

First Steps for First Gen: An exploration of the experiences of first generation college students during the formal processes of enrolling in higher education

by

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Abstract

The Center for First Generation College Student Success (2020) defined first generation college students (FGCS) as, “an undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree.” FGCS have to navigate many aspects of college without parent(s) who have experienced college themselves. After applying and being accepted to college, FGCS must engage in the formal process of enrolling in college. Requirements for the formal process of enrolling in college vary from institution to institution, but some common requirements include financial requirements, attending orientation programs, fulfilling on-campus housing responsibilities, and providing medical documents (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.; Graham et al., 2018; Nelson, 2021).

This qualitative study sought to better understand the experiences of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews with FGCS at a large, public, four-year institution. The institution is designated as a First-Gen Forward campus from the CFGSS. Participants included 18 FGCS that were enrolled at the institution at the time of the study. These 18 participants were selected through convenience sampling and snowball sampling.

Numerous theoretical perspectives were explored throughout this study including: cultural capital, social capital, family capital and family attitudes, social identity, Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, Astin’s (1984) Theory of Involvement, and Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory. A guiding theme through many of these theoretical perspectives is the importance of support and mattering (Spieger & Bednarek, 2013).

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List of Abbreviations

CFGSS	Center for First Generation Student Success
FAFSA	Free Application for Federal Student Aid
FGCS	First Generation College Student
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
MSI	Minority Serving Institution
NASPA	National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
Non-FGCS	Non-First Generation College Student
PWI	Predominantly White Institution

Chapter 1: Introduction

First generation college students (FGCS) are defined as, “an undergraduate student whose parent(s) do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree,” (Center for First Generation College Student Success, 2020, para. 5). Previous literature explores the many challenges that FGCS face during all aspects of college, but this study specifically focused on the challenges that FGCS face during the formal processes of enrolling in college. The formal processes of enrolling in college includes any institutional requirements that must be completed prior to a student beginning classes at an institution. Many individuals can serve as support individuals for a FGCS, and many resources on college campuses can serve as support services for FGCS. Together, these support individuals and support services can create a support system that can positively impact a FGCS.

Background

There are many factors that influence the overall experience of first generation college students (FGCS) on college campuses. FGCS face many challenges, and there are many points along the journey where those challenges may cause a FGCS to decide to not attend college. These challenges can arise during the admission process, formal processes of enrolling in at an institution, and all throughout college. The purpose of this study is to hear about those challenges from the perspectives of FGCS. Stories told by FGCS participants in this study will inform higher education administrators about the challenges that FGCS face during the formal processes of enrolling at an institution.

FGCS face challenges academically, socially, and financially. Academically, FGCS have lower graduation rates compared to their non-FGCS peers (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Unverferth et al., 2012). FGCS also struggle with understanding faculty

expectations related to academics (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Socially, FGCS are less likely to have as many social connections as their non-FGCS peers, and therefore, FGCS tend to have less social capital related to college (Ward et al., 2012, p. 106). When related to higher education, Nicols and Islas (2016) framed social capital as access to relationships that facilitate access to resources. Overall, FGCS tend to be less involved on campus, which contributes to less social connections (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Financially, FGCS tend to be from a lower socioeconomic status, so they have a higher need for a job while in college (Unverferth et al., 2012). Their lower levels of student involvement may be due to their free time being spent working at a job throughout college (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Unverferth et al., 2012).

To better understand FGCS, higher education administrators must understand the characteristics of FGCS. The Center for First Generation Student Success (CFGSS) (2020) provided data points regarding FGCS. With regards to age, 28% of FGCS are age 30 or older. With regards to gender, 40% of FGCS are women. With regards to race, 46% are white, 18% are Black, 25% are Hispanic/Latinx, 6% are Asian, 1% are American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.5% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. With regards to institution types, FGCS are most likely to attend two-year colleges or for-profit institutions (CFGSS, 2020). Based on FGCS being more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status and more likely to have dependents, the reason for their enrollment at two-year colleges and for-profit institutions may be for reasons related to affordability or access to online courses (CFGSS, 2020; Schorr, 2017). Historically, many two-year colleges are more affordable and private for-profit institutions have provided online learning opportunities for students (Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

