First-Generation College Students Experiences in Master's Counseling Programs Using Social Cognitive Career Theory Framework

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ABSTRACT

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCES IN MASTER’S COUNSELING PROGRAMS USING SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY FRAMEWORK

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Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2022
Melissa Fickling and Kimberly A. Hart, Co-Directors

First-generation college students (FGCS) are currently underrepresented in graduate programs, and therefore underrepresented in careers that require a graduate degree. There have been numerous studies on FGCS in undergraduate programs, but few studies done in graduate programs. Researching FGCS at the undergraduate level has helped to provide a better understanding of barriers FGCS can experience, and ways to provide them supports. This study looks at FGCS currently enrolled in Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)-accredited counseling programs in order to learn about their experiences.

To learn about their experiences, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to answer the research question, “How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework?” For this study, a FGCS was defined as a person who had neither parent nor guardian complete a bachelor’s degree. I collected data through semi-structured interviews with ten participants, which were roughly one-hour in length.
Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was used as the framework for this study, and concepts of this theory were used to organize the findings. Eighteen themes emerged that were organized within SCCT concepts of barriers, outcome expectations, choice goals, self-efficacy, and supports. In the final chapter, I discuss potential implications for both higher education institutions as well as counseling programs.
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCES IN MASTER’S COUNSELING PROGRAMS USING SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY FRAMEWORK

BY

SANDRA M. BEDNARZ PETERSEN
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Co-Directors:
Melissa Fickling
Kimberly A. Hart
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I am forever grateful for the love and support I received through this process from my family and friends. Thank you for believing in me, even when I did not believe in myself. I also could not have done this without the encouragement and assistance from my professors, peers, and colleagues.
DEDICATION

To all first-generation college students and their families,

with special gratitude to Erica and Linda Bednarz
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the experiences of first-generation college students (FGCS) currently enrolled in a Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)-accredited counseling program. In addition to helping learners attain knowledge, higher education may provide opportunities for career and life advancement (Baum et al., 2010). These opportunities can include increased job prospects, networking opportunities, and, potentially, higher income levels (Baum et al., 2010). Researchers have shown that undergraduate students who have at least one parent who earned a bachelor’s degree are more likely to complete college than students whose parents have not completed their degree (Ishitani, 2006). For FGCS, they are tasked with completing their degrees with little to no insight from their parents on how to navigate higher education (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Providing FGCS early college awareness programs in high school, and peer support groups and mentorship during undergrad has helped to increase graduation rates (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Engle et al., 2006; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Petty, 2014; Somers et al., 2004).

Naturally, as fewer FGCS complete undergraduate programs compared to non-FGCS, there are even fewer FGCS in graduate programs (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Since fewer FGCS attend graduate school, there is little research on their experiences in graduate school (Cataldi et al., 2018). This might be a problem, because counseling, as well as an increasing number of occupations, require graduate school. In this chapter, I will introduce the population of FGCS and graduate students, identify the research
problem as it relates to the counseling profession, present the study, and provide an overview of
the remaining chapters.

First Generation College Students

For the purposes of this study, I will use the term first-generation college students (FGCS) to refer to students who are the first in their family to complete a bachelor’s degree. Petty (2014) discussed how the definition of FGCS has changed over time. Originally, a FGCS was defined as a person who was the first in their family to attend college. Meaning, that a person would not be considered a FGCS if their parent attended college without completing their degree. Now, FGCS are commonly defined in the literature as students whose parents have not completed a college degree (Petty, 2014). In this section I will discuss common barriers FGCS experience in undergraduate and graduate programs, and common strengths FGCS have possessed.

Common Barriers and Common Strengths

Wang and Nuru (2017) discussed that FGCS can face challenges even prior to college. FGCS have been found to be less academically and psychologically prepared for college (Engle et al., 2006; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pelco et al., 2014). One challenge is that FGCS take fewer demanding classes and have lower GPAs and SAT scores in comparison to non-FGCS (Horn et al., 2000; Pelco et al., 2014; Rielh, 1994). Another challenge FGCS can experience is either the inability of their parents to guide them in the admission process, or their parents deterring them from pursuing college (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Garriott and Nisle (2018) found that during undergraduate work FGCS experienced additional stressors such as lacking financial resources,
not having emotional support from family, or limited effective coping skills to manage stress. FGCS are more likely to receive more remedial assistance or withdraw from classes (Glass et al., 2017).

Racial and economic factors have also been found to negatively impact FGCS (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Students of color can struggle finding peer supports, receiving adequate academic preparation, and with experiencing family achievement guilt (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). A majority of FGCS of color come from a low social economic status (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Petty, 2014). FGCS of color also have to navigate financial hurdles regarding financing college (Petty, 2014). Combined, these factors put FGCS of color or from low SES at a disadvantage, significantly hindering the successful completion of their undergraduate degree (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014).

There is less literature available that discussed FGCS in graduate programs (Olive, 2014). Brosnan et al. (2016) found that FGCS are underrepresented in medical programs – due in part to FGSC facing financial barriers that prevent them from pursuing medical school (Brosnan et al., 2016). In order for FGCS to be successful in graduate programs, it is necessary to address the challenges that they experience both in pursuing higher education and completing their degrees.

Olive (2014) reported that although FGCS face significant barriers, there are also positive characteristics many of them possess. FGCS have been found to be intrinsically motivated, persistent, and self-efficient (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Olive, 2014). University programs can use and build upon these common strengths to help FGCS excel by maximizing academic and career opportunities, building peer support networks, and developing overall wellness-- all of which tend to come easier to non-FGCS (Brosnan et al., 2016; Petty, 2014).
Benefits of Graduate School

Not only can obtaining a graduate degree provide career and financial benefits, but these benefits can also significantly impact one’s health and the health of one’s family (Baum et al., 2010). While some graduate degrees can enhance job prospects, in other fields, such as counseling, a master’s degree is a prerequisite to enter the profession (English & Umbach, 2016). With fewer FGCS in undergrad and graduate school compared to non-FGCS, careers that require graduate degrees have fewer FGCS working in those professions, creating a lack of representation due in part to equity of access (Sue et al., 1992). Specifically, in regards to the counseling profession, counselors have discussed the importance of inclusion and representation (Sue et al., 1992), yet little research has been completed on representation of students of color, disabilities, and/or LGBT in CACREP-accredited counseling programs (Shin et al., 2011).

To provide consistent and quality training, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) was created for counselor education (Olson et al., 2018). For the purpose of this study CACREP-accredited counseling programs will be explored. CACREP-accredited counseling program were selected because counseling is my chosen field of study and to choosing one type of program will assist in creating a homogenous sample for this study. Counseling is also a relevant field to study, as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) estimates that the counseling field is expected to grow significantly by 25% over the next ten years. In order to work as a professional counselor, one must complete either a graduate or doctoral program. The counseling profession specialties are vast, and counselors can work with many different populations in a variety of settings (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2020b).
Statement of Problem

As stated previously, information about FGCS who pursue graduate programs is lacking in comparison with research on FGCS in undergraduate programs (Olive, 2014; Brosnan et al, 2015; Cataldi et al., 2018). It is possible that the lack of research can be attributed to the fact that FGCS are not pursuing advanced degrees, and therefore are underrepresented in graduate programs (Cataldi et al., 2018). Some careers, such as counseling, require graduate degrees. So, if FGCS are not pursuing graduate programs, they necessarily are going to be equally unrepresented in fields requiring advanced degrees. When institutions or professors address the barriers related to being a FGCS by providing additional supports and resources, FGCS are more successful at completing their undergraduate degree (Petty, 2014).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of FGCS currently enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. I recruited students currently enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. The study may be informative for graduate programs and faculty to better understand the experiences of FGCS students in graduate programs, and possibly led identifying ways to provide supports and/or assist in addressing barriers.

Research Question

The research question that was answered in this phenomenological study is: How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework? For the purposes of this study, FGCS was defined as a
person who neither parent nor guardian completed a bachelor’s degree. To answer this question, I employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) focused on the lived experiences of FGCS in graduate programs. This approach was appropriate for this study because it focuses on personal lived experiences, what the experiences mean to the participants, and how the participants make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2011). In this case, the phenomenon is the experience of being FGCS in CACPREP accredited counseling graduate program. The goal of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of any barriers and strengths unique to FGCS in counseling graduate programs. The participant’s race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religion, social-economic-status, or program type would not be a factor in choosing participants. I looked for participants who were eighteen-years-old and older. Data was collected using semi-structured individual interview (Creswell, 2012). Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was implemented as the context framework for this study. Lent et al. (1994) discussed that SCCT is comprised of many concepts, and for the purpose of this study I will focusing supports and barriers. A conceptual framework of SCCT applied to this study can be found in Appendix A.

Significance of Study

Looking at the lived experiences of FGCS currently enrolled in counseling programs may be beneficial to administrators and faculty working in graduate programs for multiple reasons. One reason is that, because FGCS are underrepresented in graduate programs (Cataldi et al., 2018), thus information is lacking compared to the available information about undergraduate FGCS (Olive, 2014). Providing additional supports for FGCS in undergraduate programs has been found to be beneficial in combatting barriers, such as lack of academic and psychological
preparation as well as misunderstandings surrounding higher education generally (Petty, 2014). The researcher’s aim for this study is to learn about how being a FGCS influence experiences in CACREP-accredited counseling program. For this study, CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs will be used because a career in counseling requires an advanced degree (ACA, 2020), and, because of accreditation, FGCS are enrolled in programs that have the same minimum set of standards to ensure access to licensure (CACREP, 2016). Learning about FGCS experiences enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs will be done by implement an IPA qualitative design and a SCCT framework (Lent et al., 1994; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith 2011).

**Social Cognitive Career Theory Framework**

SCCT incorporates Bandura’s general social cognitive theory (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT focuses on self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and goal mechanisms in relation to other factors (i.e., person, contextual, and experiential/learning factors) that impact career development (Lent et al., 1994). For this study, I focused on the contextual supports and barriers component of SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2006). Contextual supports are defined as being facilitative influences (Lent & Brown, 2006). Contextual barriers are defined as being obstacles (Lent & Brown, 2006). Lent and Brown (2006) discussed that both contextual supports and barriers can be either factual (e.g., parental income) or perceived aspects of a person’s environment (e.g., having access to career role models). I will provide a review of the SCCT literature in chapter two.
Summary

FGCS are disproportionately underrepresented in graduate programs when compared to non-FGCS (NCES, 2017). As a result, less information is known about their experiences (Olive, 2014). Research related to FGCS has provided undergraduate educators and universities valuable information about the strengths and barriers that FGCS experience (Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Glass et al., 2017; Wang & Nuru, 2017). Educators used this information to implement policies geared towards combating the barriers that have impeded FGCS success in completing their bachelor’s degree (Glass et al., 2017; Petty, 2014). Learning about FGCS experiences in graduate programs may help to identify whether similar policies should be implemented at the graduate level. In the next chapter I will provide a literature review to assist readers understanding on relevant topics related to this study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

First generation college students (FGCS) complete undergraduate and graduate degrees at lower rates than their non-FGCS peers (NCES, 2017). This is problematic because post-secondary education may provide career opportunities and significant financial gains compared to those without a college degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). This research study will focus the lived experiences of FGCS currently enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. In this literature review, I will discuss barriers that FGCS can experience, common strengths they possess, and resources that have been beneficial in assisting in their completion of undergraduate degrees. I will also cover the experience of FGCS who pursue graduate degrees for careers that require a minimum of a master’s degree. Although this study will look at FGCS who enroll in graduate programs, the majority of this chapter will be focused on studies involving first-generation college students in undergraduate programs. This is due to the lack of research regarding first-generation college students who pursue graduate school. As social cognitive career theory (SCCT) identifies barriers and supports in choosing a career (Lent et al., 1994), SCCT will be used as the framework for this study.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

SCCT utilizes concepts of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, choice goals, barriers, and supports to assist a person is identifying and purposing their goals. Olson (2014) suggested that
SCCT can be a helpful framework for working with FGCS since SCCT is beneficial for those in the early stages of their career preparation (see Appendix A).

SCCT views self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and choice goals as social cognitive mechanisms that are relevant to career development (Lent et al., 1994). Lent et al. (1994) defined self-efficacy as a dynamic set of beliefs that a person uses to make a judgment about how they will succeed or not succeed at a particular task. These sets of beliefs are not fixed and can be changed over time. Notably, these beliefs yield a moderate relationship to a person’s abilities (Lent et al., 1994). Lent et al. (1994) defined outcome expectations as beliefs about what might happen if a person pursues a certain career opportunity. Outcome expectations include what can happen in different areas of a person’s life and how physical, social, and self-satisfaction can be impacted. In simplistic terms, self-efficacy focuses on, “Can I do this?” and outcome expectations focuses on, “If I do this, what will happen?” Lent et al. (1994) suggested that choice goals help a person organize their objectives which guides action over time. These choice goals include what a person wants, and what plans and decision they make to achieve their goals (Lent et al., 1994).

Other important aspects of SCCT are barriers and supports that occur in a person’s environment (Lent, 2005; Lent et al., 1994). This theory differs from career development approaches like the popular trait-factor models, which do not put emphasis on situation-specific aspects that a person possesses or that are in their environment but rather focuses more on a person’s interests, values, and abilities. To better understand why career choices might or might not be pursued, SCCT indicates the incorporation of a person’s environment and other external factors which can be vital to this decision process. Barriers can include lack of finances, sociostructural impediments (e.g., discrimination, sexism) or limited choices. Supports can
include familial and peer supports, mentorship, and access to education and career opportunities (Lent, 2005). Lent and Brown (2006) discussed that not many measures have been created to identify domain-specific supports and barriers, because they are often too broad to provide accurately specific predictions. To gain an understanding part of the phenomenon FGCS in graduate school may experience, a qualitative approach will be implemented with this study.

