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Andrea Rascon

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Mentor: Tamara Yakaboski, Ph.D., Higher Education & Student Affairs Leadership

Abstract: The number of women entering college and receiving degrees is continuously increasing while simultaneously first-generation students also are making up a larger portion of college students. Though numbers have increased, both populations are frequently viewed as vulnerable when it comes to succeeding in college. Much research has covered each populace separately. Minimal focus on first-generation female (FGF) students has limited the understanding of what the everyday college environment offers to enhance academic, social, and ethical experiences. Past research has focused on financing and academics; however, this study's purpose was to explore the collegiate experiences that contribute to FGF student's success and positive individual development throughout college. Qualitative group discussions involving FGF undergraduate students demonstrated key aspects of their college experiences as well as what supportive and educational resources universities were potentially missing. Findings include issues related to family and peer support, society role-expectations, self-development, decision-making, health-related behaviors, emotional well-being, student engagement, and student support services.

Keywords: *females, first-generation undergraduates, self-development, socialization, student engagement*

The number of women entering college and receiving degrees is continuously increasing while simultaneously first-generation students also are making up a larger portion of college students. Though numbers have increased, both populations are frequently viewed as vulnerable when it comes to succeeding in college. Much research has covered each populace separately. Minimal focus specifically on first-generation female (FGF) students has limited the understanding of what the everyday college environment offers to enhance academic, social, and ethical experiences.

According to the Census Bureau report as of April 2011, for young adults between the ages 25 to 29, 36% of women have earned a bachelor's or higher degree, compared to only 28% of men. Additionally, 55% of college students are now women (U. S. Census, 2008). Despite this trend, higher education institutions continue to foster racist, sexist, and classist environments that are inhospitable to women (Ng, 2000). Female college students additionally face various challenges in college such societal sex-role behaviors, developmental issues and possibly negative stereotyping.

Furthermore, 43% of all enrolling college students were first-generation (Choy, 2001). The classification 'first-generation' describes those students who are the first in their family to obtain a college degree. Among these students are parents or guardians who have not received a baccalaureate degree from a four-year institution. First-generation students are most of the time from a minority population, female, have dependents and come from low-income families (Engle, 2007). In 2005, approximately 38.2% of first-generation college students were Hispanic, 22.6% were African American, 16.8% were Native American 18.5% were Asian American, and 13.2% were non-Hispanic white (Howerdel, 2008). First-generation college students often face challenges while attending higher education institutions. Some of these challenges may include fear of failure, lack of social support, and lack of college-leveled study skills. Even with this populace growing in higher education, first-generation students are at a disadvantaged and are more likely to struggle academically, socially and financially compared to those who parents possess a college degree (Gatto, 2009).

Much current research has primarily looked at the struggles of first-generation and female

undergraduates separately. Plenty of research also studied issues like dropout rates and failing grades rather than the lived experiences. FGF research recognizes the still existence of gender-based inequities in educational opportunities (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Socioeconomic status, ethical backgrounds and gender characteristics have also been taken into consideration. Given that there is little research combining first-generation and female students, the overall goal of this study is to bridge the gap by illustrating the experiences of FGF undergraduates to show the audience what factors held high levels of influence for these students. Hopefully this demonstration will encourage administrators and faculty to create innovative resources that provide academic opportunities for first-generation female students.

Research Significance

Challenges faced by FGF students may be considered push or pull factors for educational success. Push factors are the external driving forces whereas pull factors are the internal motivators. Example push factors may be living up to the expectations of others, graduating with a college degree from a 4-year institution, and eventually pursuing a career with a satisfying lifestyle. Examples of pull factors are experiencing something new, accomplishing personal aspirations, the ability to support oneself as well as others, gaining socioeconomic status and strengthening self-worth.

Researching the intersection of the first-generation and female population is important to the field of higher education because (1) there is a lack of research combining first-generation and female undergraduate students, (2) more FGF students are gaining motivation to attend and be successful in higher education, and (3) faculty and administrators need to recognize and understand the life changing experiences for FGF students to better support their needs for success. As mentioned before, increasing statistics of the specific populations encourage recognition as well as institutional support. Moreover, every institution has a mission statement, and nearly all convey the intent to contribute to every student's

academic success, educational opportunities and enhanced college experiences. Universities and institutions have a responsibility to support their students (Gatto, 2009). It is imperative for higher education universities to recognize that students' experiences can be dramatically affected, positively or negatively, by the college environment and support services.