The formal processes of enrolling at an institution consists of any institutional requirements that must be completed prior to the student beginning classes. Various

requirements may include completing financial aid requirements; paying for tuition, fees, and housing; attending orientation; on-campus housing requirements; and providing medical documentations. Typically, these steps, known as the formal processes for enrolling in college, will take place during the months leading up to a student's first semester at the institution. For first-year students starting classes in a fall semester, these institutional requirements are often due during the summer before the fall semester. All transfer students have unique timelines, but these institutional requirements are often due during the semester prior to their first semester at the institution or the months leading up to their first semester at the institution.

College campuses provide many support services for students, and some of those support services are specific for FGCS. Some college campuses, including the college campus studied in this research, are designated as First-Gen Forward by the Center for First Generation Students. First-Gen Forward campuses must provide specific resources on their campus and engage in trainings to learn best practices for supporting FGCS in on their campuses (CFGSS, 2020). Regardless if an institution is designated as First-Gen Forward, data shows that there is likely to always be FGCS on every college campus. It is the responsibility of college administrators to help make FGCS aware of support services on campus. The Center for First Generation Students (2020) found that FGCS were significantly less likely to utilize support services as non-FGCS. The one support service that FGCS engaged with the most was financial aid. FGCS engagement with financial aid aligns with the concept that FGCS tend to be from a lower socioeconomic status. FGCS of lower socioeconomic statuses would likely need federal grants, federal loans, private loans, or scholarships in order to afford the cost of attendance (Unverferth et al., 2012). Higher education administrators, specifically student affairs professionals, need to be intentional about informing students about support services on their specific campus. Additionally, financial

aid departments should consider special FGCS training for their employees since the data has shown that FGCS interact with financial aid more often than non-FGCS, and overall, FGCS interact with financial aid more than any other support service (CFGSS, 2020).

Individuals who provide support to FGCS are critical for FGCS. Support can come from parent(s), other family members, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, mentors, and other adults (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Parent(s), high school teachers, and guidance counselors serve as important support individuals for FGCS prior to their transition to college, and student affairs professionals, academic advisors, friends, and student organizations serve as important support individuals once FGCS have transitioned to college (Astin, 1984; Kojaku & Nunez, 1998; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Numerous topics are explored in chapter two in order to gain a better understanding of FGCS, the challenges that FGCS face, the requirements of the formal processes of enrolling at an institution, support services on college campuses, and individual support systems for FGCS. Higher education administrators need to be aware of the challenges faced by FGCS all throughout college because those experiences provide some context to the challenges FGCS may face during the formal processes of enrolling at an institution. Information gathered from this study will add additional context to the experiences of FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences and challenges of FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college. For the purpose of this study, the formal processes of enrolling at an institution included all institutional requirements that a student must complete prior to beginning classes at an institution. Examples may include but are

not limited to: completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other financial aid requirements; paying for tuition, fees, and housing; attending orientation; registering for on-campus housing; and providing medical documentations. Specific requirements are determined by individual institutions (FSA, 2021).

This qualitative study utilized a narrative approach to better understand the experiences of FGCS. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews with FGCS at a large, public, four-year institution. The institution is designated as a First-Gen Forward campus from the CFGSS. Participants included 18 FGCS that were enrolled at the institution at the time of the study. These 18 participants were selected through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. The specific institution does not have an office specifically dedicated to supporting FGCS, so various institution departments were asked to assist with identifying FGCS who could participate in the study.

This study was guided by the following research question:

1. What challenges do first generation college students experience when completing the formal processes of enrolling in college?