Barriers and Supports within SCCT Framework

Barriers and supports can include both objective and perceived environmental factors (Lent et al., 2000). Lent et al. (2000) discussed the common definition of barriers to be, “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult” (p. 39). This definition allows for barriers to include both intrapersonal and environmental factors (Lent et al., 2000). However, there are benefits and drawbacks of perceived environmental factors (Lent et al., 2000; Lent et al., 2002). One benefit accounts for individual differences, as two people can share an experience while perceiving that experience in two vastly different ways. A drawback is that outsiders could assign blame to an individual because they assume a barrier is only in that person's mind (Lent et al., 2002).

Olson (2014), who suggested using the SCCT framework to help FGCS work through challenges they may experience, analyzed a single-subject design case study implementing SCCT with FGCS who recently obtained a bachelor's degree. The case study focused on Mary, a 23-year-old white female from a rural farming town. Mary reported not being very involved on campus during her time as a student. Although she recently graduated with a 3.0 and a bachelor's in political science, she was having difficulty finding a job six months after graduating (Olson, 2014).
In utilizing SCCT through individual counseling, Olson (2014) showed how increasing Mary’s self-efficacy helped Mary believe that she possessed the skill set necessary for the jobs in her field. Outcome expectations were also explored, as Mary initially believed that she would fail if given any opportunity in her field. Choice goals were explored to help Mary in her decision-making process regarding her employment.

In addition to SCCT concepts, Mary and her counselor discussed how her status as a FGCS impacted her identity. Mary reported feeling like she was not doing “real work” as her career path did not include physical labor of which her family was accustomed to. She also expressed concerns about not belonging in the workplace. To address this concern, the counselor helped Mary form competencies around workplace norms.

Lent et al. (1994) discussed how outcome expectations could be influenced by others: “It is not difficult to imagine a person with high self-efficacy for mathematics choosing to avoid science-intensive career fields if she or he anticipates negative outcomes (e.g., nonsupport of significant others, work/family conflict) to attend such options” (p. 84). Lent et al.’s (1994) understanding is consistent with research trends in which family interactions have a significant impact on a person’s educational pursuits (Nuru & Wang, 2017). Lent et al. (2000) also discussed how barriers can occur at different stages of development, and how barriers can be related to choices. An example was given of when a student wants to declare a major, but parents tell them that they will not financially support that decision. This lack of parental support then creates a significant barrier. However, this barrier only effects that specific major choice; it is not a barrier towards all of their educational opportunities (Lent et al., 2000).

As discussed earlier, FGCS can face unique barriers when compared to non-FGCS, such as not having parents who are able to prepare them for what to expect in college (Garriott &
Nisle, 2018). Additionally, less is known about FGCS experiences in graduate school (Olive, 2014). Learning about the potential barriers FGCS experience may lead to a better understanding of what supports to provide them in graduate school.

Graduate School

After a bachelor’s degree is earned, a person can pursue graduate school to earn a master’s degree or doctoral degree (NCES, 2020). Completing a graduate degree can lead to high incomes, which in turn can result to improved health and increased opportunities for the graduate and their family (Baum et al., 2010). Baum et al. (2010) found that those who have earned a graduate degree are less likely to smoke, less likely to be obese, and more likely to exercise. Children who come from a home where a parent has an advanced-level degree are more likely to be academically successful themselves (Baum et al., 2010). For certain careers, such as clinical mental health counseling, college professors, lawyers, and medical doctors, graduate degrees are required (English & Umbach, 2016). FGCS are less likely to pursue graduate school (English & Umbach, 2016; Olive, 2014) which means that FGCS are not only underrepresented in graduate school, but also in those respective professions.

First Generation College Students

For the purposes of this study, FGCS are those who are the first in their family to complete a bachelor’s degree (Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Petty, 2014; Wang & Nuru, 2017). Garriott and Nisle (2018) estimated that one in every six students on a college campus in the United States is a FGCS. Of the FGCS who attend private institutions, 16% attend for-profit private colleges (while only 5% of non-FGCS attend), and 9% attend nonprofit private colleges.
(while 23% of non-FGCS attend) (NCES, 2017). This comparison reveals that more FGCS attend for-profit private colleges and less attend nonprofit private colleges. This attendance difference suggests FGCS may not be as informed on the college selection process as for-profit private colleges have less resources to meet their needs. Among FGCS generally, 76% attend public colleges. With the majority of FGCS attending public colleges, this literature review will discuss studies conducted at these public universities that reveal common barriers, strengths, and supports that influence the success of FGCS.

Common Barriers

As previously discussed, FGCS can experience barriers in pursuing college (Engle et al., 2006; Ishita, 2006). These barriers can start prior to undergraduate studies, due to social and academic environments in which FGCS are not being prepared either academically or psychologically (Engle et al., 2006; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pelco et al., 2014). Throughout undergraduate studies, FGCS can continue to face barriers related to that can impend their degree completion (Ishinitia, 2006). FGCS students of color can encounter additional challenges both leading up to college and during college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Olive, 2014).

Prior to Undergraduate Studies

During high school, FGCS can experience barriers in preparing for college such as lack of academic preparedness and navigating college expectations (Engle et al., 2006; Wang & Nuru, 2017). When FGCS begin the college exploration process, although advice from their social group may be sought, these students still want guidance and support from their parents (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Wang and Nuru (2017) refer to this dynamic as “different precollege traits” (p.
154), meaning how FGCS’s parents’ lack of experience prevent the parents from providing assistance not only successfully completing high school, but also navigating the college application process (Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Wang & Nuru, 2017; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Notably, FGCS might also be encouraged by their family members not to attend college and instead focus on family responsibilities (Wang & Nuru, 2017).

Numerous studies have found that FGCS can be both academically and psychologically unprepared for college (Engle et al., 2006; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pelco et al., 2014). In comparison to non-FGCS, FGCS tend to take less rigorous courses, have lower GPAs and SAT scores, and lack strong cognitive and effective study skills (Horn et al., 2000; Pelco et al., 2014; Rielh, 1994). Psychologically, FGCS have lower academic self-efficacy when compared to non-FGCS, meaning that FGCS struggle to believe that they have the ability to succeed in academia (Pelco et al., 2014; Rielh, 1994). Also, FGCS do not understand the culture of higher education, which puts them at a disadvantage for how to navigate it successfully (Pelco et al., 2014).

Horn and Nunez (2000) looked at data from the National Center for Educational Statistics to compare courses taken by FGCS and non-FGCS; specifically, the researchers focused on mathematics courses taken in eighth grade and high school. Mathematics was chosen because when students take algebra in middle school, they are more likely to complete higher mathematics courses during high school. Horn and Nunez (2000) found that only 14% of FGCS enrolled in eighth grade algebra while 34% of non-FGCS were enrolled. In high school, students taking higher mathematics courses continues along the same lines, where FGCS are 22% and non-FGCS are 61% of those enrolled. From the data set, only 58% of FGCS enrolled in post-secondary education compared to 92% of non-FGCS who enrolled in post-secondary education (Horn & Nunez, 2000).
Socioeconomic status (SES) also is a potential barrier to college for FGCS (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Garriott & Nisle, 2018). Wang and Nuru (2017) found that a common theme in their study was that FGCS had concerns related to being able to afford college. Blackwell and Pinder (2014) noted that a majority of FGCS are from low SES backgrounds and found that FGCS reported not having enough resources at home or within their communities to assist with their education (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). This may be part of the reason why FGCS from low SES are four times more likely to drop out during their first year of college, compared to non-FGCS (Froggé & Woods, 2018).

Initial barriers that can impact FGCS academic success in college can be found in the lack of preparation FGCS receive in middle school and high school (Engle et al., 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Wang & Nuru, 2017). This is evidenced by FGCS having been found to be academically and psychologically unprepared for college (Froggé & Woods, 2018; Horn & Nunez, 2000). Additionally, other barriers can include family members being unable to provide assistance on how to navigate higher education successfully (Wang & Nuru, 2000) and coming from low SES backgrounds (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Garriott & Nisle, 2018). As a result, FGCS may not be supplied with the necessary resources to put them on the path to academic success before starting college, and this can be seen in their undergraduate study performance. Notably, these pre-college barriers may continue while new barriers can develop during college.

**During Undergraduate Studies**

 Universities tend to look at retention rates to gauge the success of a freshman class (Rielh, 1994). A strong predictor for retention is admissions selectivity, meaning that students who have a more rigorous academic background are more likely to be prepared for college
coursework (Rielh, 1994; Westrick et al., 2015). Rielh (1994) compared the preparation, aspirations, and performance of FGCS and non-FGCS of the freshman class of Indiana State University. Indiana State University was chosen because they had a moderate admissions selection and a mission to serve FGCS (Rielh, 1994). Rielh (1994) surveyed 2,190 freshman, which was 93% of the freshman class. Out of the 2,190 participants, 774 were FGCS. Rielh (1994) found significant differences between FGCS and non-FGCS in the following areas: GPA and SAT scores, self-predication of grades for the first-semester, academic degree aspirations, and first-year academic performance. High school class rank was the only area there was not a significant difference (Rielh, 1994).

Ishitani (2006) also looked at factors that influence college attrition and degree completion. A longitudinal study was completed using data sets from NELS:88 and NELS:1988-2000, which looked at 4,427 eight-graders over a 12-year span. This study looked at four groups of participants: FGCS whose parents had a high school degree or lower, FGCS whose parents started college, but did not complete it, non-FGCS who had one parent earn a college degree, and non-FGCS who had both parents earn a college degree (Ishitani, 2006). For example, the results showed that both groups of FGCS were more likely not to complete their degree, and had the highest risk of dropping out after their second year. In comparison to non-FGCS, FGCS whose parents did not attend college were 8.5% more likely to drop out while FGCS whose parents attended but did not complete college were 4.4% more likely to drop out (Ishitani, 2006). FGCS whose parents had not attended college at all were 51% more likely to take longer than four years to complete their degree compared to 44% of FGCS whose parents attend some college (Ishitani, 2006).
FGCS have also been found to have different experiences during college when compared to non-FGCS (Terenzini et al., 1995). Terenzini et al. (1995) did a longitudinal study with 3,840 participants from 23 different institutions. FGCS worked more hours off campus per week, participated less in workshops offered by the school, and were less engaged in collegiate activities when compared to non-FGCS (Terenzini et al., 1995). Inman and Mayber (1999) and Mehta et al. (2011) also had similar findings in regards to spending less time on campus and being less involved in activities. FGCS also did not feel like their faculty were willing to be flexible or helpful, or cared about their personal development (Terenzini et al., 1995).

Collier and Morgan (2008) discussed that success in college not only requires commitment to academics, but also understanding and mastering the college student role. The college student role includes understanding professors’ expectations and using academic skills to meet those expectations. Collier and Morgan (2008) conducted focus groups at Portland State University that consisted of faculty groups, FGCS groups, and non-FGCS groups. The faculty focus groups found that their concerns related to students not meeting expectations in the following three categories: workload and priorities, the explicitness of expectations and assignments, and issues related to communication and problem solving (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Some overlap was found between FGCS and non-FGCS such as having misunderstandings regarding expectations, disregarding faculty suggestions on how much time to devote to studies, and wanting faculty to be more explicit (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Collier and Morgan (2008) found more areas in which FGCS and non-FGCS differed in regard to expectations from faculty members. Although both FGCS and non-FGCS requested faculty to be more explicit, the manner in which FGCS and non-FGCS preferred this looked different. For example, FGCS wanted syllabi that was very detailed, while non-FGCS wanted
syllabi that were concise (Collier & Morgan, 2008). FGCS also reported having difficulty understanding how to navigate a syllabus, and therefore, did not utilize it. In the same vein, FGCS put more emphasize on what a faculty member stated about assignments, than what was written in the syllabus (Collier & Morgan, 2008). However, not understanding the syllabus led students to lose points on assignments and for missing class. Understandably FGCS experienced frustration over not adhering to mechanical aspects of assignments (formatting, citation styles, page limits) which negatively impacted their grade. As a result, FGCS also discussed feeling uncomfortable approaching faculty members for help or clarification on these issues (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

In conclusion, FGCS can experience numerous barriers during their undergraduate career, evidenced by the comparisons between FGCS and non-FGCS found in the studies outlined above. Not only are non-FGCS more likely to complete their degrees than FGCS, but for the FGCS who do complete their degrees they are less likely to complete their degree in four years (Ishitani, 2006). Additionally, Rielh (1994) found that FGCS and non-FGCS differed in terms of degree aspirations and first-year grade performance. In the preparedness category, FGCS also struggled to understand the college student role and lacked the confidence to approach their professors for assistance (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Cultural Context of Barriers

The section above identified some common barriers that FGCS experience prior to and during college. While the discovery of these barriers is important, understanding what influences the root causes of these barriers is vital to providing FGCS with the necessary supports to foster degree completion. In the United States, due to our history of racism being imbedded in our
society, racism impacts one’s experience of class and vice versa (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017). Additionally, the SES of a FGCS of any race can impede both their secondary as well as their post-secondary educational success. Consequently, 54% of FGCS are students of color (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019).

FGCS of color may face additional challenges of not receiving adequate academic information and lacking peer support (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Olive, 2014). Blackwell and Pinder (2014) studied the experiences of Black FGCS compared to Black third-generation college students. FGCS discussed feeling isolated from their siblings due to diverging academic interests as well as not having access to academic, financial, and social resources (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014).

Throughout their time in college, FGCS of color can experience family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Wang & Nuru, 2017). Family achievement guilt is defined as the feelings associated with obtaining academic and/or professional success that is not experienced by the majority of those in his/her family and peer groups (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). In this same study, Covarrubias and Fryberg (2014) looked at family achievement guilt between both FGCS and non-FGCS, as well as family achievement guilt between students of color and white students. While a majority of the students of color were Latinx, participants were also Black and Native American (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). The researchers found that FGCS and students of color were more likely to experience family achievement guilt than non-FGCS and white students. The authors attributed this variance to differing cultural values that focus on the importance of others rather than individualism (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014).