Positionality Statement

Being a college student takes a lot of time, effort, and money. Typical features I have dealt with as a college student are often having little money, living on my own for the first time, being stressed, trying to stay healthy, trying to keep a social life, and trying to study as much as possible. I have found that in order for my efforts to be effective, I need to make a commitment to my education. As the lead author and as a current undergraduate college student who identifies as first generation and female, this study is not only to understand my own experience but also my peers. Personal and peer implications for this study include my own struggles, accomplishments, and the process of becoming familiar with the college environment.

I have noticed that, in order to be successful in earning an educational degree, I must be a willing to spend mass amounts of time learning the skills it takes to be a good student and search for supportive resources. At the same time, I must develop a self-identity as a first-generation female in the field of higher education that fellow peers, colleagues, professors, and society value. From three years of undergraduate experience, I believe the best way to pursue one's full academic and development potential is stepping out of the comfort zone to engage in the college environment. To gain an understanding of what other FGF students often face, the research study was approached with this question in mind: "What are the college experiences of first-generation female undergraduates?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Categories for investigation include *socialization, self-development, student*

engagement, and health and wellness. These categories were explored in focus group discussions involving members of the participating population. Each category has two subcategories to further support the initial topic. The following literature review provides understanding of the presented topic and related categories.

Socialization

Support

The socialization literature mainly focuses on family and peer social support and societal role expectations (Bizzair, 1998; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Pillay, 2010). Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) examined the impact of family and peers on college outcomes. For some FGF students, a supportive family is important for emotional reason even though the relationship with family members may fade once school starts. The secure feeling and encouragement from family members frequently provides a psychological safeguard of comfort. This type of emotional support from family members, especially for women, is a form of adjustment into the college atmosphere for ethnic minority college students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). The researchers also compared peer and family support. Peer support is relevant for social adjustment while family support is substantial for emotional adjustment. Unlike family members, peers are more accessible and perhaps easier to correlate with. College students are capable of connecting with each other to study, sharing young life experiences, and forming friendships bonds whereas family members of first-generation students are not at as familiar with study skills or college environments. In their study, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) anticipated and confirmed peer support was more significant rather than family support though both are relevant to college outcomes.

However, Pillay and Ngcobo (2010) found a slight difference in peer and family support for first-year students. Parents were perceived as most supportive with friends and classmates subsequently. Questionnaire was disseminated to

a psychology class with 79% female and 21% male participants. A greater number of first-year male students identified their parents as most supportive as first-year female students. In contradiction, the results conclude that female students found peers and friends more supportive than males do. Regardless, support from family members and peers are offered to the majority of college students. Additional literature may confirm the idea of family support being greater than peer support or vice versa.

Societal roles

Women have been fighting for equal access and experiences in higher education since U. S. colleges opened their doors (Thelin, 2011). Though women have accomplished matters such as the right to vote, increased wages, the Violence Against Women Act, and the Title IX Education Act, the assurance of equal privileges is immobile. Females in society are repetitively considered weak, too caring and too feminine. Females' pay rates are lower than males' even though the female population in the workplace has slowly increased since the mid-20th century. Rimer (2003) states that female students are pressured to be "effortlessly perfect". Women want to be well educated, skilled, fit, good-looking and popular without any nature of struggle. Maria Pascucci, founder and president of Campus Calm, a leadership and empowerment company, writes about internal and external pressures that women are continuously dealing with. Internal pressure involves the personal aspiration to 'do it all' and the external pressure is society's expectation for women to 'do it all, perfectly'. On top of having earning an education and supporting their selves, women hypothetically are to hold their marriage and children in the highest regards. The concept of effortlessly perfect is also known as the superwoman syndrome. Herrera and DelCampo (1995) describe the superwoman syndrome as the mistaken belief that a woman's participation outside the home should not interfere with domestic responsibilities.

The enrollment of first-generation students, who are mainly minorities, has been a great

contribution to diversity in higher education though theses students often feel similar societal pressures. Most first-generation students feel the burden to take care of their families given that they are the first with educational opportunities. First-generation students have seen the struggle their parents or guardians have gone through. As a result, they aspire to be successful enough to assist those who sacrificed for and raised them. University of Northern Colorado's professor of Hispanic Studies, Dr. Priscilla Falcon (2011) describes pressures, such as being a hard working student, having a job or two as well as being a caretaker for the family at home, existing for first-generation female students. FGF students want to succeed and take care of their family when it is possible. Falcon (2011) presented information concerning the fear and success for underrepresented ethnic groups. In the homes of minority populations, family is priority. However, family priorities are absent once a FGF has entered the college environment. It is suddenly up to the students to make life-decisions on their own. In addition to the pressure of taking care of family members, the student's family is usually not familiar with what it is like to attend college. Therefore, families do not imagine it to be so demanding for the student and continue to have high expectations for domestic responsibilities.