Theoretical framework

Theoretical perspectives influence higher education administrator's ability to interpret and understand the experiences of FGCS as they experience the transition of enrolling in college. FSA (2021) states that all students who choose to attend college must fulfill the requirements of the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. The formal processes of enrolling in college takes place after a student is admitted to an institution but prior to beginning classes at the institution. The formal processes of enrolling at an institution primarily involves financial aid requirements; paying for tuition, fees, and housing; attending an orientation program; on-campus

housing requirements; and providing medical documentations. Individual institutions determine the specific requirements for their specific institution (FSA, 2021). These are all required steps for attending college that can cause a FGCS to stop their journey towards attending college if they have less information or support throughout the process of completing these steps. Support is important for all students, and Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) emphasized the importance of support for FGCS throughout college. It can be inferred that support is equally important for FGCS through the formal processes of enrolling in college (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

The guiding concept for this study is support. In relation to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, Barclay (2017) simply stated that support is, "the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student" (p. 25). Support can be in the form of parent(s) or other family members, and support can also be outside of the family unit. A support system can include friends, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, mentors, and other adults (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Once a FGCS has begun their transition to college, student organizations can even serve as a form of support. Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement acknowledged how important student involvement can be for creating a support system for college students. Many student involvement opportunities begin at the beginning of semesters, but some student involvement opportunities begin in the summer months when a student is engaging in the formal processes of enrolling at an institution. Therefore, there is a possibility of a student organization becoming a form of support for a student while they are engaging in the formal processes of enrolling at the institution (Astin, 1984).

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs demonstrates the importance of social needs. In order for a student to achieve esteem needs and self-actualization, they must first have their social needs met (Tanjula, 2014). Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory also emphasizes the

concept of an individual's feeling of mattering. Barclay (2017) described mattering as, "the beliefs people hold, regardless of whether those beliefs are accurate, that they matter to someone significant" (p. 24). FGCS can experience challenges during the admission process, formal processes of enrolling in college, and throughout college, and these various forms of support have the potential to assist FGCS through those challenges.

Numerous theoretical perspectives were explored throughout this study. These theoretical perspectives provided insight and context to the known experiences of FGCS. The information gathered in this study provided additional context based on the experiences of the participants. Theoretical perspectives that were explored in chapter two include: cultural capital, social capital, family capital, social identity, achievement guilt, Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement, and Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory. A guiding theme through many of these theoretical perspectives was support and social needs because of the importance of support for FGCS (Spieger & Bednarek, 2013).

Definition of Terms

The following is a list of terms as they will be defined and conceptualized in the study:

Application. "The medium or tool used by a student to apply to college" (NACAC, 2020, p. 13).

Attrition. "Students leaving their initially enrolled institutions without returning either to their initial or other institutions" (Ishitani, 2006, p. 871).

Financial Aid Offer. "Notifications sent by institutions to prospective students informing them about the financial aid options available through the institution, including Federal Student Aid" (FLEC, 2019, p. 13).

First Generation College Student. “An undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree” (Center for First Generation College Student Success, 2020, para. 5).

First-Year Student. “Students who apply as first-time undergraduate matriculants. These students typically have no previous college experience since graduating from high school” (NACAC, 2020, p. 15).

Formal Processes of Enrolling. Any institutional requirement that must be completed prior to beginning classes. Individual institutions determine the requirements. Common requirements include: financial aid requirements, attending orientation programs, on-campus housing requirements, and providing medical documents (FSA, 2021).

Non-First Generation College Student. “An undergraduate student who has at least one parent with a bachelor’s or higher degree” (Center for First Generation College Student Success, 2020, para. 5).

Non-traditional Student. “Students who do not fall within the profile of a dependent student aged 18-24, do not attend college immediately after college or return after a prolonged absence, parents of dependent children, and those who are married” (NACAC, 2020, p. 16).

Retention. “The collective effort of both the student and institution to ensure continued persistence to graduation and degree completion” (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d., para 6).

Transfer Student. “Students who have typically earned or attempted college-level course credits after graduating from secondary school and are applying as matriculants from one undergraduate institution to another” (NACAC, 2020, p. 17).