Olive (2014) looked at the experiences of Latinx FGCS. As previously mentioned, the education level of a Latinx students’ parents can influence both academic achievement and
degree completion (Mohammadi, 1994). Olive (2014) discussed how Latinx parents want their children to achieve and do better than they did. However, because these parents have not attended college, they lack the necessary knowledge to assist their children in pursuing higher education.

As noted, due to institution’s lack of support and preparation, FGCS of color can face additional barriers. Researchers have found that FGCS of color experience less peer support, receive insufficient academic preparation, and may experience family achievement guilt more than white students. In spite of these barriers, FGCS have shown resilience and demonstrate strengths not always seen in non-FGCS.

**Common Strengths**

Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) conducted a study, between FGCS and non-FGCS currently enrolled in community college, exploring how motivation and integration into college life impacts academic achievement. They found that motivation for completing college comes from both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Intrinsic factors refer to motivation that originates from within, and in academic settings, can include enjoyment from learning about challenging topics and finding pride in accomplishing academic tasks. Extrinsic factors refer to motivation that originates from external places and, in terms of pursuing a career, can include financial gains or higher jobs status (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Prospero and Vohra-Gupta’s (2007) study had 277 participants, 197 of whom were FGCS. The participants completed surveys involving demographic information, motivation variables, and integration variables. The results found that FGCS had a stronger relationship between motivational dimensions and integration dimensions than non-FGCS. Motivational
dimensions and integration dimensions were found to be significant predictors for FGCS academic success but were not found to be significant predictors for non-FGCS. Additionally, a correlation was found between intrinsic motivation and academic success for FGCS (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) discussed how intrinsic motivation can help FGCS better integrate into the college system. Similarly, Blackwell and Pinder (2014) also found that FGCS who succeeded were intrinsically motivated for learning, even at a young age.

In another study, Hicks and Dennis (2005) surveyed 430 participants who were currently enrolled at a four-year university. The study was exploring the attitude differences between FGCS and non-FGCS about goals and motivations for attending college. The participants were surveyed using the Life Attitude Profile-Revised (LAP-R) with the purpose (PU) subset and personal meaning index (PMI). The results of the study showed that FGCS scored the highest in the choice/responsibility and goal-seeking dimensions, were more enthusiastic about their life and their important life choices and were motivated to achieve the goals that they set for themselves (Hicks & Dennis, 2005).

In the study conducted by Wang and Nuru (2017), found that interactions with family members heavily influenced FGCS' decisions to pursue higher education. Common themes that were positive included “coauthoring the dream where parents discussed the many advantages from pursuing higher education and supported their child's desire to earn a college degree (Wang & Nuru, 2017, p. 159). Another theme was FGCS and their parents “aspiring for more” which referred to both the FGCS and their parents wanting a better life (Wang & Nuru, 2017, p. 160). Additionally, FGCS experienced lower levels of stress throughout their undergraduate career when they were able to identify coping skills and external resources, and when their parents provided emotional support (Garriott & Nisle, 2018).
Although the research has shown that some FGCS face significant barriers before pursuing and during their undergraduate career, the research also suggests that they possess many strengths that non-FGCS do not possess in like-kind. FGCS often have the intrinsic motivation of desiring to achieve more for themselves and their families to assists them in navigating the college system. Universities and professors can capitalize on these strengths by providing FGCS with the necessary academic and financial supports to maximize these students' success.

Supporting FGCS

Higher education administrators are concerned with improving FGCS enrollment and retention rates, due to schools being held more accountable for assessment and performance, with potential implications for performance budgeting (Engle et al., 2006; Froggë & Woods, 2018). As the following supports have been found to help FGCS succeed, administrators should provide, prior and during their undergraduate career, additional supports to FGCS such as summer readiness programs, peer support groups, and mentor programs to increase FGCS enrollment and improve retention rates (Engle et al., 2006; Petty, 2014; Somers et al., 2004).

Supports Prior to Undergraduate Studies

Providing supports for FGCS should begin prior to college in either high school or middle school (Engle et al., 2006; Sommers et al., 2004). Sommers et al. (2004) conducted a study that looked at the backgrounds, aspirations, achievements, and persistence of both FGCS and non-FGCS. When discussing implementation of the study’s findings, notifying both FGCS
and their parents early on about college awareness programs was important (Sommers et al., 2004). Early college awareness programs can include information about financial aid, the application process, and encouragement for students (Engle et al., 2006; Somers et al., 2004).

Colleges can also provide supports to FGCS by providing summer readiness programs prior to their first year (Hicks, 2003; Hutchens et al., 2011). FGCS are often unclear on both what to expect of college and what is expected of them (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Hicks, 2003; Wang & Nuru, 2017). Hicks (2003) conducted a study on how FGCS and non-FGCS expectations about and how they perceived college. The study had 197 participants, 112 of whom were FGCS. The participants attended one of two six-week summer programs, either the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation Programs (LSAMP) or Preparation and Adjustment for College Entrance Program (PACE). The participants in the study completed pre- and posttest surveys using the PEEK questionnaire style which gaged: Perceptions, Expectations, Emotions, and Knowledge about college (Hicks, 2003).

Hicks (2003) found that both FGCS and non-FGCS had misconceptions about attending college. Both FGCS and non-FGCS initially did not understand the rigor of academia at the college level and also believed that instructors would spend time teaching study skills (Hicks, 2003). After the six-week program ended, FGCS developed concerns about their ability to complete this course work (Hicks, 2003). Additionally, FGCS, believing their support group would remain the same as it was in high school, reported they did not plan to join extracurricular groups to make new friends (Hicks, 2003). These findings suggest that FGCS may need college preparedness support prior to attending college, as well as guidance on how building new relationships creates a peer support group which can ultimately help them succeed (Hicks, 2003).
Supports During Undergraduate Studies

Support for FGCS does not end after they are admitted into an undergraduate program (Petty, 2014), as Blackwell and Pinder (2014) found that supports have been beneficial for FGCS throughout their undergraduate school career. Among these supports are peer groups made up of other FGCS as well as professor mentors (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Garriott & Nisle, 2018).

An example of how to implement these supports is illustrated in the programs offered by the University of Kentucky (UK; Hutchens et al., 2011). The support for FGCS began by creating a cohort of FGCS. The cohort had a weekend retreat at the beginning of the semester where the students had the opportunity to be more introspective, learn about college expectations, and begin forming support groups. The students were also enrolled in a course designed to assist students in identifying careers and majors, and there was also a mentorship component (Hutchens et al., 2011). Prior to the program, UK had a retention rate of 59% for FGCS compared to 70% for non-FGCS (Hutchens et al., 2011). After the first year’s cohort completed the program, FGCS had a retention rate of 72% for the university and 100% retention rate for students in the cohort (Hutchens et al., 2011).

After the success of the first cohort, UK looked for ways to expand the program (Hutchens et al., 2011). This expansion included creating a Director of First-Generation Initiatives position, a First-Generation Advisory Board, and dorm rooms specifically for FGCS (Hutchens et al., 2011). UK also identified five areas where supports could be implemented to benefit FGCS. The first step was to gather data to identify which students were FGCS needing additional supports. The next suggestion was to respond to the needs of FGCS, by asking FGCS directly or designing focus groups. The third suggestion was to engage faculty and staff by
making them aware of the potential barriers faced by and supports available to FGCS. The fourth suggestion was to provide FGCS with scholarships and financial aid, and, lastly, the final suggestion was to instill a sense of community so that FGCS feel like they belong. This could include providing orientation classes specifically for FGCS or facilitating a mentorship program (Huchens et al., 2011).

Understanding the subculture components of FGCS is also an important aspect of providing supports (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) found that FGCS can feel conflicted in balancing the demands of academia with their responsibilities in their home life. To better understand this dilemma, Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) conducted a narrative study using relational dialectic theory as the framework (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Relational dialectic theory states that relationships are a “[G]ive-and-take process in constant motion,” and for FGCS this can be the student wanting to maintain their cultural identity while navigating college (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011, p. 55).

Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) conducted a study where twelve FGCS participants engaged in focus groups and individual interviews while attending a university that provided additional supports (i.e., FGCS dorms and FGCS orientation classes). They found that students experienced four specific tension types: two interindividual dialectic tensions ("in versus out" and "talking versus silence") and two intergroup dialectic tensions ("integration versus segregation" and "assistance versus resistance"). “In versus out” referred to wanting to fit in at college and feeling proud of their accomplishments, while at the same time not feeling like they belonged to the college culture. “Talking versus silence” referred to the concern FGCS students felt about being "outed" if they talked and disclosed who they really were (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). “Integration and segregation” referred to the balance the students felt about
wanting to participate in college culture yet wanting to be themselves, while “assistance versus resistance” referred to understanding that support programs would be helpful, but feeling that they would not be self-sufficient if they utilized them (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

As a result of their study, Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) identified more effective ways universities could provide supports to FGCS experiencing these tensions. The first suggested support was for universities to better engage with the parents of FGCS. It was noted that traditional events such as “Parents Day” would not be sufficient to meet this criterion, as students expressed this one-day exposure felt both intimidating and overwhelming to their parents. The students reported that their parents did not understand university culture, and therefore did not want to visit due to fear that they would stand out as unintelligent and be made fun of (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Another suggested colleges and universities should provide supports and services to FGCS together with non-FGCS. Though having support groups for only FGCS fill a need, providing services to a monolithic group also felt isolating (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). The researchers last suggestion was to educate faculty members on how to develop relationships with FGCS and to better understand the needs of that community (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

Although previous research shows that family and friend encouragement highly influences FGCS' decision to attend college (Wang & Nuru, 2017), institutional supports were found to be instrumental in assisting FGCS reach their academic goals (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). Their study had 688 participants from two four-year institutions, and they looked at institutional supports as well as family and friend support in relation to stress, coping, and perceived academic goal progress between FGCS and non-FGCS (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). The researchers
identified several institutional supports such as mentorship, tutoring, college preparation, and college life acclimation and belonging programs on campus (Garriott & Nisle, 2018).

Another beneficial support for FGCS is substantive faculty involvement (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). Though Terenzini et al. (1995) found that overall FGCS did not feel like their faculty cared about them, Filkins and Doyle (2002) found that when FGCS feel that their faculty addresses their needs, this support has the effect of students becoming more academically engaged. Filkins and Doyle (2002) utilized data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE includes data collected from over 300 four-year colleges and universities and included over 175,000 student participants (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). In particular, the researchers focused on looking at TRIO eligible students (which include FGCS and low-income students) compared to non-TRIO eligible students in regards to effective education practices (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). The results showed that for personal and social development, the student-faculty relationship was more important to FGCS success than it was to non-FGCS success. Filkins and Doyle (2002) also found that in regards to vocational and workplace skills, FGCS benefit more from active, collaborative hands-on learning. In the classroom, active and collaborative learning can include activities such as presentations or class discussions (Filkins & Doyle, 2002).

Another avenue towards ensuring academic success for FGCS is to address any psychological barriers that that may impede their preparedness for college (Engle et al., 2006; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pelco et al., 2014). Stephens et al. (2014) found a way to assist FGCS in becoming more psychologically prepared for college through use of different-education intervention. Difference-education intervention gives students the opportunity to learn about the varying social-class backgrounds and how these can be both a strength and limitation in
academia. To explore these differences, groups of participants attended a panel where the panelists discussed how their different backgrounds impacted their academic success. Additionally, the panelists shared obstacles they faced and how they overcame them, as explained by the following panelist:

Because my parents didn’t go to college, they weren’t always able to provide me the advice I needed. So it was sometimes hard to figure out which classes to take and what I wanted to do in the future. But there are other people who can provide that advice, and I learned that I needed to rely on my adviser more than other students. (Stephens et al., 2014, p. 3)

The date from the study is as follows, the study had 147 participants, 66 of whom were FGCS (Stephens et al., 2014 There were four groups in total: there were two groups who experienced the difference-education, a FGCS and a non-FGCS, and two control groups, a FGCS and non-FGCS. At the end of the school year, the researcher was measuring the following four areas: (1) if difference-education had been retained, (2) participants’ utilized resources, (3) impacted evaluation of college transition, and (4) had impacted GPAs (Stephens et al., 2014). Stephens et al. (2014) found that FGCS who experienced difference-education had significantly higher GPAs and utilized more resources than FGCS in the control group. No significant difference of GPAs or resources utilized were found in the non-FGCS groups. Both FGCS and non-FGCS who experienced difference-education were found to have a more positive transition into college; experienced less stress, less anxiety, and had more academic and social engagement than both control groups; and had a greater appreciation for differences than the control groups.

Research indicates that FGCS can benefit greatly from financial, social, and academic supports both prior to and during their undergraduate careers. For example, it has been stressed that providing middle school and high school students information and encouragement to would-be FGCS and their families is important (Engle et al., 2006; Somers et al., 2004). After FGCS are
admitted to college, summer programs prior to their freshman year can assist FGCS in understanding expectations and building peer supports (Hutchens et al., 2011). Colleges and universities can also encourage professors to better understand and be more engaging with their FGCS, while also implementing collaborative learning experiences to help FGCS to succeed (Filkins & Doyle, 2002).