Self-Development

Self-sense

Self-development includes self-confidence and decision-making (Bronfenbrenner & Morries, 1998; Bandura, 1995; Holmes, Rodder & Flowers, 2004; Dennis, et al., 2005; Powell 2009; Northcutt, 1991; Belenky, 1986; Perry 1981). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), the ecological theory describes development as the result of interactions between characteristics of the person and the environment over the course of his/her life. Albert Bandura (1995) defines self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 2). Rodgers (1990) defines student development as the student's growth, progress or an increase of

developmental capacities as a result of enrolling into higher education. Brockner's (1988) study showed that low self-esteem was mostly influenced by one's surroundings. Each of these descriptions provides a great understanding to one developing a sense of self. As college students, FGFs are expected to take the responsibility of learning and completing their schoolwork as well as meeting new people and deciding what is paramount for them. In order to be successful in doing so, having an excellent level of self-confidence and self-esteem is imperative. Powell (2009) states that having a "sense of self" plays an important role in maintaining a high self-esteem. Due to the home environment and traditions, first-generation students typically have a general idea of self-sense. Little do these students know, their sense of self is soon to alter within the college surroundings. Women commonly have many diverse emotions when going through life, especially in the course of college when they transition from dependent to independent. An inner sense of self becomes present at time of challenge throughout life (Miller, 1984). Self-esteem and confidence is merely a state of mind that can be easily distorted by anything. For example, criticism may deduct the level of one's self-esteem or achievement may perhaps increase one's level of self-esteem. FGF students encounter negative experiences frequently for reasons such as being less prepared for college, not knowing who to converse with, or have been previously criticized for their ethnic background or gender. Alternatively, rewards of having a positive self-esteem include the power and ability to pursue full potential, healthy relationships with others, and an overall pleasurable lifestyle (Federal TRIO program: SOAR, 2003). Northcutt (1991) noted women rely on internal self-value rather than the external sources. Listed characteristics of successful women include independent, hardworking, and risk-taking.

Development models

In contribution to high self-esteem and being successful in college, FGF students must be capable of making life decisions, which are usually for the first time. Two researchers, Perry

and Belenky, have introduced models for intellectual and ethical development. Perry (1981) exploited four schemes: dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. Dualism is the recognition of a right and wrong decision with no questions asked. Multiplicity is when one comes to understand that there are different options available. Students in this scheme acquire analytical skills. The demand for necessary facts and evidence is when students progress into the relativism scheme. The last scheme is commitment in which students make decisions based on the knowledge they have gained. Area and style are two terms used to describe the official decision made. Area refers to social contexts while style is the balance of conflicts, which can be pressures and obligations.

Different from Perry's groups, Belenky (1986) introduced the female intellectual and ethical development. Her five-part perspective model highlights how women come to making meaningful decisions. First is silence, clarified as women who do not have a voice. Women who lack voice are often seen as powerless and incapable of speaking for themselves. Listening is Belenky's second point of view. This is when women have yet to reach the point of connecting with knowledge. The third is knowing, gaining possession of her "true self" and voicing her opinions. Learning and application is the fourth perspective. At this point, women separate impersonal and connect with personal truths. Belenky's final perspective is constructed knowledge. Emotions and thoughts of previous standpoints are then taken into consideration when a final decision is being made. Once a FGF student has a strong and honest sense of herself, she is able to listen to the voice of others without losing the ability to hear her own voice. These two models help support the study in demonstrating how FGF students may approach a decision that needs to be made.

Health and Wellness

The World Health Organization and the Alliance Institute for Integrative Medicine define the third theme, health and wellness, as the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being that encompasses emotional stability, critical thinking, and continuing sense of spirituality (Cottrell, 2011). Being healthy is not merely the absence of a disease or illness. Today's college students are increasingly experiencing more complex and severe mental and physical health problems (Brenton, Roberton, Tseng, & Newton, 2003; Cooley & Toray, 2001; Delene & Brogowiez, 1990).