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the many challenges that FGCS face during all aspects of college. FGCS face challenges during the admissions process, formal processes of enrolling in college, and all throughout college. This study specifically focused on the challenges faced by FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college and the support FGCS do or do not receive during these processes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A significant number of First Generation College Students (FGCS) attend institutions of higher education across the United States and across the globe. In 2018, approximately 56% of college students across the United States were FGCS (CFGSS, 2020). FGCS are found at all types of educational institutions and in all regions of the United States, however, some institutions are more intentional about their support for FGCS. Institutions with support programs for FGCS enhance the student's ability to navigate challenges and successes throughout college and increase in graduation rates (Schorr, 2017). The Higher Education Research Institute looked at graduation rates among four-year institutions, and among FGCS, only 27% finished a bachelor's degree in four years (DeAngelo et al., 2011). Support services specifically designed for FGCS are critical for increasing the graduation rate among FGCS.

Defining FGCS

A critique of the research surrounding FGCS is the absence of a consistent definition for FGCS. The absence of a single definition of FGCS has caused some difficulties in understanding and furthering the research on FGCS (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). In order to develop a definition of FGCS for the purpose of this research, it is important to first understand the definitions previously used by scholars studying FGCS. Some definitions of FGCS are broader and therefore encompass more students, and some definitions of FGCS are narrower and therefore do not encompass as many students (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017)

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) houses the Center for First Generation Student Success (CFGSS). The CFGSS provides institutions of higher education with resources and best practices for supporting FGCS on college campuses. One point of understanding that is provided by the CFGSS is distinguishing a definition for

FGCS verses non-first generation college students (non-FGCS). The Center for First Generation College Student Success (2020) found that the selected definition of FGCS impacts the percentage of students that are classified as FGCS. The center found that 24% of college students had parent(s) with no postsecondary education, 56% of college students had parent(s) who did not have a bachelor's degree, and 59% of college students had parent(s) that did not have a bachelor's degree and were also the first sibling in their family to go to college (CFGSS, 2020). FGCS can be defined in different ways considering these different nuances. However, the CFGSS has centered their definition of FGCS as, "an undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor's or higher degree" (CFGSS, 2020, para. 5). In the opposition, the CFGSS defines non-FGCS as, "an undergraduate student who has at least one parent with a bachelor's or higher degree" (CFGSS, 2020, para. 5). Scholars have encouraged the usage of broad yet encompassing definitions of FGCS and non-FGCS (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017).

Peralta and Klonowski (2017) examined 24 articles to review how various scholars defined FGCS. They found that about half of the 24 articles did not provide a conceptual definition for FGCS. Among the half of the 24 articles that did provide a conceptual definition for FGCS, nine of the articles had different definitions (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) suggest that the definition of FGCS is difficult to narrow down because FGCS fall along a continuum. Simply comparing FGCS with non-FGCS can lead readers to assume that these are two distinct groups, but comparing the definitions of FGCS among scholars demonstrates this variance within the collective group of FGCS (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Peralta and Klonowski (2017) found three main differences among the definitions of FGCS. The first major difference in multiple definitions includes who is considered family for

FGCS. Some definitions only consider parent(s), while some definitions include guardians or other immediate family members. The second major difference in multiple definitions includes the type of degree that has or has not been achieved by the student's family members. Some definitions only consider bachelor's degrees, while some definitions consider associate degrees and technical degrees. The final major difference in the definitions was the consideration of the amount of education the family member obtained. Some definitions only consider if the family members never attended any college, while some definitions consider if a family member has not completed a bachelor's degree specifically (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017).

After reviewing the 24 articles with varying definitions of FGCS, Peralta and Klonowski (2017) recommended using an encompassing definition of FGCS. Specifically, they defined FGCS as:

An individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parent(s) or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree. This definition includes students who may not have parental relationships and resources that may support them throughout their academic career from enrollment to graduation. (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017, p. 635).