First Generation College Students in Graduate Programs

There is less literature focused on FGCS in graduate programs than in undergraduate programs (Olive, 2014), which underscores the need for the present study. Olive (2014) conducted a phenomenological study to research why Latinx FGCS enrolled in a counseling graduate program. The study had three participants who were currently enrolled in a counseling program, identified as Latinx, and were FGCS (Olive, 2014). Olive (2014) found that FGCS were influenced by those that they respected, like their professors or academic counselors, to pursue graduate school. As FGCS, Latinx students were not influenced by their family members due to family members' unfamiliarity with graduate school. The researchers also found that guidance from those they respected played an important role throughout the participants’ programs (Olive, 2014). Though FGCS had “challenging life experiences,” they were found to be resilient, persistent, and displayed self-efficacy in both setting and completing educational goals (Olive, 2014, p. 79). The participants reported viewing graduate school as something that could help them to achieve distinction, financial comfort, and career satisfaction (Olive, 2014). Martinez (2018) also conducted a phenomenological study looking to see if Latinx Serving Intuitions (HSI) assisted FGCS in preparing for graduate school. The study had 15 participants who identified as Latinx, and who were interested in becoming a faculty member in the
humanities. Martinez (2018) found that the participants reported that their development of academic interests was tied to their identity; one participant discussed how in a literature course they took was the first time in their academic career that they were learning about their own culture. Participants also discussed the importance of family support, even when their family did not understand all of the aspects of graduate school. Peer support was also found to be an influence in their decision to pursue graduate school. Lastly, because having the opportunity to know what to expect during their undergraduate program was beneficial, programs that expose FGCS to graduate program expectations early on would be of equal value (Martinez, 2018).

Brosnan et al. (2016) focused on FGCS who pursued medical school to identify barriers as well as find strategies for equity. The study had 22 participants, 15 of which were from lower SES, and was conducted using Bourdieu’s method to look at the forms of capital (social, cultural, economic) that are valued in medical school settings to see if FGCS had access to these resources (Brosnan et al., 2016). In medical programs there is disproportionately less enrollment for FGCS and students from lower SES, not because they are not accepted into the program, but because these applicants are less likely to apply (Brosnan et al., 2016).

The researchers found that FGCS faced barriers in all three capital types (Brosnan et al., 2016). Social capital is the idea of “who you know” and FGCS struggled compared to their peers in this area. The study revealed that non-FGCS had family member(s) who were doctors which helped the students have a better idea of what to expect in the program (Brosnan et al., 2016). Further, FGCS were less likely to have the same networking opportunities and felt uncomfortable asking for assistance in this area (Brosnan et al., 2016). Cultural capital, similar to social capital, benefits those who have connections or inroads to the profession. Due to not knowing the professionally acceptable norms, the medical FGCS felt they lacked the “right kind
of knowledge” (Brosnan et al., 2016, p. 848). Further, the participants reported that they were unsure how to navigate professional peer relationships and struggled to connect with their peers, leading to further isolation (Brosnan et al., 2016). As they advanced in their studies, growing personally and professionally, the students next reported difficulty fitting in with the friend group they had prior to starting medical school (Brosnan et al., 2016). Lastly, economic capital focused on SES, and the study found that the absence of financial resources was consequential--as evidenced by FGCS needing to work during the program, even when it was discouraged (Brosnan et al., 2016).

As the available research on FGCS in graduate programs is limited, additional research regarding FGCS in graduate school is needed (Olive, 2014). That FGCS benefited from targeted resources and supports prior to attending undergrad, indicates similar programs for FGCS interested in pursuing graduate programs would have a similar effect--especially considering the fact that FGCS found the guidance and encouragement they received to pursue graduate school to be beneficial. Additionally, FGCS possess numerous characteristics to help them to succeed in setting and achieving their education goals (Olive, 2014) even though they also experience financial barriers and feeling they lacked social or cultural knowledge (Brosnan et al., 2016). Addressing these barriers may help provide FGCS with targeted resources and supports to help them succeed.

Gaps in the Literature

Researchers who have studied FGCS have focused primarily on the experiences of students who are either pursuing or enrolled in undergraduate level programs. As previously indicated, less research is available about the experiences of FGCS who pursue graduate
programs, largely because FGCS are underrepresented in these programs compared to non-FGCS. Further research on FGCS in graduate programs could be beneficial for a number of reasons: potentially assisting in understanding why fewer FGCS pursue graduate degrees, understanding if there are additional supports that could be provided to FGCS who have interested in attending graduate school, and positively impacting FGCS recruitment and retention in graduate programs. With FGCS being underrepresented in graduate programs, they are also necessarily underrepresented in those respective careers. As such, because certain careers require advanced degrees and if we want our professions to be more diverse, more research about FGCS experiences in graduate programs is essential.

First Generation College Students in CACREP Counseling Programs

The phenomenon for this study will be the lived experiences of FGCS in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. As discussed previously, FGCS are underrepresented in graduate programs (Cataldi et al., 2018) and through this study I want to learn how being a FGCS impacts experiences in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. Counseling profession was chosen because it is my field of study and because counselors are required to earn a master’s degree. For the purpose of this study, FGCS in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs will be further explored.

The ACA (2020a) defined counseling as, “[A] professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (para 2). Professional counselors have earned a master’s degree, completed an internship experience during their graduate work, and undergone a licensing process (ACA, 2020a). Counselors can work in a variety of settings including at mental health centers, hospitals,
community health centers, and in private practice (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In the next ten years the projected growth for counselor professionals is 25%, which is significant given that the average growth rate for occupations is only 4% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

The ACES established CACRP to create educational standards to be used when training counselors (Olson et al., 2018). CACREP (2020) is geared towards preparing counselors and promoting continuing professional development. This is accomplished through developing standards and implementing procedures towards accreditation (CACREP, 2020). In 2016, updated CACREP standards were released containing many aspects of counseling training (CACREP, 2016). This includes the eight core areas of competency, which are as follows (1) profession counseling orientation and ethical practice, (2) social and cultural diversity, (3) human growth and development, (4) career development, (5) counseling and helping relationships, (6) group counseling and group work, (7) assessment and testing, and (8) research and program evaluation (CACREP, 2016).

Summary

Various aspects of postsecondary education viewed from the lens of SCCT, such as benefits of attending graduate school, as well as CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs were outlined above. Considerations of barriers to, strengths of, and provided supports for FGCS before, during, and after attending undergraduate were presented. Barriers included academic and psychological unpreparedness, coupled with the lack of resources and the necessity of working due to low SES (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Engle et al., 2006; Froggê & Woods, 2018; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Terenzini et al., 1995). Despite these barriers, the strengths exhibited by FGCS included resiliency, persistency, and self-efficacy (Olive, 2014).
Lastly, supports were found to be most beneficial when they occurred both prior to and during enrollment in college (Engle et al., 2006; Petty, 2014; Somers et al., 2004).

Researchers have found that FGCS invaluably benefit from early exposure to college preparation programs (Engle et al., 2006; Petty, 2014; Somers et al., 2004). However, due to the lack of FGCS in graduate programs, the available literature on their experiences is not complete (Olive, 2014). Given the findings of FGCS benefiting from supportive programs in undergrad, coupled with the lack of information of FGCS in graduate programs, reviewing and analyzing FGCS’ graduate program experiences is warranted to respond the research question: How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework? The next chapter will outline a specific methodology and set procedures for the present study.
Chapter 3

METHOD

This study was conducted to answer the research question: How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework? For this study, FGCS will be defined as a person who had neither parent nor guardian completed a bachelor’s degree. The participants were currently enrolled in a CACREP-accredited graduate program working towards their master’s degree. For this study, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was the framework and focused on identifying any barriers or supports the participants may or may not have experienced or obtained. The remainder of this chapter discusses the methodology and method for this study.

Methodology

One beneficial qualitative approach for appropriately examining experiences of FGCS in graduate programs is a phenomenological study (Giorgi, 1994). Researchers who employ phenomenological studies attempt to understand the commonalities of the shared lived experiences of multiple individuals who have all had connection with the same phenomenon (Giorgi, 1994; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The particular phenomenological approached employed for this study will be an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). This approach would be most effective for learning what FGCS in graduate counseling programs experience because it focuses on not only for learning about individual experiences, but also potential connections or
disconnections between participants' experiences. Particularly, this may help identify any barriers or strengths that are common to FGCS in graduate counseling program.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA researchers’ main objective is to explore how participants make sense of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). To accomplish this objective, IPA researchers utilize fundamental principles from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In regards to research, hermeneutics, often referred to as double hermeneutic, is when the participant make meaning of their experiences. Next, the researcher attempts to decode the participant’s meaning (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith 2011). Idiography refers to the in-depth analysis of a single case as opposed to nomothetic principles which focus on groups and populations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A discussion regarding how this process was implemented in this study will be in the data analysis section of this chapter. Next, I will discuss criteria of the participants of this study and how they were recruited.

**Participants**

In this study, I sought out FGCS who were currently enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate program working towards a master’s degree. All of the participants were at least 18 years old. Though demographic information was collected by participants via a survey, their race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religion, or social-economic-status were not used as inclusion or exclusion criteria. Ten participants were interviewed for this study (Creswell, 2012; Morse, 2000) and they were compensated for their time with a $15 gift card.
A number of factors are considered when deciding on a sample size (Morse, 2000). First, both the scope of the study and nature of the topic is considered (Morse, 2000). When the scope and the nature of the topic are specific and obvious, this straightforwardness lends itself to a smaller sample size because information obtained through interviews provides in-depth responses (Morse, 2000). Next, quality of data is also taken into account, as fewer participants are needed when they provide more in-depth responses (Morse, 2000). The quality of interviews will be examined based on participants completing all phases of the interview process and adjust the sample size as needed. Sampling will conclude when no new information is acquired through interviews (Kline, 2017).

**Recruiting Participants**

After receiving Northern Illinois University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I sought potential participants through the Counselor Educator and Supervisor Listserv (CESNET-L) is a professional listserv for counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors. I used CESNET-L to contact counselor educators and asked them to forward information about the study to their current students (Appendix B). This allowed for purposive sampling, which allowed me to incorporate a detailed set of criteria that needed to be met by the participants (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Additionally, I employed snowball or chain sampling. This was done by asking email recipient to forward my study information to others fit the criteria being explored (Creswell, 2012).

During the recruitment process, participants were informed that participating in this study is voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were informed that the interviews will be recorded, as well as of the possible benefits and risks of
participating in the study. Potential benefits include personal reflection and increasing supports for FGCS in graduate school. While there were no foreseen risks, reflecting on personal experiences may evoke unexpected emotions. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix C.

**Instrumentation**

I collected data through utilizing individual semi-structured interviews (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Using semi-structured interviews allowed participants to discuss details of their experience they found relevant related to the phenomenon. To assist with this, a majority of the questions were open ended. The list of questions used in the interviews can be found in Appendix D. I developed the interview questions after accessible literature on FGCS was reviewed and critically analyzed. As the researcher, I assembled initial research questions, methodology, and investigative protocols while engaging in consultation with my dissertation committee. For this study the phenomenon was the lived experiences of FGCS in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. I met with participants individually via video conference for the interviews.

**Procedures**

Data collection was conducted through individual interviews using in-depth phenomenologically based interviews, which were roughly one-hour in length (Seidman, 2006). The interview structure details the questions focusing on the participants' lives leading up to graduate school and their experiences during graduate school. After the interviews were completed, and themes are identified, themes were shared via email with the participants and the
participants had the opportunity to comment or give feedback on the interpretative themes as well as comment on their individual narrative data from their individual interviews (Seidman, 2006). Due to COVID-19, interviews were completed online using video conferencing through a secure web application. Although this decision was made because of COVID-19, it had additional benefits of recruiting participants from anywhere within the United States. All recordings from interviews were secured on an electronic device requiring two passwords, and were properly destroyed after the completion of the study, when the final manuscript is submitted. After the interviews are completed, Rev was used to transcribe the interviews, and, like the audio-recordings transcription files, were secured on an electronic device requiring two passwords, and were properly destroyed after the completion of the study (Rev, n.d). The audio recordings and transcripts were kept in separate encrypted files, and identifying information was removed from transcriptions within 24 hours of receiving them from Rev.

Data Analysis

When using IPA framework, it is recommended that the researcher completing the data analysis become fully immersed in the data by utilizing both emic and etic perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith 2011). The emic perspective allows the research to view things from the participants point of view, while the etic perspective allows for an outsider point of view (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). To minimize potential code bias, I began data analysis processes after all data had been collected (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis was completed in three phases and is illustrated in Figure 1. Prior to each phase, I consulted with my dissertation committee to discuss my reflections.
Phase One

In the first phase of data analysis, I first listened to the video recording of each interview while simultaneously reading the transcript, and then independently read the transcripts two additional times (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Reading the transcripts multiple times allowed for the analysis to stay focused on the participant's story (Smith, 2011) and may also potentially help me gain new insights about the participant through each reading (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Additionally, as I was rereading, I took notes to better familiarize myself with the data and learn how the participant discusses, recognizes, and thinks about their experience as a FGCS currently enrolled on a CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). My note taking process involved making descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et
al., 2009). Descriptive comments focused on the content of what the participant said while linguistic comments focused on the specific word choices used by the participant (Smith et al., 2009). My conceptual comments included questions I had while reading the transcript, and include potential meaning that I identified to be significant (Smith et al., 2009).

**Phase Two**

In the second phase of data analysis, having thoroughly reviewed the interview transcripts, I solely relied on my notes to translate these observations into themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). During this phase, the hermeneutic circle came into play which refers to moving from looking at the data as a whole, to looking at it in parts that will later come back together as a new whole (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Initially, individual themes were represented as phrases in chronological order as they appeared in the transcript (Smith, 2011). Next, I began looking for similarities among emergent themes from this individual's interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Moving away from chronologically ordering, I charted how the themes fit together to create a cluster of related themes (Smith et al., 2009).

**Phase Three**

Up until this point, I was working with transcripts from each participant individually. During this phase, I began looking for patterns across participants (Smith et al., 2009). I noted what connections occurred across participants, if a theme in one interview helps to clarify something in another interview, and which themes are most potent across all interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, I relabeled themes that I merely identified in phase two. I also created super-ordinate themes, or themes that represent a larger picture. Within the super-ordinate
themes will be related themes to that category, coupled with a highlighted portion of the interview transcript that conveys the theme in the participant's own words (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, I emailed the participants a copy of the identified themes and asked them to provide written feedback on areas where something may have been misinterpreted.