Body image

Researchers have found that health-related behaviors are frequently associated with body image. Grogan (1999) classifies body image as "a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body" (p. 1-2). It is common in our society for both males and females to have negative perceptions of their bodies. Delene and Brogowiez (1990) found that 90% of college students worry about their body image, a great number of these students being females. Features of negative body image perceptions correlate with depression occurrences, anxiety, low self-esteem, and pathogenic dieting and eating disorders (Cooley & Toray, 2001; Denniston, Roth, & Gilroy, 1992; Thompson & Altabe, 1991). In general, college women experience body image disturbance (Thompson, 1990) because of self-comparison to the unrealistic female images revealed through the media, negative stereotyping of those who are overweight (Lake, Staiger & Glowinski, 2000), or the competitive pressures to be attractive (Harris, 1995). Therefore, the overlapping features of negative body images perceptions take place. Women who are concerned with their bodies tend to have a lower self-esteem, which can lead to depression and also the commonly pathogenic of eating disorders (Lowery et al., 2005).

Emotional well-being

The focus of positive emotional well-being is to have a happy and healthy lifestyle. A few examples of positive emotional well-being consist of the ability to cope with stress, adaptability to change, and respect of self. Female college students often test higher for anxieties, fear of

failure, and feelings of insufficiency (Bishop, Bauer, & Becker, 1998). They are also two times more likely to feel overwhelmed and experience depression (Bryant, Gilmartin, & Sax, 2003; McGarth, Keita, Stricklan, & Russo, 1990). First generation low-income populations are additionally at higher risks of experiencing depression. This may be due to subordinate knowledge about college-leveled study skills and hard work and struggle it takes to gain a college degree (McGarth et al., 1990). Another feeling comparable to being overwhelmed is loneliness and homesickness. Much research has shed light on female students usually having a closer connection to family than males do (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991).

It is probable for FGF students to not be emotionally well because of previous negative life events. Unfortunately, negative distress towards one's race, ethnicity and gender are common characteristics that contribute to poor emotional well-being (Jackson & Finney, 2002). Sax, Bryant, and Gilmartin (2004) suggest these students who have been emotionally harmed are unlikely to seek professional help.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is an important factor to not only FGF college students, but for all students. The main purpose of student engagement efforts is to promote encouragement and support for learning and personal fundamentals that are essential to success outcomes (Kuh, 2007). First-year transition and support programs are particularly important for students who come from backgrounds associated with a 'higher risk for attrition' (Gatto, 2009). Benefits of student engagement are a sense of belonging, educational opportunities, supportive resources, co-curricular experiences and much more.

Student engagement surveys have found that one third of college students do not participate in student activities (NSSE, 2005). Studies have also shown that first-generation students are less involved with on-campus activities (Dennis, Phinney, & Cuateco, 2005; Pike and Kuh, 2005).

Unfortunately, absence from on-campus events and activities are primarily due to other commitments. Other priorities incorporate attending class, completing homework outside of class, working (sometimes multiple jobs), maintaining a social life, and pursuing personal hobbies (Metah, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Therefore, this population of students does not have the time to attend on-campus activities. Astin (1993) reported that college success was associated with student involvement. The rationale of student involvement is to give a sense of union on campus, creating a positive environment for students to meet new people and expand their horizons. Student activities offices within universities have countless ways for students to get involved. A few examples of campus involvement are fraternities, sororities, academic clubs, organized athletics, volunteer work, and new interests opportunities. Getting involved on campus is highly encouraged, especially for students who are new and unfamiliar with the college environment, such as FGF students. As mentioned before, peer social support contributes to more significant for college outcomes (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, 2005) and enhances students' well-being (Sax, 2003). Sax's female students felt emotionally healthier when they were successfully engaging the campus environment.

Specific student support services are made available to eligible students, many of which are accessible to low-income first generation students. Many college students are unfortunately not aware of the resources available to them, especially first-generation and female students. NSSE (2005) surveys found that between 40 and 50 percent of first-year students never used career services, financial advising, or academic tutoring services. In some cases, FGF students do not understand the struggle of adjusting to college until it is too late. As a result, about 43% of first-generation students drop out of college before their second year, whereas about 20% of traditional students leave college without a degree (McKay, 2008). Depending on how developed universities are, support services such as

counseling centers, resource centers, diversity promotion offices, and student learning are just a few of the opportunities for students. Federal TRIO programs are the most commonly known services available for first-generation students. There are more than 900 TRIO programs in the United States that provide opportunities for academic development. The goal is to assist first-generation low-income students throughout college to successfully complete their degree program. Tutors and mentors are provided through TRIO programs.

