates and times are you available to take part in the first interview for the study?**

**(state as many options as possible):**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Which family member (mom or dad) /guardian would you recommend to participate in this study based on their involvement in your college experience as a freshman student?**

Family member name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact #: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D**

*Parent/Guardian Demographic Information*

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone #:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of student at university:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship to student:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Your highest level of education:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of family members in household:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you have a job?: (Yes/No):** \_\_\_\_\_ **If yes, # of hours worked each week:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Types of contact with student/relative during freshman year (check all that apply):**

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

Text \_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

In person \_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_ How many times per day/week/month/year (circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Consent to Participate in Research – Parent/Guardian**

**Title of Study:** The Role of Family and Parental Support in the Persistence of Freshman First-Generation College Students

**Principal Investigator:** Ray Grant, MS (doctoral student) at DePaul University

**Faculty Sponsor and Supervisor:** Rebecca Michel, Ph.D. (DePaul University)

#### **Purpose of Research**

This study will examine the relationships between freshman first-generation college students and their parents, and how these experiences were supportive to students in their academic and educational pursuits during the first year of college. The research has the potential to benefit first-generation college students and their families by fostering a deeper understanding of how parental involvement in the academic pursuits of their children may led to successful outcomes.

#### **Participation in the study**

The study seeks the participation of first-generation college students who are in their first-year of studies or just completed their freshman year of college, and one of their parents/guardian. Participation in this study is voluntary and this means that you can choose not to participate. As a participant you are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time.

For the purposes of this study a first-generation college student is defined as a student whose parents did not attend college, or may have attended college and completed some coursework, but did not graduate.

#### **Compensation for participation in study**

Each participant (student and parent/guardian) will receive a total of \$50 in gift cards for participation in the study. Of that amount \$25 will be paid upon completion of the first interview and another \$25 at the end of the second interview.



### **What does participation in the study require?**

- If you agree to take part in the study you will be asked to take part in two in-person interviews. Skype communication is also an option. The first interview will last approximately 50 minutes and the second around 30 minutes.
- During the first interview student participants will be interviewed to learn about how their relationships with their parents/guardians help support them during their freshman year in college. Parent/guardian participants will be asked to discuss the support they provide to their first-generation college student during their child's first year in college.
- The interviews will be audio recorded and study participants will consent to the interview being taped. Each interview will be transcribed into written notes in order to maintain an accurate record of what was said.
- Before in-person interviews are conducted each participant will complete an online demographic questionnaire that may take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

### **Confidentiality**

Information obtained in the process of the study will be kept strictly confidential. Prior to the study each participant will be requested to choose a pseudonym that will be used instead of their real name. There will not be any identifying information in the data collected or the results analyzed. All research records and data collected will be stored in a private and secured location.

### **Are there any risks involved in participating in study?**

Participation in the study does not involve any risks nor harm. The topics and questions that may be asked during the interview could be sensitive and evoke strong feelings or emotions. You are not required to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable.

### **Are there benefits to participating in this study?**

You will not personally benefit from participating in this study. Results from the study will help the researcher learn about the experiences of first-generation college students and how parental and family support can help freshman students persist through their academic career.

### **Contact information about research**

If you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to me Ray Grant (the researcher) at 917-705-0792 or via email at [rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu](mailto:rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu). You may also contact the research supervisor Dr. Rebecca Michel for additional information at [Rebecca.michel@depaul.edu](mailto:Rebecca.michel@depaul.edu).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Should you have any questions about or concerns about your rights as a research subject you can contact the Director of Research Compliance in the Office of Research Services Susan Loess-Perezat 312-362-7593 or by email at [Sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:Sloesspe@depaul.edu).

**Statement of Consent**

I have read all of the information provided above. By signing below I indicate my consent to participate in the research and fully understand and agree with the information provided.

Parent/Guardian Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F

Email Template (Email #1 sent after initial recruitment email to students)

Dear Students,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the “*Role of Family and Parental Support in the Persistence of Freshman First-Generation College Students*” study.

This email is a reminder of your upcoming participation in the above-mentioned study.

**You are scheduled to participate in 5 days!**

**Date of your interview:**

Monday, (date) at (time)

**Interview location:**

(location)

I will send you an email reminder one day close to your interview date

The first interview will take approximately 50 minutes and will be audio recorded.

You will receive a \$25 gift card after the first interview and may choose from the following gift card options: Whole Foods, Subway, Aldi, or Starbucks.