Bracketing

I am a FGCS currently enrolled in a doctoral program. My parents have been supportive of my decision to go to college and graduate school. At times, they were unable to help me navigate the process entailed in applying to and attending college. My parents can relate to the additional stressors of families that were unable to give their child advice in this area.

In my own experiences, there have been many times that I was uncertain in my ability to successfully complete a doctoral program. However, I cannot contribute this lack of confidence to being a FGCS or not. During times of intense doubt, the support and encouragement from my family has been crucial. Without their additional support and involvement, I could see myself not pursuing this degree.

Additionally, I can relate to being intrinsically driven and self-motivated. In terms of drive, because I struggled academically beginning in elementary school, I am motivated by the fact that I never felt like I would succeed in college, let alone a graduate program. Further, I was also unaware that graduate school existed before my freshman year of college. I knew that medical doctors received additional education but did not realize that was the case for other disciplines as well.

Being aware of my own experiences as a FGCS is important because I do not want to be biased throughout these interviews (by asking leading questions) or during the data analysis (by
hyper-fixating on/ignoring themes). Bracketing will continue throughout the duration of the study, and I will also consult my co-chairs throughout the process to help minimize incorporating my bias.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness describes different areas used to ensure the quality of a study, where the “confidence of data, interpretation, and methods used” are all examined (Connelly, 2016, p. 435). To ensure trustworthiness, my study was examined using the criteria of authenticity, confirmability, credibility, and transferability (Connelly, 2016). Authenticity refers to researchers “fairly and completely” reporting the participants’ story (Connelly, 2016, p. 436). To establish confidence in the legitimacy of participants data as accurate, a study is only credible when standard procedures of qualitative studies are followed or justification for deviating from these standards are provided (Connelly, 2016). Confirmability is achieved by accounting for researcher assumptions, biases, and motivation at the outset of the study, independent from study findings—which may contrast or be in parallel to the researcher's motivations for studying the topic (Connelly, 2016). Dependability reflects how the data holds up over time, specifically how easily the study could be reproduced with similar findings (Connelly, 2016). Transferability is the extent that a study’s findings can be applicable to other situations or people. Transferability is the extent that a study’s findings can be applicable to other situations or people (Connelly, 2016). In the following sections, I will discuss protocols and procedures implemented to measure these components.
Authenticity

In order to gain the perspective of the FGCS currently enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs, and to ensure that I will report the different realities of each participant in an honest way, I selected participants who meet the necessary criteria for this study. In addition to recording all interviews, I kept detailed notes including any descriptions that lead to my final conclusions. Further, throughout each phase, I will check my biases to ensure that my own beliefs are not clouding the participants' stories.

Confirmability

To accurately reflect the experiences reported by FGCSs, the integrity of the study was maintained by creating and keeping comprehensive interview notes and reflective journals throughout each phase of the data analysis (Connelly, 2016). Throughout the study, my reflective journals were shared with my committee to help prevent bias in interpreting the participants' experiences. Next, my interpretations were reviewed with my committee for feedback. Lastly, my interpretations were provided to the participants to elicit whether my summaries accurately represent their stories and/or what changes need to be made (Connelly, 2016).

Credibility

To ensure credibility, I adopted similar measures implemented in other phenomenological studies (Connelly, 2016). Mindful that the integrity of the study depends on the accurate collection of data, I administered techniques such as lengthy interactions with the participants, reflective journaling, and member-checking (Connelly, 2016; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of each participant's lived
experiences, I conducted an interview lasting roughly one hour. Through each phase of data analysis, I checked for my own biases through reflective journaling that was shared with my dissertation co-chairs. Lastly, in sharing my analysis of their interviews with the participants, member-checking allowed for the participants to provide any corrections or clarifications.

**Dependability**

To maintain the integrity of this investigation, I created an audit trail of documents including the process log and peer-debriefing notes (Connelly, 2016). From recruitment to the competition of the study, all ethical data handling processes were strictly adhered to. To help ensure anonymity, this included retaining data collection on password protected security encrypted online systems and participant demographic information and their interviews on separate platforms. My process logs include notes related to activities that occurred during the study and decisions that were made (Connelly, 2016).

**Transferability**

To ensure and enhance the external validity of the study, I provided specific details pertaining to context, location, and participants by reporting their stories accurately and without bias (Connelly, 2016). As one of the main influences on the status of FGCS and the history of inaccessibility to higher education, socio-economic policies of the United States may also be implicated in the findings of this study. As a result, some of the barriers faced by lower SES populations generally may inform the considerations of this study. Though limited, the established research on FGCS pursuing graduate programs may indicate that the findings of this
study could be considered evidenced informed data for individuals who share similarities with
the participants of this study (Connelly, 2016).

Summary

A phenomenological study was implemented to address the research question: How do
first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social
Cognitive Career Theory framework? I found ten participants to engage in an individual
interview with me. The interviews were semi-structured and implement in-depth
phenomenological based interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A three-tiered analysis phase,
using IPA framework was employed to interpret and compile the data from the interviews. In the
following chapter I will present the study’s findings and interpretations; including transcript
eamples from the interviews and identified themes (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008).
Chapter 4

PHENOMENOLOGICAL FINDINGS

Through this study, I sought to answer the question, “How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework?” To answer this question, data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with ten participants. The data were analyzed through the method of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Through this approach, after my initial note taking from the participants’ raw data, notes were transformed into themes and then connections emerged across themes before looking for patterns across all cases (Smith et al, 2009). In this chapter, I will provide evidentiary excerpts of participants’ narrative disclosures.

Descriptive Data

The population of interest for this study was first-generation college students (FGCS) who were currently enrolled in a master’s-level CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. For this study, FGCS was defined as a person whom neither parent nor guardian completed a bachelor’s degree. This study included a sample of 10 FGCS who are currently enrolled in a master’s level CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. Thirteen participants responded to the call for research participants. Two participants did not meet criteria, as they were currently enrolled in doctoral-level counseling programs, and one participant did not respond to a follow-up email to schedule an interview. The remaining 10 participants
engaged in one in-depth individual interview. Participant data relevant to inclusion eligibility is in Table 1 and demographic questionnaire and full demographic data collected from participants can be found in Appendices E and F. In order to maintain participant anonymity, names and identifying factors (i.e., university, professor names) were redacted.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant code</th>
<th>Highest level of education caregiver 1</th>
<th>Highest level of education caregiver 2</th>
<th>Currently Enrolled in master's level CACREP counseling program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>102</td>
<td>Middle School/Jr. High</td>
<td>Middle School/Jr. High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Middle School/Jr. High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>109</td>
<td>Middle School/Jr. High</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overview of Themes

Emergent themes from this study were interpreted through the participants’ overt and covert disclosures (Smith et al., 2009). Participant narratives were coded and used to determine factors that influenced participants’ experiences as FGCS currently enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs Eighteen themes emerged during the data analysis. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was used as a framework for this study, and therefore concepts from this theory were used to organize the findings. The research question for this study
and interpretive themes are organized in Table 2, followed by a brief synopsis for each of the SCCT concepts, then discussion of each theme that emerged along with data from participants that exemplifies the theme.

Table 2
Interpretative Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Query</th>
<th>SCCT Concept</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework?</td>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>Financial/Need to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Childcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negative/Indifferent Family Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving Back to Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving Back to Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Concern about “worth the cost”/financial security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice Goals</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intelligence/Love of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Imposture Syndrome</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Application of Coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Overcoming Barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty/Mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive Family/Friends Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Barriers

Participants were asked to discuss barriers they experienced in relation to their education. As discussed previously, barriers include both intrapersonal and environmental factors to a person’s career success (Lent et al., 2000). Participants discussed several barriers they experienced throughout their education as well as current barriers they experience. The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this concept.

Financial

Participants of the study discussed financial difficulties they have experienced. These struggles led to some participants working one or more jobs while attending school, family members working overtime to assist them, and struggling to access healthcare. This led to participants feeling “stretched thin” in their responsibilities, and at times unable to engage in self-care. Participants also spoke of peers in their undergraduate programs who were unable to complete their degree due to financial concerns. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

A lot of people are still struggling to make ends meet because they didn't know how to get there or they ended up dropping out. I think that finances were a big barrier for me. My mom was a single mom. Again, didn't really have the knowledge about how expensive college was. Every year we had to find $1,000/$700 to pay the difference up until my junior year, I would say, which is when I ... Mind you as a side note, I had been working already pretty much jobs. Worked at the airport, worked at Walgreens all throughout my college, subsidized myself because I didn't have, again, the finances like my other friends whose parents were just giving them money. I had to work for my own money. I had to work to pay off these tuition. And then, I was fortunate enough to find a job on campus that provided housing, which took away a lot of the financial stress. Was able to solve that on my own, but financial barriers were definitely there. (102)
[Working has been] complete and utter chaos. And you know... I know that you know, but it's not just that. I work full-time. I'm also in the National Guard part-time. I'm also a full-time single parent. And then I was also in school full-time. So it was long nights or long days, I guess you'd say. Because you know, obviously it started early in the morning, and I don't know... while I'm in school... midnight, I was up reading until midnight almost every night. Weekends, you know? I mean, I would bring my computer to my kid's baseball games or soccer games, practice and stuff, so I could do homework while they're at practice. So it just... My military career took a hit because I wasn't able to balance it all. And I'm still trying right now, but it's a lot. (104)

Childcare

Participants who have children reported lack of childcare was a barrier for them. This was seen both in finding and affording childcare so they could attend their classes. This led to participants taking out additional loans and at times needing to miss class if their child became ill. This became increasingly difficult if family was not supportive of the participant returning to school. The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this theme.

So I finally took out loans and then I took a large amount of loans and I didn't give any of the refunds because I needed it for childcare, especially in the summertime. School is a little bit easier, I save some money, but that's been a huge barrier is being able to manage those roles of kids and working and going to school and then the things that throw you for a loop like if one kid gets sick. (106)

There was concern at first. My mom was like, "You have small children. You should be at home. You should be taking care of your children. You shouldn't be pursuing school. It's going to be too hard for you. (106)

Isolation

While discussing barriers, another theme that was identified was isolation. This isolation occurred for participants both at home and at school, which led to participants feeling like they did not fit in either place. Participants discussed at times their family did not understand their experiences in higher education. One participant discussed how they realized they had also
changed during their educational journey, and that impacted how they were relating to their
friends and family now. The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight
this theme.

Yeah. And I also think that ... I mean, it’s really tough coming back home and trying to
simultaneously apply the knowledge that I’ve learned to better myself or better my
community, while also still trying to relate in the same way that I did six years ago. I am
not the same person that I was six years ago because education has changed. And
although I am still me, I just think a lot of the experiences that come with education can
change you. And so, that is sometimes difficult. I mean, even with small things. It’s
summertime, all my friends want to go out, and everyone is on vacation. I’m like, “No, I
can’t. I have school. Got to work on this project.” I feel like that sometimes perpetuates a
bigger divide. My friends are really understanding but even then, from a personal level, I
think feelings of isolation is what that prompts, for sure. (102)

I think definitely just that it can feel a little lonely sometimes, especially in your family.
Feeling like you have to explain the whole situation or what, like they just don’t fully get
it because no one’s done it. Or I get like little comments of, “You always say it’s because
of school or you’re busy you can’t come around and this and that.” And so there’s been
some definite like sacrifices, or things I’ve had to kind of put up with from family
thinking that I’m not putting enough time into being around family. And it’s all just
because they don’t really get it. And sometimes it’s not even worth explaining it, because
some of these family members still think I’m going for nursing. I’m like, that was in high
school. That’s a way back when, we’re seven years from then. (106)

Social Capital

Social capital is the idea of “who you know” that can provide resources and supports
(Brosnan et al., 2016). Participants discussed how they lacked social capital, because their
parent, who did not graduate from college, could not provide them with assistance in all areas
related to higher education. This led to participants needing to find resources on their own
regarding the application process, FAFSA, and academic concerns that came up. The following
sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this theme.

Because for kids whose parents didn't go to college, like I remember my friends had no
problem like filling on applications and then figuring out FAFSA and going to the college
and career fair that they had through like my school district. Me and my mom felt extremely overwhelmed because we're like we've never done this before. My mom didn't go to a college and career fair. She had no idea what to look at. Like I knew I wanted to be a special ed teacher, but I had no idea what that entailed or what I was getting myself into necessarily. And then just kind of hoping that schools can kind of do a little bit more when helping students like that. Like even reaching out to the families and seeing if they need assistance. (103)

So that was one part, and then I just feel like knowledge and access to knowledge. I know that a lot of people have their families involved in their college process, but for my family, it was a little bit hard just because of the language barrier. And also just the whole knowledge in general about being for the first one in your family to go to college, no one really knows what that's like until you actually are forced to go through it. So I think that that was another big barrier that I faced. (109)

Lack of Representation

Another barrier that was identified was lack of representation in higher education. Participants discussed their experiences of culture shock they felt when starting an undergraduate program. One participant shared how at times it is emotionally draining to share their experiences as a student of color in their classes, but at the same time feel like it is important to do so that their fellow classmates have a better understanding of diversity when they are practicing counselors. The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this theme.