As a whole, this literature reviewed summarizes the different aspects of first-generation and female undergraduate college students. With the two populations combined, first-generation and female students are more likely to struggle in finding useful support, living by societal expectations, adjusting to the college environment and becoming familiar enough with their self in order to develop as a person. This study is intended to discover the features undergraduate students who identify as first-generation and female for reviewers and institutions to understand their needs and possibly creating an innovation of supportive college environments that strives for student success.

METHODS

This exploratory qualitative study was designed to use a combination of small focus groups and one-on-one interviews to encourage the participant's level of comfort and their ability to help guide the direction of the discussions (Montell, 1999). An exploratory study was called for because as demonstrated in the existing literature there has not been previous work that combines the two populations, female and first-generation. This provides a starting point for future studies to expand upon.

Participants

After approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Northern Colorado, eight FGF undergraduate students were recruited for participation. All the participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two and

met the criteria of a currently enrolled female undergraduate student who identified as first-generation. Participating FGF students were contacted at the beginning of the Spring 2012 semester through posted flyers, the Center for Human Enrichment, the Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership program, and personal invitations. A limitation to this study was not being able to reach additional FGF students to contribute to the diverse perspectives.

All participants were undergraduate students with various degree interests corresponding with psychology, criminal justice, human services, and Spanish education. Four of the participants were classified as juniors, one sophomore, and three freshmen. Some participants had experienced living on campus while others transferred from different institutions.

Procedures

The lead researcher conducted all the focus groups and interviews. The group discussions were held in the Spring 2012 semester at three different locations on campus. The first discussion, held at the campus Women's Resource Center, included four of the eight participants. The second data collection took place in the James Michener Library; however, only one of three expected participants attended, therefore the second data collection process was conducted as an interview rather than group discussion. The last data collection was with three FGF students at the Cesar Chavez Cultural Center on campus, which is a center for student engagement. The length of each discussion/interview varied from twenty-five minutest to forty-five minutes. Each focus group and interview was individually recorded.

After participants met at the chosen location, the study was explained and informed consent forms were distributed in order to keep each student's information confidential. To help facilitate the discussions, the research topic was addressed by open-ended questions relating to the categories presented in the literature review. Examples questions that were asked are: Do you feel like you have peer and family to support you since you've been going to college? As a female,

what is it like for you being on campus? How do you feel about being the first in your family to go to college? Can you describe any negative experiences where you were criticized for being a woman or a first-generation student? How have you adapted to the college culture?

Though various questions were prepared, the FGF students led the direction of discussion. Comprehensive observation, i.e., note taking and listening, took place while participants expressed their feelings and experiences dealing with each category.

The final component of the focus group discussions was sharing information with the participants about resources available to them on campus and within the community. As learned from previous research, on-campus student engagement and academic involvement offers opportunities for students. Advocacy for student and academic engagement was a small part in closing discussion with the FGF students. With previous research showing peers among college students have the biggest influence of positivity and adjustment, an aim for the group discussions was for the participants to make connections with each other knowing that they share a few common experiences.

Data Analysis

Data recordings were transcribed to assist with analysis. Transcriptions were coded based on similarities. The transcribed documents were merged into a separate document that divided the data into similar subject matters. That second document was then color coded to find similarities among all three sessions. Finally, a third word document was created with all of the data organized by similarities. I assumed there would be some areas where overlapping occurred prior to the collection process; the data collection was organized into each category as best as possible. As the lead researcher, I processed categories and codes with my faculty advisor to ensure trustworthiness.

FINDINGS

Each FGF student expressed her personal college experiences regarding each topic brought up in the discussion or interview. In reflection of the experiences, three major headings emerged: (1) challenges faced; (2) developing a sense of self; and (3) campus services that provide support. Each theme will be elaborated in the following sections.

Theme 1: Challenges Faced

The participants experienced many difficulties since their attendance in college as FGF students. Most reflected on pressures or expectations, family support and areas in which they were demographically different from their peers.

Family Support

When participants conversed about their support system, they indicated having minimal family support. For these FGF students, their family members were not able to comprehend what it is like to be a college student and be supportive, which is consistent with the first generation literature. The families had a lack of understanding about the college environment and the efforts these students need to put forth in order to be a successful student.

One of the FGF students referenced her family's inability to understand her as a college student:

> …it's not that they don't want to support me, but I don't think they understand what it means to go to college. Even the other day I had to explain to my mom the difference between an undergraduate and a graduate. They don't understand what I do and they kind of just ignore it when I bring it up.