If you have any questions please email me at: [rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu](mailto:rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu).

I look forward to meeting you!

Ray Grant, M.S.

Doctoral Student

DePaul University

## APPENDIX G

Email Template (Email #2 sent after initial recruitment email to students)

Dear Students,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the “*Role of Family and Parental Support in the Persistence of Freshman First-Generation College Students*” study.

This email is a reminder of your upcoming participation in the above-mentioned study.

**You are scheduled to participate in the study tomorrow!**

**Date of your interview:**

Monday, (date) at (time)

**Interview location:**

(location)

The first interview will take approximately 50 minutes and will be audio recorded.

You will receive a \$25 gift card after the first interview and may choose from the following gift card options: Whole Foods, Subway, Aldi, or Starbucks.

If you have any questions please email me at: [rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu](mailto:rgrant8@mail.depaul.edu).

I look forward to meeting you!

Ray Grant, M.S.

Doctoral Student

DePaul University

## APPENDIX H

Telephone conversation script template for recruitment of parents/guardian

Hello Parent/Guardian,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the “*Role of Family and Parental Support in the Persistence of Freshman First-Generation College Students*” study.

I want to confirm your availability and discuss with you the interview location for the study. When are you free to the conduct the first interview for the study?

### **Dates for study:**

1. Monday, (date) at (time)
2. Tuesday, (date) at (time)
3. Wednesday, (date) at (time)
4. Thursday, (date) at (time)
5. Friday, (date) at (time)
6. Monday, (date) at (time)
7. Tuesday, (date) at (time)
8. Tuesday, (date) at (time)

### **Interview location:**

We can meet at (location)

The first interview will take approximately 50 minutes and will be audio recorded.

After the interview you will receive a \$25 gift card and may choose from the following gift card options: Whole Foods, Subway, Aldi, or Starbucks.

Just to confirm, we will meet for the first interview on Tuesday, (date) at (time) at (location).

Do you have any questions?

I look forward to meeting you!

Ray Grant, M.S.

Doctoral Student

DePaul University

## APPENDIX I

### Student Participant Interview Protocol

<b>MAIN QUESTION</b>	<b>GUIDES</b>
Talk to me about your family and relationship with parents/ guardians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Describe your relationship with your parents or guardian?</li><li>▪ What role, if any, did your parents/guardian have in influencing your choice to attend college?</li><li>▪ During your first year of college, describe the type of conversations you would have, if any, with your parents/guardian about your academic experiences in college?</li><li>▪ In what ways, if at all, did your family support you during your first year in college?</li><li>▪ In what ways, if any, could your family have been more supportive during your first year of college?</li></ul>
What expectations did your parents or guardian have for you after you started attending college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ After you started attending college, what expectations, if any, were set for you by your parents/guardian?</li><li>▪ What expectations, if any, did you have of your parents when you started college?</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In looking back at your first year of college, what would you like your parents/guardian to know about your experiences in college? (both inside and outside of the classroom)</li> </ul>
<p>Talk to me about your parents or guardian's views on education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What beliefs and views do your parents/guardian have about education and you attending college?</li> <li>▪ Have you noticed any change in your family's attitude towards you since you started attending college? If so, give examples?</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX J

### Parent/Guardian Participant Interview Protocol

MAIN QUESTION	GUIDES
Talk to me about your relationship with your student/relative attending college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Describe your relationship with your relative/student?</li><li>▪ Is your relative/student the first in their family to attend college?</li><li>▪ How do you feel about your relative/student attending college?</li><li>▪ After your family member started attending college has anything changed in your relationship with him/her? Please provide a few examples.</li><li>▪ During your family member's first year of college, did you have conversations with them about their academic experiences? If so, what were those conversations like?</li><li>▪ In what ways did you support your relative/student during their first year in college?</li><li>▪ What other support, if any, do you wish you</li></ul>



	<p>could have given them during their first year in college?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are you most proud of about your relative/student?</li> </ul>
<p>What expectations did have for your relative/student after they started attending college?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What expectations (if any) did you have for your relative/student after they started attending college?</li> <li>▪ Did the role your relative/student play in the family (at home) changed any after they began attending college?</li> </ul>
<p>Talk to me about your views on education in general</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are your beliefs and views about education?</li> <li>▪ What is your understanding of what college is like for your relative/student?</li> </ul>