In comparison, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) described a narrow definition of FGCS as a college student whose parent(s) did not experience college at all, and they provided that a more encompassing definition of FGCS as a college student whose parent(s) experienced some college education. However, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) also acknowledged that it is more common in the United States to use a more encompassing definition of FGCS (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

The absence of a consistent definition of FGCS impacts scholars and their ability to understand, theorize, and further the research surrounding FGCS. Therefore, in an effort to

maintain consistency with existing data, this research will utilize the definition provided by the Center for First Generation College Student Success (2020). Specifically, this study will use the following definition for FGCS: “an undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree” (Center for First Generation College Student Success, 2020, para. 5).

Characteristics and Social Identities

There are many differences between FGCS and non-FGCS, but each FGCS is also unique in their own sense. Each FGCS has social identities that overlap with their FGCS identity. CFGSS (2020) suggested that some identities to consider in addition to FGCS are the possibility of dependents, working full-time, age, race, and socioeconomic status.

The CFGSS (2020) developed four National Data Fact Sheets. The four fact sheets were developed with data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is sponsored by the United States Department of Education. The data was released in 2018 and pertains to the 2015-2016 academic year, and it is the most recent version of the data (CFGSS, 2020). There are many ways to define FGCS, but for the purpose of the National Data Fact Sheets, the Center of First Generation Student Success (2020) used data regarding 56% of college students with parent(s) that did not have a bachelor’s or higher degree. This distinction of a bachelor’s or higher degree is consistent with the definition of FGCS for the purpose of this study which is defined as, “an undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree” (CFGSS, 2020, para. 5)

Non-Traditional Students

Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) discussed a concept that is commonly used among higher education: non-traditional student. This concept commonly refers criteria including but not

limited to: age, family status, and students who work full-time (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). NACAC (2020) specifically defines non-traditional students as, “students who do not fall within the profile of a dependent student aged 18-24, do not attend college immediately after college or return after a prolonged absence, parents of dependent children, and those who are married” (p. 16). FGCS are more likely to be non-traditional students compared to non-FGCS. The phrase non-traditional student is commonly used in conjunction with FGCS because so many FGCS are also non-traditional students (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

The CFGSS (2020) reported that 28% of FGCS are age 30 or older, and only 16% of non-FGCS are age 30 or older. Age may have an impact on a student’s likeliness to have dependents or work full-time while attending college. The data showed that 30% of FGCS have dependents, and only 16% of non-FGCS have dependents. Additionally, the data showed that only 40% of FGCS attend college full-time, while 48% of non-FGCS attend college full-time. Students who work full-time are less likely to also attend school full-time (CFGSS, 2020).

Race

FGCS are more likely than non-FGCS to be from a racial minority group (Chen, 2005). The majority of college students in the United States from racial minority groups are also FGCS (CFGSS, 2020). Data from the Department of Education demonstrates that 46% of FGCS were white compared to 61% of non-FGCS being white. With regards to Black students, 18% of all FGCS are Black, and only 12% of all non-FGCS are Black. Similarly, the data shows that 25% of all FGCS are Hispanic/Latinx, and only 14% of non-FGCS are Hispanic/Latinx. This trend continues with American Indian students, Alaska Native students, Native Hawaiian students, and Pacific Islander students. The data shows that 1% of FGCS are American Indian or Alaska Native, and only 0.5% of non-FGCS are American Indian or Alaska Native. The data shows that

0.5% of FGCS are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and only 0.4% of non-FGCS are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. However, this trend is not consistent among Asian students. The data shows that 6% of FGCS are Asian, and 8% of non-FGCS are Asian (CFGSS, 2020). The racial breakdown of FGCS and non-FGCS in 2015-2016 is demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Race Among College Students in 2015-2016 (CFGSS, 2020).

Race	FGCS	Non-FGCS
White	46%	61%
Black	18%	12%
Hispanic/Latinx	25%	14%
Asian	6%	8%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	0.5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.4%

Income

FGCS tend to come from families with lower family income. FGCS are high achievers among individuals in their socioeconomic status, but there are differences and challenges that these students experience compared to students of higher socioeconomic statuses (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Lower family income among FGCS leads to more concerns related to the need for financial aid, the need for a job, and the possible need for living off campus if it is more affordable (Unverferth et al., 2012). The need for a job and the possible need for living off campus can take FGCS away from valuable campus resources such as having access to a resident assistant or becoming involved in student organizations. The CFGSS (2020) reported that FGCS

were more likely than non-FGCS to use financial aid services on college campuses. However, the CFGSS (2020) also reported that FGCS were less likely than non-FGCS to use other campus resources.