In addition, another FGF student spoke in reference to being raised by her older sister because her parents have resided in Mexico since she was eight years old. Even with these circumstances, she had a similar response to the other student about familial support:

> … I wouldn't really want to go to my sister [with issues about college] just because I would feel like I'm putting her

on the spot. She's not familiar with that. So it would be hard for her to try and help me. She's the type that really cares and wants to help out a lot so if I ask her things about school, she wouldn't know how to help. I would be afraid that it would put her down.

These students have specified their family members have little knowledge of college and what they go through. Their family members are not familiar with the heavy loads of schoolwork or how to handle issues that pertain to their academics.

These challenges that participants expressed were consistent with current literature. Participants recognized their family members as less supportive regarding academics or social identity as Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) anticipated and confirmed.

Expectations

Participants felt under pressure when it came to high expectations from family and society. These women are the first in their family to attend college and are trying their best to be victorious in doing so. Participants revealed their feelings of tension when it came to this and said this pressured emotion often arises from their family members as well as society.

One student responded to the topic considering her family members:

> … Especially because they [her family] do fantasize. They tell me 'When you're working and have your career…' They tell me all these things so it makes me feel like I need to exceed and become someone in life.

Another FGF student's response to feeling pressured brought up general societal expectations for women:

> …I'm really independent. I'm going to do it and I don't care what people think. I feel like with society, they put these expectations on women to do this or do it this way and appear this way. I like to be outside the social normal. I'm doing my

thing and even though people might classify me as that but if only they actually knew me and what I did. I do it for me, I don't do it to impress people or to have people view me as this instead of this.

First-generation students as well as female students feel that they need to put in more effort in order to be just as auspicious as their fellow students. However, the quote was only one of many statements about attitudes towards family and society expectations and the feeling of pressure. These young women were determined and motivated to getting an education. For example, one woman informed to the group how she thinks society views her, "She's not going to graduate, she's a woman, she's a minority and she's this and that. So I feel like there is something that society gives us this thing that we have to live up to."

Clarifying that these students acknowledge society's attitudes towards their population, the societal influences do not directly impact their way of living, they agreed that they could live by their own expectations.

Differences

Though each and every student at a university is different, these FGF students recognized the demographic differences between them and their fellow students. Previous research has distinguished first-generation students often come from low-income ethnic minority backgrounds (Engle, 2007). As a result of these students growing up in an environment with others who do not have comprehension about college-level skills, these students are not as prepared as the students who did have knowledge and people who were able to provide that for them (Mehta, S. S., Newbold, J. J., & O'Rourke, M. A., 2011).

One FGF student strongly signified the differences between her and her classmates:

> …I think my peers support me but they don't understand my situation. The common ground is school and the demands that it puts on everything. Even though our student definition is a lot different, they come from the traditional

families…she [her roommate] doesn't understand the life experiences I have and that I don't have mommy and daddy to rely on. Like when situations come up, you know. But we're weighed on the fact that school is demanding and that we're at the same points in our lives.

Another difference was this student's feeling of being uncomfortable when first arriving on the college campus. She expressed that she and many of her friends like her frequently felt isolated on campus:

…I guess my freshmen year, the culture change. I came from a high school where it was mainly Hispanics. So when I got here to UNC, it was mainly Americans. My freshmen year, I knew no other ethnicity other than American. So it was really hard for me.

This notion of culture change was only mentioned negatively once. This student later stated that she has been able to adjust and make connections since her first year in college. Though the differences were not discussed in the previous literature review, they were approach within each group discussion. These quotes illustrate a few of the major challenges for first-generation females in their undergraduate experiences and the need for predominately white institutions (PWIs) to address cultural differences.

Theme 2: Development of Sense of Self

This section is made up of topics that contribute to Albert Bandura's definition of self-efficacy, which is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1995, p. 2). The topics included are overcoming and motivation. Being FGF students, it is difficult for them to recognize what limits can be pushed given that they do not have any type of guidance to begin with. It may also be difficult to know how to go about making the right decision and how they can be effective.

Overcoming

Participants spoke commonly about accomplishing what they did not believe they could before. Their self-awareness and esteem have risen as a result. Having a "sense of self" plays an important role in maintaining a high self-esteem (Powell, 2009).

A few of the FGF students agreed with each other when asked about the contributions to their self-confidence:

…For me, it's accomplishing things that I know I have to but don't feel like I can. I feel that reassures my self-confidence. I'm doing the right thing in going to college and wanting to graduate. It reassures a lot for me.