And I guess I also just didn't really know how to call the things that I was feeling in terms of imposter syndrome and culture shock and yeah, pretty much that. And I also just had a lot of white professors, so I didn't really realize how important that really was until after I graduated from college, having that representation of the staff and faculty and to have their support. But I experienced culture shock in the terms of I went to a predominantly white institution, a predominantly white college. So just facing that was definitely hard because not only the school was really white, but I also saw that immediate community area as white, and there wasn't a lot of Latinos or black people. So that was definitely a shock where I'm used to seeing a lot of Latinos, a lot of Mexicans and even just being able to come home to that every day and then completely not being around my language, being around the music that I am used to having access to, the foods, all of the things that are a part of my culture were now not there. (109)
You know I think college was the first time where the racial divide of America became this thing I was aware of. High school was so inclusive and you saw people from all type of backgrounds being celebrated. Our high school worked very hard to be like, "Let's celebrate you and you and you." With presentations, and festivals, and specific days where we learned about specific things. So in my mind, the whole world was like this, right? How could it not be? Then you go to college and you're like 1 of 12 black people and it's like, "Oh the whole world is not like this." I don't know. It was just like culture shock. Or going to class and being that one black person and then praying they don't get on certain topics, because you don't want to speak for a whole group of people. No one wants to be that token colored person to answer all the questions about all the things.

111

**Negative/Indifferent Family Responses**

Of all the themes found in the study, family responses to participants pursuing higher education had the widest range of differing responses. Half of the participants reported that they had positive responses from their family regarding education. The other half of participant family responses were split between negative or indifferent responses to education.

Participants reported that negative family responses they received were related to family valuing things over education. One thing their family values over education included traditional gender roles, which negatively impacted the female participants who were encouraged to focus on their children and/or household responsibilities. Another was the family member’s focus on working, during or right out of high school, to financially contribute to the family. Finally, another participant shared that their family member had a distrust of higher education.

Other participants in the study reported their family had an indifferent or neutral response when it came to them pursuing education. Something these participants had in common was that, in general, education was not talked about. This led to participants pursuing higher education
without guidance from their family members. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

Okay. So yeah, when I was 15 years old, my mom decided that it was basically time for me to drop out of school and start paying for myself. So I dropped out at the age of 15. It was like close to, no. I was 16. So yeah, it was 15. And then I started working full-time at 15 to pay for myself. (105)

He's [father] never liked anybody with a higher education which is really interesting for me to be in that position because that's a counter transference moment that we have to work through of me openly talking to him about that suspicion he has of anyone in higher education who thinks they can call themselves, if they have a master's or a doctorate. (106)

There really weren't any. My idea and my desire to better my life by attending college was of my own. We didn't get any, I don't want to say any push to do it. I don't know what the appropriate word is right now. We weren't provided the opportunity to go see schools or we didn't have it instilled in us that it was something important. There was just too much emotional abuse happening in the household. Maybe it's possible, had my mom not brought this other guy in, that she would have, but I don't even know that she really values education much. She's always kind of just been more in the role of a homemaker and has been happy with that. There was no push for my sister and I to go to college. Nobody ever asked us if we had any interest in anything. (108)

Outcome Expectations

In SCCT, outcome expectations are defined as beliefs about what will happen if a person chooses a specific career, in this case looking at what the participant’s believe will happen with their degree (Lent et al., 1994). Participants reported wanting to give back and help others. This sense of giving back included wanting to help others in their future career as a counselor and how they would be able to help others who experience similar barriers to themselves. Participants discussed how they would like to give back both to their family members as well as in a larger sense. Although the outcome expectations were mostly positive, some of the
participants also reported family concern about financial security in the future. The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this concept.

**Giving Back to Family**

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed barriers they experienced being the first in their family to complete a bachelor’s degree. Participants discussed wanting to use the knowledge they now have about higher education to help others in their family when it is time for them to pursue higher education. Another area that participants discussed being able to give back to their family was by providing for them financially or being a positive example. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

Trying to set a good example for my children. So obviously as you know, I've been through a lot during my graduate school and with my personal life and everything else, and I think that trying to show my children not to give up, that your dreams are worth pursuing no matter how much it costs. The fight will be worth it in the end. I think that that's a big part of it. And then the other part is that I don't want to... I've had enough failure in my life that I want to be able to show that I have as many wins as losses, or my wins are higher up on the scale than my losses, if that makes sense. (104)

But at the same time, I was like, in the long run, this is going to be beneficial because hopefully I'll be able to help my dad contributed towards bills and I'll be able to start this chain of my younger siblings going to college. And yeah, I definitely felt like I had to keep reassuring myself that I was doing the right thing. (109)

**Giving Back in a Larger Sense**

In addition to giving back to their families, participants discussed using their education to give back to others in a larger sense. This is seen by the desire the participants have to work with underserved or marginalized populations, as well as advocating against systemic problems. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.
Halfway through my undergrad, I changed majors and I decided to go into the psych field. I just really wanted to work with marginalized communities in the mental health field because they are underserved. And oftentimes, mental health really goes unnoticed. It's not on the forefront like physical health in colors of community, and then the LGBT communities, and other marginalized communities. And so, I really wanted to be able to work to bridge that gap. I will also say that from a practitioner standpoint, there are not a lot of people that work as practitioners that belong to these marginalized groups. And so, I thought it was a really good opportunity for me to not only work with these groups, but to also represent the groups that I'm working to serve. And so, being both Black, and Hispanic, and being part of the LGBT community, I think is also a cornerstone of why I wanted to pursue graduate school. (102)

It's a skill. It's a social capital that I work with my clients on. How do you get resources? How do you know who to call? Do you know where your food banks are? Do you know how to lower your utility bills? Do you know these survival skills that I've been practicing through my whole life where you just came full circle and being able to see that as a skillset to give to other people? But then also knowing that this systemic stuff it creates this re-traumatizing effect even when you've finally got your shit together. Knowing that at some point it's still there and being able to address it though in a healthier way. (106)

**Concern about Financial Security**

Some of the participants shared they and their family members had concerns about financial security. Participants reported their family was unsure if what the participant would earn after graduation was worth the cost of education. At times, their family members suggested alternative career paths that either did not involve higher education or wanted them to choose degrees that guarantee financial security. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

You know, this is a really interesting question because I always compare myself to my siblings and I don't think of us as any different in terms of like, oh, I'm better or they're better. But I think my family, I think they do have a hard time understanding the purpose of education, especially because I think that my dad, he makes a decent living being a truck driver. They get decent money, and he only wants to school to second grade. Whereas like me, he thinks that, not to say that school is a waste, but he just thinks that there are other opportunities besides college. So I was never really, my family never really was like oh, you need to go to college. I've heard my dad say that he's proud of me, but it was never an expectation. I think it all goes back to that financial security and valuing that over education and opportunities through education. So I don't know if it's
something that I'm fearful of or I don't know, honestly, about how he would best understand what I'm doing. (109)

My bio dad was always just like, "Get a medical related degree, didn't care what it was. Medicine will always pay you well, you can always grow in that field." So he was a little disappointed when nobody got a radiology degree. That was, get a radiology degree, go be a nurse, go be whatever. Just get in the hospital, you'll always make money. It's like, "Okay, no." Well I wanted to and then I didn't. (111)

Choice Goals

As participants discussed how graduate school became an objective for them, many discussed how education has always been a priority. *Choice goals* are what a person wants to accomplish and include steps to achieve their plan (Lent et al., 1994). For the participants education became a goal for them throughout their life, and they discussed their passion behind that goal being their love of learning. Below are participant excerpts supporting this concept.

During the interviews, participants discussed how they had excelled in academic settings throughout their life. This helped participants to attend specific high schools or receive college courses that helped to further their education. They also shared how they had a love of learning, and it was something they sought out. Below is a participant excerpt supporting this theme.

I have always excelled in school. School has always come really easy to me. I say that not to brag or anything because I'm not the bragging type, but I feel like school has always come very easy to me. I've always put a lot of emphasis on my ability for coursework. I was in gifted programs when I was in middle school. And in high school, I didn't go to my neighborhood high school, which was not a good high school because I didn't live in a good neighborhood. I took a selective enrollment test and went to a really good school in the city, in a different neighborhood, in a way better neighborhood with a lot more resources because I was able to test into a really good school. I think I've always excelled at school, through childhood. (102)
Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a set of beliefs a person holds about how they will succeed or not succeed at a particular task (Lent et al., 1994). These beliefs are not fixed and can change over time. Lindley (2005) discussed that self-efficacy can be used to combat barriers that a person may experience. Self-efficacy can also help to identify a person’s interests or area of strengths that can help them to determine a career path (Lindley, 2005). While self-efficacy has many positive aspects, research has shown that FGCS have lower academic self-efficacy than non-FGCS (Lent et al., 1994; Pelco et al., 2014). The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this concept.

Imposture Syndrome

Throughout the interviews, participants shared doubts they experienced regarding their ability to succeed in academia. These doubts occurred for the participants during their undergraduate program and currently while they pursue their master’s degree. While discussing their feelings of doubt, many participants used “imposture syndrome” to describe their experience. Bravata et al. (2020) defined imposture syndrome as “high-achieving individuals who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalize their accomplishments and have persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud or impostor” (p. 1252). Many participants discussed succeeding in academic settings most of their life, but still felt like they would not succeed in their current program. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

There was really a point where I wanted to be like, "I'm just going to drop out, but I'm still here and I'm this far so I need to finish." I think that persistence helped with that too
because once I start something, it's really hard for me to not see it through or give it up. And so, even though I have been recently feeling like I just want to drop out and work at my full-time job, I'm like, "I'm already two out of three years done. I might as well just finish the third year and it'll be fine." (102)

And I really realized I didn't have that social capital. And even starting graduate school I really had to work on that social capital. So I think that the imposter syndrome was really fears of leaving what I knew, leaving what I had seen my family do, the people around me. And also realizing that I truly didn't have all the social capital in place to make it a smooth process but I had gone into other experiences without the social capital in place. Even being in the military at 19 years old, being a female and with a bunch of men I was lacking skills and I made it through that. So I think that the imposter syndrome really became just a skill thing for me and that's how I kind of pushed through that was realizing that it's a skill deficit that I can work on but at the time it was very uncomfortable to question yourself like that. (106)

Application of Course Work

When discussing their experiences in graduate school, the participants reported that assessments for their coursework consisted of projects rather than exams. Participants went on to discuss how this aligned better with their learning styles and their ability to communicate their understanding of a subject. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

It's everything that you learn in grad school is something that they want you to apply. So whether it's in practicum, like you learn something in like the course or in the reading and you apply it in practicum. Or like the skills class, you do all these assignments and you read it and you apply it in class, like you practice it. And your grades and your performance and the way you're going to be a counselor isn't based off an exam, like multiple tests. It's based off of who you actually are as a person, which is something that I genuinely enjoy more about grad school than I did in undergrad. (103)

It's really like we've done all our homework, we've read the book, so we're just coming in and we're learning something through our discussions. We're challenging belief systems. And that has been really positive. I prefer that kind of experience versus when someone just has a PowerPoint up and they're covering material but we already read all that. We know all that. We're kind of in here to take us to a deeper level as a practitioner. (106)
Overcoming Barriers

Throughout the interview, the participants had the opportunity to discuss barriers that they have experienced regarding their education. While specific barriers have already been discussed, participants reported how they viewed a strength they possess has been overcoming barriers they have gone through. Participants believed these experiences have helped them in graduate school and will continue to help them in their work as a counselor. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

I think that for me, one thing that helps me with all of this, is that even though I recognize I have a lot of the barriers, even though I recognize that I started at a lower level because of some of the context of my life, I think now where I am, I'm able to use those shortcomings, if you will, as strengths. I think that's going to be really valuable when I start workings with the communities I want to work with. Coming from a family that didn't necessarily believe in mental health or where mental health was stigmatized, I can be like, "Hey, I'm Hispanic. I recognize that mental health in Hispanic families is not existent. I recognize that's seen as a sign of weakness. I recognize that's very stigmatized, but this is a choice that you have to make. I understand that you hold culture in one hand and health in the other, and sometimes there's intersectionality." And so, that's just an example. (102)

I finally felt this breaking out of feeling like I had to constantly be a reaction to things and not escaping things anymore and just coming from me what I wanted. I had a passion and I just want to pursue things and learn. And learn, and learn, and learn. And I think that just woke up and I think it just shifted in me. I think I was finally forming some healthy attachments in my life too. I was having some secure attachments where needs were being met and so the survivalist in me was calming down. And I was like maybe there is room for other things. (106)

Characteristics

Participants shared characteristics they possess in which helped them throughout their graduate school programs. These characteristics included attributes that led them to pursue the counseling field and characteristics that have helped them as a graduate student, such as a
passion to help others, resiliency, and perseverance. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

Yeah. I think that for this program specifically, I am very caring. I think that my drive and my passion to help the communities has really helped me to work on the knowledge that I have and to put the knowledge that I have to field use or into practice. I would also say that I'm super diligent and super hard working. I feel like ... I mean, I've already talked about it being really hard to work and really hard to go to school. You shouldn't have to do that, but also not everybody is able to do it. And so, I feel like I'm very passionate, and driven in that sense, and hard working in that sense. I will also say I'm persistent, which goes along with that same theme. (102)

I think I have a good amount of perseverance. I don't think that you can be easily... What's the word? I think that if you're easily dis-swayed by something that's uncomfortable, you're not, I don't know how well you can get through this because there's a lot of discomfort that comes with having to balance different aspects of life. Just having good perseverance, I guess. I just take everything in stride and hope I'm doing good enough. But, yeah, like you said, I also identified that earlier I think I have good time management skills. And then also putting myself first. Like I kind of mentioned earlier with sleep, unless I have some... Like, I'm really backed up with homework or I have a final coming up or something, I always made sure I go to bed at a decent hour because that's just something that I value. I'll move things around in life to make sure that that happens. I guess that's just a form of self-care too. I try to put myself... Well, I can't say first because I have kids, but I'm in close second. (110)

Supports

Participants in this study identified several supports in their life that assist in their education. As stated in chapter two, supports can include objective and perceived environmental factors (Lent et al., 2000). Participants in this study discussed people in their lives, both in and outside of academia, who provided support prior to and during their graduate school experience. Inside of academia, people who provided supports included faculty members, mentors, and fellow classmates. Representation in higher education was another identified support. Outside of academia, people who provided supports included family and friends. Lastly, participants
discussed tangible resources they have received or believe would be beneficial to receive. The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this concept.