Attending college is expensive, and for many college students, their ability to qualify for federal aid depends on their parent's median income. In turn, the amount of financial aid that a student qualifies for can impact the decision of where they can afford to attend college. The CFGSS (2020) reported that among college students in 2015-2016, the median parental income for FGCS was \$41,000. Comparably, the median parental income for non-FGCS was \$90,000. The difference in median parental income can impact a student's ability to receive financial aid, which can impact the institutions that a student can afford to attend (CFGSS, 2020).

Types of Higher Education Institutions

FGCS enrolled in college at various institution types across the United States. FGCS enroll at public institutions, private non-profit institutions, and private for-profit institutions. Some FGCS enroll at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), while some enroll at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) (CFGSS, 2020). Higher education administrators need to know where FGCS are attending college in order to best support FGCS on their college campuses.

Minority Serving Institutions

The CFGSS (2020) reported that 49% of students at PWIs were FGCS. Although some FGCS attend PWIs, many FGCS chose to attend MSIs (CFGSS, 2020). This may be due to FGCS being more likely than non-FGCS to be from a racial minority group, and therefore, FGCS from racial minority groups may feel more supported at MSIs (Chen, 2005). Data from the CFGSS (2020) demonstrates that FGCS are the majority at some MSIs. The following data represents the enrollment of FGCS at MSIs in 2015-2016: 67% at American Indian/Alaska Native-serving

institutions, 65% at Hispanic/Latinx-serving institutions, 65% at Black-serving institutions (non-HBCU), 60% Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and 48% at Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander-serving institutions (CFGSS, 2020).

Two-Year Institutions

Overall, more FGCS attended two-year institutions rather than four-year institutions (Chen, 2005). Two-year colleges, specifically community colleges, serve college students across the United States in multiple different capacities. Some community college students obtain certificates, technical degrees, or applied associate degrees, and some community college students obtain associate degrees with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution to finish a bachelor's degree (Chen, 2005). Specifically, in 2015-2016, 64% of students at public two-year colleges were FGCS, 69% of students at private non-profit two-year colleges were FGCS, and 70% of students at private for-profit two-year colleges were FGCS (CFGSS, 2020).

Four-Year Institutions

The CFGSS (2020) provided that many FGCS also attended four-year institutions. Some FGCS attend a community college and then transfer to a four-year institution, and some FGCS attend a four-year institution as a first-year student. Specifically, in 2015-2016, 47% of students at public four-year institutions were FGCS, 43% of students at private non-profit four-year colleges were FGCS, and 72% of students at private for-profit four-year colleges were FGCS (CFGSS, 2020)

For-Profit Institutions

As demonstrated by the data from the CFGSS (2020), FGCS are the mostly likely to attend private for-profit institutions. In 2015-2016, 72% of students at private for-profit four-year institutions were FGCS, and 70% of students at private for-profit two-year institutions were

FGCS (CFGSS, 2020). Thomas and Quinn (2007) reported that FGCS are also more likely to choose online learning opportunities. Historically, many private for-profit institutions have provided online learning opportunities for students, which may be the cause for the increased enrollment of FGCS at private for-profit institutions. Many public and private non-profit institutions have increased their online learning opportunities, which will provide more opportunities for FGCS (Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

Prestige

Members of higher education and members of society in general have socially constructed the concept of prestigious institutions and prestigious majors at institutions. This concept is supported by data regarding acceptance rate, likeliness to seek advanced degrees, and future careers (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) discussed the concept of prestige as it relates to FGCS and stated, “In general, FGCS are more likely to study less prestigious subjects at less prestigious universities with a lower orientation towards advanced degrees” (p. 324). Pascarella et al. (2004) looked at variables related institution types for FGCS. The variables of family income, cognitive development, academic motivation, and high school grades were removed, and it was found that FGCS were still enrolled at less prestigious and less academically selective institutions (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Challenges and Successes

FGCS experience various challenges and successes in college. These challenges and successes can be highlighted during the admission process, formal processes of enrolling in college, and throughout college. Persisting through the challenges can be the difference between if a FGCS does or does not graduate with a college degree. The successes that a FGCS experiences in college can also impact the likeliness of a FGCS graduating college.