Another participant's response confirms this feeling of college helping improve self-esteem:

…I do things, I achieve things that I don't think I could do… once I achieve them or even at least put my foot in the door I think, and 'I can do this if I put my mind to it.' It really boosts my confidence. I did that, I can do more.

These quotes support the previous literature in FGF students taking responsibility to progress and being able to become aware of what they are capable of doing. Students' growth and developmental capacities are essential in Rodgers' (1990) definition of student development. The quotes additionally slightly reflect on the decision-making process that Perry (1981) and Belenky (1986) previously addressed in research. When these students overcome and make favorable decisions, they develop as individuals and know how to handle future situations.

Motivation

Motivation was an emphasized topic in the data collection process. Each FGF student had something to say when they were asked how they felt about being the first in their family to go to college. A few examples of participant's motivation were being a role model, prioritizing education, and accomplishing their personal aspirations.

One FGF participant shared her struggles to stay in school and her nephew being reasons for motivation:

> … there's some people who are closest to my family that I've known since high school who look at me like I won't be able to do it, finish college and make it through everything. So when I almost couldn't stay in school anymore, it gave me more of a drive to want to stay in school… hearing how much he [her nephew] looks up to me made me want to do it, not just for myself but for my family. That helped a lot.

Being a positive role model was mentioned a few times with the topic of motivation. Showing others they are capable of going through college is an ideal example of being a role model for their younger family members. A participant with comparable feelings explained:

> …It's the effort. It's how hard you want to try. You can't just wait around for things to come to you; you have to search for them. You can't just blame the world for your unhappiness. You have to put in a good amount of effort.

This quote demonstrates a few of Northcutt's (1991) characteristics of successful women including independent, hardworking, and risk-taking. The following quotation exhibits what each FGF student mentioned at one point in which was the ability to support a future student through college:

> … I feel like I'm setting the right path for her [her younger sister] to follow. But it is really tough because I don't have that support of someone to guide me through the college experience… in my future, my kids will be hopefully going to college. I am going to be able to help them out because I went through that. I wouldn't want them to go through what I go through.

This was important to the participants in regards to their personal lived-experiences. The participants aspired to be a guide their future children through college because they understand what it will take to be successful in college and will be there for support.

Theme 3: Campus Services that Provide Support

In addition to the motivational aspect of the findings, campus support was considerably emphasized. College adjustment, peer support and student engagement were significant in the findings of this project. The participants are a few of many first-generation students who entered into college knowing scarcely anyone and having limited information about the college environment.

Peers and Faculty Support

Peer support was distinguished as more helpful than familial support in literature and the findings in this study were similar. Many of the participants said their peers and also faculty members were both accessible and reliable when it came to emotional and academic support.

Regarding peer support, the FGF students said:

> …I feel like my peers here support me in college more. My parents support me in telling me to do my best, but they don't do anything about it because they don't know as much. They're kind of clueless when it comes to it. I also feel like I'm just as clueless… my friends who have more knowledge about everything, they're more support. They help me complete anything I don't know about.

Another student expressed her strong faculty support on campus:

> …I personally know my advisor and it if wasn't for my advisor, I would not be where I'm at. She has given me also that emotional support and she knows my circumstances… I know that I can ask her questions about really anything, especially academically.

It was revealed by the participants that there was a strong support system for them on campus

as research implies. Not much of literature encompasses support from faculty members as much as peers, though in these findings, the amount of peer and faculty support were very alike.

Adjustment

The process of adjustment to college is extremely essential to any new college student, especially to those who have no idea what to expect. The participants reflected about relying on themselves for the first time, putting themselves outside their comfort zone, and making connections with new people.

Participants often found it hard to become familiar with the college environment when each first arrived:

> …It took me a whole semester to adapt to college. I only live an hour away, so I would go home almost every other night because I wasn't very close with anybody up here at first. I would go home to have dinner with my parents and drive up so early for classes… Once I started making friends, I started becoming more comfortable.

Another student showed great emotion when talking about branching out in college:

> …If we didn't have all these things do, we would be going home every weekend. It's totally about networking and the people you know. The more people you know, the better… it's about how you can branch out to every group too. That way it's a lot better.

Making connections on campus is a simple way for the FGF students to adjust to the college environment. It helps the transition and allow for students to meet new people and easily network. Student engagement is essentially applicable to this idea of college adjustment.