**Faculty and Mentorship**

When discussing faculty and mentorship, participants discussed the personal relationships they had. Participants reported they felt cared about by their faculty and mentors as a whole person. This meant the participants felt challenged to grow professionally, but also that the professors cared enough to check in on them regarding their personal lives. Many of these included the faculty being flexible and understanding of the barriers that students faced. Another participant shared that their faculty member in their graduate program encouraged and helped them to seek out psychological testing, which identified a learning disability. Participants also discussed their hope that professional relationships with faculty and mentors would continue after their program, or, in cases of mentors from undergrad, those relationships were still present. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

I think my experiences with the professors have been overall positive. I think that even after I graduate, I would really like to keep in touch with a lot of professors, even as far as just updating them or saying hello. I know Dr. (Redacted) specifically, that's a good example. He's retired, but every now and then I'll email him or I'll text him. And so, he's been really supportive. He actually wrote me my letter of recommendation for internship. He wrote me such a beautiful letter of recommendation. I've had really positive interactions with all of the faculty. (102)

Yeah. Just I remember going to my advisor, who's also a professor, and being like, "I'm not ready for this next stage." And she was proud of me. I thought I was going to get in trouble but she was like, "No, I'm so proud because students will never say this. Take your time." I just feel like I like to believe that wherever I go next in life, that they'll be there. I can just stop by and knock on the door, and talk to them about my life and my problems. That's what they say. So we'll put that to the test. (111)

Well, I think that they've already been very accommodating for me since starting the graduate program. The first two semesters, I didn't have any psychological testing done. I
went and I completed that. Actually got a referral from my advisor and I went somewhere and I had some testing done and they were able to give me some insight on what might be going on. That was helpful. And then I qualified for accommodations through the university. I receive double the testing time for finals and midterms. I got a lot of extra support and I could use a note card for my statistics final and my statistics midterm. I have absolutely no complaints about my university with accommodations. I think that they go above and beyond. Like I said before, they really want people to succeed. I think that they've already done everything that they can, and I'm pleased with what they have done. (110)

Representation

As discussed previously, participants reported that lack of a representation in higher education as a barrier to their educational experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that they discussed having more representation in programs to address this barrier. Some of the participants discussed how their programs were succeeding at this by hiring faculty from different cultures and races as well as incorporating multiculturalism and diversity throughout their coursework. Another participant shared how additional representation is needed throughout their program and providing safe spaces for different communities. The following sections include excerpts from participants that highlight this theme.

We have the state ones and then we have some of the school ones, but they're not social in the way that Black Counselors Association could be. I mean, there's not a smaller, more localized safe space for those communities. And part of that is because the diversity in our program is just not there. How do you have a Latinx Counselors Association with no Latinx counselors or with two Latinx counselors? That's not very feasible. I don't know if that is our program's fault. I mean, it's definitely not the professors' fault, but I mean there's things that we could be doing to market our program or perhaps connect with other programs to make a larger network. Things like that I think would be really powerful. (102)

I do also know that they're adding more staff that are from different cultures and races, and that's always beneficial to learn from people in the field that look like you and have gone through things similar to you. (111)
Positive Family and Friends Response

The participants described family and friends as part of their support system. Through the interviews, participants discussed words of encouragement and actions that their friends and family provide to show their support. For half of the participants, support included their family having a positive response to them pursuing higher education. Words of encouragement helped participants when they were feeling self-doubt or in times of intense stress, these words helped participants to continue their education. Actions provided more tangible resources to participants, and some of the examples included financial resources or childcare that helped participants during their program. Below are participant excerpts supporting this theme.

My mom, she just always wanted us to do our best. So there's a school here for the gifted and talented, that's what they call it. I was accepted to go there when I was in third grade, and I think from that point on it was just like, "Okay, [participant’s name], at that point was this really big thing." They literally had to request you. So it's like, you're really good at the school stuff. I think I was always future minded. Like where do you want to go in your future? What is it that you want to do? By that point, I had already known I wanted to be a nurse. I don't really know where that came from, but I do remember I was seven, writing a letter to my grandma. Like, "When I grow up, I want to be a nurse." My mom was like, "Okay, if that's what you want to do, let's do it." No one talks to me about the blood part, or acknowledge the fact that I didn't like blood. They were just like, "You want to do this? You got this." I was just like, "Okay." But my mom was just like, "Always do your best." I guess I always talked about going to school. (111)

I think that if it weren't for the support of a few of them, I wouldn't be where I am. Obviously [partner] with encouraging me to go back to school. My dad helped me watch the kids on the nights when I had to go to school. Actually during my undergraduate, my mom actually helped pay for a couple of my books a few times, so that was nice. Unexpected because I've never asked my mom for money before, but she, a few times, had asked me, "Can I pay you for your books?" And I was like, "Yeah." I'm not going to say no. So that's nice. (104)
Resources

While discussing ways to address barriers, participants discussed resources they had received from sources that were both outside and inside of their university. Outside resources a participant discussed was their church that provided financial supports and mental health resources. Resources at participants’ university included financial resources, both for courses and tangible items (e.g., food pantry, diapers). The following sections includes an excerpt from a participant that highlight this theme.

But I was an undergrad they had a food pantry. They had access to actual resources, especially all my sociology teachers. They would allow you here if your kids had to play in the back like in the lobby or something. I just felt like there's a community appreciation, professors that understand that if we are opening the doors to everyone in the community to come to higher education that we have to be comfortable with community and I would say in human history that children and moms and everybody, we should be integrated into these spaces because we're part of the future. We're part of that. And there's a lot of discomfort around having, I think, children in spaces where they're unexpected. And now my kids are a little bit older so they can keep themselves busy. They just play quietly and do their stuff and I think that the flexibility of the professors and then in undergrad having access to actual resources. The undergrad had more funds for me to apply for so there was more grants and then there was actual food and diapers and things I could get in a bank weekly. (106)

Summary

The report of the study findings included participants’ descriptive data and evidence from participants to support the super-ordinate themes found (Smith et al., 2009). Eighteen themes were interpreted from the data that spoke to the participant’s experiences as first-generation college students currently enrolled in a master’s level CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The following chapter will provide an analytical interpretative discussion on the themes that emerged from this study.
CHAPTER 5
INTERPRETATIVE DISCUSSION

I found that majority of research regarding first generation college students (FGCS) focused on experiences related to undergraduate programs. There is less research related to FGCS who pursue graduate programs even though fewer FGCS attend graduate school than non-FGCS (NCES, 2017). This finding, along with my personal interest as a FGCS, led me to wanting to better understand FGCS who pursue graduate school. To do this, I studied the experiences of FGCS currently enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. In this chapter I will discuss my findings related to previous research on the topic, discuss limitations of my study, and implications of the findings.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework? In order to answer this question, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was implemented using semi-structured individual interviews (see Appendix D). Following is a discussion of the findings derived from the participant’s experiences through data collection and analysis phases.
Discussion of Findings

The final concept of IPA involves the researcher report including a final statement of meaning behind participant lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). As the framework for this study was social cognitive career theory (SCCT), study findings will be discussed through this theoretical lens including barriers, outcome expectations, choice goals, self-efficacy and supports to assist a person is identifying and pursuing their goals (Lent et al., 1994). Through each concept, additional research studies will be referenced to explore similarities and differences to my study’s findings.

Barriers

Lent et al. (2000) discussed that barriers include both objective and perceived environmental factors. Previous researchers found FGCS may experience barriers prior to and during their undergraduate experience (Engle et al., 2006; Ishita, 2006) as well as explored a cultural context to barriers (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Olive, 2014). While the findings of this study affirm many the barriers discussed in previous research, there was one notable difference.

Bourdieu’s method looks at three types of capital (social, cultural, economic) and Brosnan et al. (2016) found that FGCS medical students experienced barriers related to all three. In this study, participants reported experiencing barriers to social and economic capital, but not cultural capital. Social capital refers to “who you know” and the participants of this study discussed how family was unable to provide them guidance related to graduate school (Brosnan et al., 2016). This finding corroborates previous researcher’s finding that a barrier for FGCS was family’s inability to help navigate higher education (Engle et al., 2006; Wang & Nuru, 2017).
Economic capital includes SES; participants in this study reported high levels of financial concerns, as well as a need to work throughout their program. This finding affirms previous researchers who have found SES being a potential barrier (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Garriott & Nisle, 2018) as well as how the need to work takes away engagement on campus (Mehta et al., 2011).

Cultural capital refers to having the “right kind of knowledge.” Brosnan et al. (2016) found that their participants did not feel they had connections to their field of study and were unsure of how to navigate relationships with their professors or peers. Participants of this study did not report cultural capital as a barrier, and instead felt like their experiences in undergraduate prepared them for this skill set in graduate school. These findings complicate our current understanding related to FGCS specifically in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs.

Cultural context to barriers helps with understanding what influences the root causes of barriers for FGCS. FGCS of color may face additional challenges when pursuing their education (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Olive, 2014). In this study, participants of color discussed feelings of isolation, both at school and at home. This affirms with findings from Blackwell and Pinder (2014) who also found isolation was prevalent for Black FGCS. Another area discussed by participants in this study is a lack of representation, both of faculty and their peers. While previous research discussed lack of peer support (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014), it did not discuss representation amongst the faculty which complicates our current understanding of lack of representation.
Outcome Expectations

Lent et al. (1994) defined outcome expectations as what a person believes could happen if they pursue a specific career path. Factors that can be considered in this include the impact the career may have on a person’s physical, social, and self-satisfaction wellness (Lent et al., 1994). Participants in this study were optimistic regarding outcome expectations overall, though several reported one area in which they or their family had concern.

Participants in this study discussed being able to give back after earning their degree. The participants discussed wanting to give back to their family both financially and through cultural capital. This corroborates Wang and Nuru’s (2017) findings, in which FGCS discussed using their education to give a better life for their families. In this study, participants also discussed wanting to give back in a larger sense through their career by counseling underserved populations. This finding complicates our current understanding, as it adds another facet to explore as a motivation for FGCS.

Some of the participants reported that they or their family had concern about financial security after completing their degree. Previous research discussed socioeconomic status (SES) was a barrier for FGCS in attending college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Garriott & Nisle, 2018), but did not discuss the concern of debt accumulated while attending school. As education continues to become more expensive, research has been done to find out graduates’ beliefs on if their degree was worth the cost or not. This finding affirms Nuckols et al. (2020) study where they found that most of their participants did not regret earning their degree but felt overburden by the cost of their loans. While this study did not just look at FGCS, it did note that FGCS are
considered a vulnerable population regarding financial aid programs because they often do not understand the complexity of the loan process (Nuckols et al., 2020).

**Choice Goals**

Lent et al. (1994) defined choice goals as objectives that help a person to guide action over time. Majority of the participants in this study reported they grew up with a love of learning, and that helped to form their goal of wanting to pursue college and graduate school. This corroborates Blackwell and Pinder (2014) findings in which their participants reported being intrinsically motivated to learn at a young age. Intrinsic motivation has been collated with academic success, which in turn can help FGCS in integrating to college (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

**Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a set of beliefs a person holds about their ability to succeed at a particular task, and these beliefs can change over time (Lent et al., 1994). Research regarding self-efficacy and FGCS had multiple different findings. Pelco et al. (2014) and Rielh (1994) found that FGCS had lower academic self-efficacy when compared to non-FGCS. While Olive (2014) found that despite barriers FGCS experience, self-efficacy is one of the strengths that FGCS possess. In this study, participants spoke to doubts that they had about their ability to succeed in academia. Participants reported having these beliefs during their undergraduate program, as well as in their current master’s program.
Self-efficacy can also help to identify a person’s interests and career-related choices (Lindley, 2005). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) and Hicks and Dennis (2005) studied motivation of FGCS and found that FGCS have higher levels of intrinsic motivation and were more motivated to achieve the goals they set for themselves. In this study, participants reported being resilient and perseverant, and discussed how this was helping them to achieve their goals, which affirms previous research. The participants of this study also discussed a desire to help others by becoming counselors. This finding complicates our understanding, as previous studies have found that FGCS have a desire to give back to their family but did not find wanting to give back in a larger sense (Olive, 2014).

In addition to personal characteristics, participants of this study reported a strength is being able to overcome barriers they experienced. Lindley (2005) discussed how self-efficacy can be used to combat barriers. Olive (2014) found that FGCS “has challenging experiences” (p. 79) that their resiliency and perseverance helped them to achieve the goals they set for themselves.

Participants discussed how evaluations in the graduate program were based on application rather than exams. Previous research has discussed how FGCS in undergraduate can struggle to navigate a syllabus and can experienced frustration regarding mechanical aspects of assignments (formatting, citation styles, page limits) which can negatively impact their grade (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The findings of this study conflicts with prior research, as participants of this study did not discuss these specific problems to be present during their graduate program. However nearly all of them reported that they excelled due to application components of their graduate program, which differed from their undergraduate experience, which potentially complicates our initial understanding.
Supports

Like barriers, supports can include both objective and perceived environmental factors (Lent et al., 2000). Many studies have been done to identify ways to support FGCS prior to and during their undergraduate degree, while less research has been completed at the graduate level. Brosnan et al. (2016) studied FGCS enrolled in medical school and found FGCS from lower SES were less likely to apply to medical school. Participants of this study discussed mentors they had in their undergraduate program that helped and encouraged them to pursue graduate school. Other ways the participants discussed their faculty/mentors was that they care about them as a person and understood the barriers that they experienced. This finding affirms Filkins and Doyle’s (2002) conclusions that the student-faculty relationship had a bigger impact on success for FGCS than non-FGCS and recommended that faculty be aware of FGCS experiences. Participants of this study also discussed having a diverse faculty was beneficial for them as it allowed for safe spaces and more inclusion of multiculturism.