Challenges

Numerous scholars have documented FGCS having lower graduation rates compared to their non-FGCS peers (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Unverferth et al., 2012). Scholars have also noted various challenges that FGCS face throughout college. These additional challenges are perceived to be factors that ultimately lower the graduation rates for FGCS. Some of the most common challenges for FGCS include student involvement, understanding faculty expectations, and the cost of attendance for college (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Unverferth et al., 2012). FGCS specifically tend to have socioeconomic concerns, which leads to the need for financial aid, the need for a job, and the possible need for living off campus if it is more affordable (Unverferth et al., 2012). FGCS need for jobs and possible need for living off campus could attribute to lower levels of student involvement (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017).

Ward et al. (2012) discussed the challenges of cultural capital and social capital for various groups in higher education. Ward et al. (2012) refers to this concept as “college-related cultural capital,” and it is particularly difficult for FGCS to gain this capital (p. 106). Non-FGCS are more likely to have social connections through their parent(s), siblings, or mentors. These social ties connect non-FGCS to important information or individuals that aid in their success in college. FGCS are less likely to have as many of these social connections, or they may not have any social connections at all at the institution. As a result, this causes FGCS to have insufficient “college-related cultural capital” and social capital (Ward et al., 2012, p. 106).

Successes

Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) discussed that FGCS face a number of challenges in higher education, but there are also positive factors that contribute to their success. These positive factors influence a FGCS to achieve success in the application process, formal processes of

enrolling at an institution, throughout college, and ultimately graduation. Success for FGCS is positively influenced by support individuals including family members, friends, guidance counselors, and high school teachers. These support individuals can be groups together to form a support system for a FGCS (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Tinto (2009) documented the importance of a support system for a FGCS to experience success in college. Additionally Tinto (2009) noted the importance of expectations from faculty members, feedback from faculty members, and student involvement. This supports Peralta and Klonowski's (2017) findings that that a lower level of understanding of faculty expectations and lower levels of student involvement both serve as a challenge for FGCS. FGCS can specifically benefit from support services on campus, collaborative learning in the classroom, and instructors with clear expectations. Providing this supportive environment for a FGCS allows faculty and staff to better track a FGCS progress during a given semester (Tinto, 2009).

Formal Processes of Enrolling

The formal processes of enrolling in college requires much more than just enrolling in classes at an institution. Prior to engaging in the formal processes of enrolling at an institution, a student must submit an application and be accepted to an institution (NACAC, 2020). Perspective college students are encouraged to engage with financial aid opportunities as early as possible in the application, admission, and enrollment process (FLEC, 2019). Once a student is admitted to an institution, then they must decide if they want to enroll at the institution. If they choose to enroll at an institution, then they must complete common institutional requirements for the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. Some examples of these formal processes of enrolling at the institution can include financial requirements, attending orientation programs,

fulfilling on-campus housing responsibilities, and providing medical documentations (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.; Graham et al., 2018; Nelson, 2021).

Admissions

The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (2020) is an organization and a knowledge resource for admissions counselors at institutions of higher education.

Admissions counselors are important for all perspective college students, but they are particularly important for perspective FGCS. Admissions counselors have a mission of serving and supporting students as they apply to institutions and make decisions about attending an institution. (NACAC, 2020). Institutions may apply values for Admissions counselors at the institution level, but NACAC (2020) also provides core values that all admissions counselors should adhere to in their work. The core values of admissions counselors includes: education, access and equity, professionalism, collegiality, collaboration, trust, and social responsibility (NACAC, 2020).