Engagement

In 1993, Astin reported college success was related to the quality and frequency of student involvement and similarly. The FGF participants brought up their campus involvement multiple times, more than the other topics, during the group discussions. Participants were doing many different things on campus including being a part of an honor society, the Federal TRIO program, student athletics, clubs and organizations and cultural centers. Only one of the eight participants did not belong to any type of organization, though she has been associated with the university's Center for International Education to study abroad.

A few of the participant's responses about campus involvement related to learning about themselves and applying themselves in their academics:

> …I've figured out a lot about myself and what I want. As far as school, not a lot has changed because I've always liked school. And on a personal level, I feel a lot more comfortable now than I did in high school.

Similar to becoming more comfortable, this student explained how engagement has contributed to bettering her academic performance.

> …The more you're engaged, the more you try. My freshmen year, I wasn't involved with anything and I felt like I did nothing with my life. My worst grades were from my freshmen year. It's not like I partied or anything because I didn't do any of that. And now, I'm more involved and yet I have better grades. So they go hand in hand.

With the agreement of others in the group discussion, the FGF students explained what would be different if there were not involved on campus:

> …I think it would make a huge difference because when you're involved in an organization you get to know more and more people that know more about other stuff. That gives you a more opportunity. If you don't do that, you won't find yourself. You won't know anything or anything going on campus.

Being involved on campus teaches students about themselves and they become aware of their personal values and gain a voice as a result. Participants reflected about college experience considering campus involvement in a positive matter. Literature from Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005), Sax (2003), and Astin (1993) supports the idea of student engagement enhancing students' college experiences.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to bridge the gap between first-generation and female undergraduates in research in revealing their personal experiences during college through focus group discussions. Limitations of this study include a small sample size, inconsistency with group discussions; diversity of students involved on campus, and a follow up was not incorporated. Only eight FGF students participated in the study. Therefore, only a small amount of data was collected. Also, two of the discussions were groups while one was structured as an interview. This may be considered a limitation because students in a group are able to reflect on comments from other participants. Being the only participant, the student interviewed may have not been able to elaborate effectively on presented topics. Diversity of students involved on campus refers to the collection of participants. All but one of the FGF students were somehow involved on campus. This study did not have an equal number of participants who were not involved on campus. Including participants who were not involved may have contributed to a more diverse data collection. Lastly, a follow up session was not included in this study even though a few of the participants showed interest. Follow-ups may be an enhancement to the credibility in the research findings. Also with the limitation of a small group of participants, the recruitment process should be marketed to additional students that may fit the criteria for the study.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several implications for this research. One implication of this study may be further examination or follow up as a few of the participants suggested perhaps with a larger qualitative sample or by developing a survey instrument based off these findings. Questions or topics for elaboration can be produced now that there have been two discussions and one interview conducted. Much of this research study was focused on the challenges of the FGF participants. A study about the achievements of FGF can be significant in demonstrating successful aspects for those whom are interested. Researching solely on the development of FGF students would greatly contribute to the field of higher education being that this kind of research is rare. As for the student engagement aspect of this study, there was little-to-no literature regarding FGF students and student engagement or campus support services, and this is the topic participants reflected on most. Other implications may perhaps include a study of first-generation male undergraduates, non-traditional first-generation female or male students, and studies of the support from faculty members.

As previously stated, one recommendation for further research is to expand with a larger sample size of diverse FGF students on and off campus who are involved and not involved with student engagement in order to fully understand the experiences of first-generation female undergraduates. Generalizing these research findings from only eight participants may not be sufficient to all reviewers or institutions though they do offer support to further research.

The participant findings offer higher education administrators several recommendations for improving the collegial experiences of first-generation female undergraduates. For example, family and faculty support were two areas that the women wanted more of and these were two populations that they stated helped their success. Higher education administrators could develop orientation programs geared at educating both the parents and the faculty of first-generation students on their unique challenges and needs. Another program could help keep parents informed

throughout their child's college education by explaining to the parents what is going on such as a newsletter that could go out before finals that detailed some faculty expectations for studying or some study tips. Programs such as these could assist parents with understanding more about what their student is experiencing. Faculty orientation programs could include a session on first-generation student research and their stories so that they were better informed and equipped in the classroom to identify needs and challenges to support FGF's success.

A final area for higher education administrators is in the area of engagement and developing self. Campus workshops and programming could be intentionally designed around FGF's experiences to help them negotiate family, societal, and education expectations as they develop their own identities and figure out what it means to be a successful, college-educated woman in today's society.

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