Half of the participants reported receiving support from their family. These supports included encouraging their decision to further their education as well as tangible supports such as financial resources. This corroborates previous researchers who found that family support can be highly influential in a FGCS decision to pursue college (Wang & Nuru, 2017) and that this emotional support from family can help to reduce stress FGCS experience (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). The last support participants of this study identified was resources, which included financial resources and tangible items (e.g., food pantry, diapers). This finding affirms our knowledge that finances are a barrier for FGCS (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Brosnan et al., 2016; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Hutchens et al., 2011).
Study Limitations

While potential limitations to this study were considered during the design process, actual limitations of this study could not be entirely recognized until after study completion (Smith et al., 2009; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). While research limitations do not invalidate the rigor or trustworthiness of this study, they do help to frame and contextualize implications and utility of research findings (Smith et al., 2009; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). The limitations for this study are discussed herein.

For this study, ten participants were interviewed. This sample size was chosen based on several factors related to the nature and the scope of the study (Morse, 2000). While this was a strong number of participants for the study, the sample was not diverse. There was one male participant. According to CACREP (2016), 17% of students enrolled in CACREP master’s programs are male. The sample was also lacking in racial diversity, with seven of the participants being white, one participant who was multiracial, one participant who was African American, and one participant who was Hispanic. In CACREP master’s programs, 60% of students are white, 18% of students are African American, 8% of students are Hispanic, and 2% are multiracial. While these differences are not vastly different from the sample size, demographic information about FGCS is not available, and previous research indicates that 54% of FGCS are students of color (RTI International, 2019). This means that the sample may not be representative of FGCS in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. Having discussed limitations within the study, I will now discuss potential implications.
Implications

The results of this study provided an understanding of FGCS experiences in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. This understanding helped to identify supports and barriers that FGCS believe help them to succeed in their graduate program. The implications chapter of this section will discuss how higher education institutions and counseling programs on how to better assist FGCS, as well as discuss future research.

Higher Education Institutions

A barrier that was discussed extensively by both the participants and previous research was the financial concerns experienced (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Garriott & Nisle, 2018). One way to combat this is by providing graduate assistant positions, which can help to cover the cost of tuition. However, it is important to note that this is often not enough, because these positions do not provide a livable wage. This means that students are often working more than one job during their graduate program to provide for themselves, or themselves and their family. Another way that administrators can support students is by providing tangible resources, such as a food pantry. If creating a food pantry on campus is not an option, the university can partner with local food pantries in the area. Universities should be proactive with offering resources or information about resources to their students. The last way that administrators can provide financial resources is by having scholarships for travel and attending conferences. This work should be done in conjunction with the counseling program, to help identify conferences that would be beneficial for students to attend. Even providing transportation to local conferences could not only help
financially, but also provide a support and guidance for students who are unsure of what to expect.

**Counseling Programs**

Relationship with faculty was very influential for participants of this study, and previous research corroborated this finding (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). Having faculty that invest in their students is crucial. This can be done through formal mentorship programs, having forums that allows for student needs to be heard, and being available for students outside of class time. Faculty can also assist in creating peer mentorship for new students in the program with senior students in the program.

Inclusions and representation in the counseling field is important (Sue et al., 1992), however there is still a lack of research on representation of students of color, disabilities, and/or LGBT in CACREP-accredited counseling programs (Shin et al., 2011). This, along with the information discussed by participants, suggest that more needs to be done in recruiting and retaining students of color in counseling programs. Along with recruiting and retaining students of color, it is also important that programs recruit and retain faculty of color. Diversity, equity, and inclusion discussions need to be occurring in counseling programs.

One of CACREP’s core eight competencies is social and cultural diversity (CACREP, 2016). These components should be integrated into classes, rather than being a footnote or only discussed in the multicultural course. One way to address this is to form a committee that looks at current curriculum and identify areas in which additional readings, updated textbooks, or potential assignments can be implemented to achieve this goal. This may require additional training or research on behalf of the faculty to achieve this. Faculty may also need to become
more aware of their own biases and privileges in this process. Continual growth and training in this goal should be a goal of counseling faculty.

Participants of this study reported assignments in which they were able to apply their knowledge was more beneficial than exam. This should be considered when designing evaluations for students to best express the knowledge learned. In addition to this, faculty should also help prepare students for necessary exams they can expect, such as the licensure exams. This can be done by having informative meetings with the objectives to help students learn how to apply for licensure, what to expect on the exam, and resources for study strategies.

**Future Research**

This study identified barriers and supports that FGCS experienced throughout their education. Future research could look at specific programs to gage their effectiveness at addressing these barriers. Participants of this study were FGCS currently enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling graduate program. A future study could explore the experiences of FGCS in undergraduate programs or FGCS who graduated with a degree in psychology that did not pursue graduate school, as their experiences may provide additional information on barriers and supports. Another population that could be explored in the future is FGCS in CACREP-accredited doctoral programs, to see if barriers and supports look different compared to a master’s degree.

**Conclusions**

For the purposes of this study, I examined the experiences of FGCS in CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs. This topic is personal to me as a FGCS and as a future
counselor educator; therefore, I utilized bracketing and trustworthiness components to ensure the quality of this study. In addition to my own interests, research is lacking on FGCS in graduate programs while their representation in these programs is also limited (Olive, 2014; Brosnan et al, 2015; Cataldi et al., 2018). This is a problem because some careers, such as counseling, require a graduate degree. So, if FGCS are not pursuing graduate programs, they unavoidably are going to be unrepresented in fields requiring advanced degrees.

This study utilized an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to answer the research question: How do first-generation college students’ experiences in master’s counseling program align with Social Cognitive Career Theory framework? IPA allowed for learning about individual experiences, as well as potential connections or disconnections between participants' experiences. I applied SCCT at the framework for this study, which in turned helped to organize the themes found which were: barriers, outcome expectations, choice goals, self-efficacy, and supports.

Findings that collaborated which previous knowledge of FGCS were found in all themes. There were also some findings that were conflicting or complicating within some of the themes. Themes were organized using SCCT concepts. Barrier’s housed the themes: financial/need to work, childcare, isolation, social capital, lack of representation, and negative/indifferent family responses. Outcome expectation’s contained the themes: giving back to family, giving back to the community, and concern about “worth the cost”/financial security. Choice goals’ concept included: intelligence/love of learning. Self-efficacy’s housed the themes: imposture syndrome, application of course work, overcoming barriers, and characteristics. Lastly, support’s organized the themes: faculty/mentorship, representation, friends/family, and resources.
As many of the findings in this study affirmed current research, the implications of this study urge administrators and faculty members to implement supports designed to help combat common barriers. This includes having financial supports for students, providing mentorship programs, and focus on recruiting and retaining both students and faculty of color. Future research can include specific programs being implemented to support these goals. It could also explore FGCS who earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology but did not pursue graduate school or FGCS currently enrolled in a CACREP-accredited doctoral program.
REFERENCES


Brosnan, C., Southgate, E., Outram, S., Lempp, H., Wright, S., Saxby, T., & Kelly, B. (2016). Experiences of medical students who are first in family to attend university. Medical Education, 50(8), 842–851. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.12995


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APPENDIX A

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) Model

Person Inputs:
- FGCS-
  Graduate Level
- Predispositions
- Gender
- Race-Ethnicity
- Disability
- Health Status

Background Environmental Influences
- Supports
- Barriers
  - Family
  - Teachers
  - Culture
  - SES

Proximal Environmental Influences (Supports & Barriers experienced by choice making)
- Identifying these in the study for first-generation college students in graduate programs

Self-Efficacy Expectations

Learning Experiences:
- Support
- Barriers
  - Teachers
  - College Resources

Outcomes Expectations

Interests
Choice Goals
Choice Actions
Performance Domains and Attainments
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL
Hello!

My name is Sandy Bednarz Petersen, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Northern Illinois University. I am writing to inform you about my research study. An IRB-approved study (HS21-0460) on the experiences of first generation college students who are currently enrolled in a CACREP master’s counseling program, under the guidance of my dissertation chairs, Dr. Melissa Fickling (mfickling@niu.edu) and Dr. Kimberley Hart (khart2@niu.edu).

The purpose of this study is to learn about the lived experiences of first-generation college students who are currently enrolled in a CACREP master’s counseling program. To participate in this study, participants must meet the following criteria:

- Currently enrolled in a CACREP counseling program
- Neither parent or guardian completed a Bachelor’s degree
- Be 18 years-old or older

Individuals who participate in this study will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, an interview (which can take up to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded), and, after receiving a follow-up email of identified themes, asked to provide written feedback on areas where something may have been misinterpreted. Participants will be given a $15 Amazon or Visa gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and willingness to participate and share their experiences. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

If you meet the criteria and would like to participate, please follow the link: https://niu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_72vmAak6c4z7Ms6

I would greatly appreciate you passing this information on to any potential participants who might meet the eligibility criteria.

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Sandy Bednarz Petersen, MA, LCPC, Doctoral Candidate
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Informed Consent to Participate in Research

You are invited to participate in a phenomenological research study of first-generation college students currently enrolled in CACREP counseling program. The study is being conducted by Sandra M. Bednarz Petersen, a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Northern Illinois University.

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on the experiences of first-generation college students currently enrolled in a CACREP accredited counseling program.
- This hour-long study involves being interviewed to reflect on personal experiences related to their education while being audio recorded.
- The benefits may include an increase understanding of the experiences of first-generation college students in graduate counseling programs; there are no pervasive risks anticipated with this study.

Eligibility Criteria

- Individuals who are currently enrolled in a CACREP counseling program
- Individuals who neither of their parents/guardians completed a bachelor’s degree
- Individuals who are 18 years or older with the ability to provide consent for individual participant in research as an adult

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is to better understand the experiences of first-generation college students currently enrolled in a CACREP counseling program. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: complete a demographic questionnaire, an interview (which can take up to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded), and a follow-up email fact checking of your transcripts.

Risk and Benefits

*Risks:* The study does ask that first-generation college students reflect on their personal experiences, which may bring up memories and emotions that are upsetting to the participant. If this occurs, participants will be allowed to pause the interview or discontinue participation. Participants will also be directed to consult with a trusted program advisor, mentor, or mental health provider. The risk of breach of confidentiality is present, yet is minimized by data collection processes that will be implemented.

*Benefits:* There are potential professional benefits and benefits for the participant in this study. Professional benefits may include an increase understanding of the experiences first-generation college students have in graduate counseling programs. This knowledge could potentially help schools and professors identify barriers first-generation college students experience, and
potential ways to combat them. Personal benefits to participants include receiving a $15 gift card and space for self-reflection.

Confidentiality

- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Access to audio recordings will only be available to the researcher, the researcher’s faculty co-chairs, and a HIPAA compliment transcribing service. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Compensation

For participants that complete all interviews will receive either a $15 Visa gift card via USPS mail or a $15 Amazon gift card via email.

Your Rights

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Sandra Petersen at Z1540131@students.niu.edu or by telephone at 630-449-4113. You can also research out to faculty co-chairs, Dr. Melissa Fickling at mfickling@niu.edu or by telephone at 815-753-9304 or Dr. Kimberley Hart at khart2@niu.edu or by telephone at 815-753-9308. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Future Use of the Research Data

Your information collected as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

Researcher Contact Information

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Department of Counseling, Adult, & Higher Education
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Clinical Assistant Professor: Counseling  
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Northern Illinois University  
khart2@niu.edu  
815-753-9308

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above.

________________________________________________           _____________________
Participant’s Signature                                      Date

I give my consent to be video recorded during the interviews.

________________________________________________           _____________________
Participant’s Signature                                      Date
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Hi, my name is Sandy Bednarz Petersen, and I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University. Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study. The purpose of today’s interview is to learn more about you and your experiences in graduate school.

1. Tell me about how you learned about the study.
2. Tell me about the graduate program you are currently enrolled in.
   a. How far along are you in the program?
   b. Are you full or part time?
3. Are you working while attending graduate school?
   a. If so, tell me what your work/school balance looks like.
4. How did you decide to pursue graduate school?
   a. Tell me about your career goals.
5. Describe strengths you possess that have been helpful for you during graduate school.
6. Tell me about your experiences with your courses thus far.
7. Tell me about your experience with your professors thus far.
8. Tell me about your experiences in undergraduate compared to graduate school.
9. What, if any, barriers have you experienced regarding your education?
10. Discuss ways your professors or schools could address these barriers.
11. Tell me about your support system.
   a. Tell me about the role your support system plays in your education.
12. Tell me about your family.
   a. Tell me what your parents/guardians do/(did) for work?
   b. Tell me about your parents/guardian education.
13. How do you remember your family’s thoughts on school?
   a. How did your family feel about you pursuing your undergraduate degree?
   b. How did your family feel about you pursuing your graduate degree?
14. How do you remember feelings about school throughout your life?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONARIE
Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age (in years)

2. Highest level of education parent/caregiver one received?
   - Middle School./Jr. High
   - High School
   - Some College
   - Bachelor’s Degree or Higher

3. Highest level of education parent/caregiver two received?
   - Middle School./Jr. High
   - High School
   - Some College
   - Bachelor’s Degree or Higher
   - Not applicable

4. What school do you currently attend, and what program are you enrolled in?

5. Is your program CACREP accredited?
   - Yes
   - No

6. Race (check all that apply)
   - Asian
   - Black, Non-Hispanic
   - Black, Hispanic
   - Native/Indigenous
   - White, Hispanic
   - White, Non-Hispanic

7. Ethnic identity (check all that apply)
   - African
   - Asian
   - European
   - Native/First Nation
   - North American
   - South American

8. Gender
   - Female
   - Male
   - Non-binary/third gender
   - Prefer not to say
9. Socioeconomic status growing up
   - $10,000 or less
   - $10,001-$19,999
   - $20,000-$49,000
   - $50,000-$99,999
   - $100,000 or more
APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT FULL DEMOGRAPHIC DATA
## Participant Full Demographic Data

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