NACAC (2020) has developed guideposts for admission timelines that all institutions are encouraged to abide by through their admissions process. The timeline suggestions vary for first-year students and transfer students due to the complexity of the transfer process (NACAC, 2020). For transfer students, NACAC (2020) advises that institutions should be transparent about expected deadlines, but institutions should be flexible with deadlines for transfer students. For first-year students, NACAC (2020) advises that institutions should set a deadline of October 15th or later for all applicants applying for fall admission. Deadlines for applications should not be any earlier than October 15th (NACAC, 2020). For first-year students, NACAC (2020) advises that institutions should set a deadline of May 1st or later for the earliest enrollment confirmation deadline for all applicants applying for fall admission. Applicants should not be required to

confirm their enrollment prior to May 1st, and applicants should specifically not be required to confirm their enrollment prior to the institution notifying them of their financial aid offer (NACAC, 2020). NACAC (2020) states:

Before being asked to make an enrollment decision and to commit to an institution, students should have time to hear from each school that admitted them and receive notice of offers of financial aid and scholarships, admission to honors and other special programs, and availability of housing (p. 7).

Lastly, for first-year students, NACAC (2020) advises that August 1st should be the final deadline for the institution notifying all applicants who are still on the waitlist and anticipating an update on their admission status.

Financial Aid

As mentioned, applicants to an institution should not be required to make an enrollment decision prior to the institution notifying the applicant of their financial aid offer (NACAC, 2020). FLEC (2019) defines a financial aid offer as, “notifications sent by institutions to prospective students informing them about the financial aid options available through the institution, including Federal Student Aid” (p. 13). Financial aid offers most commonly incorporate information from the applicant’s Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA is a free application that perspective college students and current college students are highly encouraged to complete in order to be considered for federal grants and federal loans (FLEC, 2019). Approximately 85% of students at four-year institutions have a financial aid offer that includes FAFSA information, and approximately 78% of students at two-year institutions have a financial aid offer that includes FAFSA information. The majority of college students submit the FAFSA on an annual basis because federal grants and federal loans are critical

financial resources for many students to be able to afford college tuition, fees, and housing (FLEC, 2019).

FLEC (2019) stresses the importance of students and their families fully understanding the long-term financial responsibilities and possible financial consequences of financial aid for college. Specifically, federal loans and private loans require a long-term financial commitment from students or their families. There are some unfortunate realities that students or their families can experience if they do not fully understand the long-term expectations for paying back federal loans and private loans (FLEC, 2019). For example, FLEC (2019) stated:

Failure to choose an institution of higher education that is affordable for both the student and their family can have immediate and long-term financial consequences. These can range from the inability to meet basic food and housing needs; failure to enroll, persist, or complete a degree; and loan delinquency and default (p. 13).

If a student is not provided with complete information about their financial aid offer, then they could ultimately over-borrow with federal loans or private loans. Students can also find themselves in a position of not obtaining the funds for the full cost of tuition, fees, and housing, which could result in a student having to unenroll from the institution (FLEC, 2019).

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators released a report in 2013 that found that financial aid information contained in a variety of financial aid offers were overwhelming and confusing to students and their families (JBL Associates, 2013). A separate study by Taylor and Bicak (2019) found that across the United States, many students are not familiar with basic financial aid terms and phrases. Some of the basic phrases included FAFSA, entrance counseling, and exit counseling (Taylor & Bicak, 2019).

FGCS are at possible higher risk of not understanding the long-term consequences of federal loans and student loans. Unverferth et al (2020) established found that FGCS tend to have more socioeconomic concerns, and the CFGSS (2020) found that the financial aid services are the most commonly used service for FGCS on college campuses during their first year of college. A possible conclusion can be drawn that FGCS are at more need for financial aid assistance, but they are also at a greater risk of not understanding the long-term financial responsibility for themselves or their families due to their parent's overall lower level of information regarding higher education (Forbus et al, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Schultz, 2004).

Orientation Programs

Baumhardt and Reilly (n.d.) define orientation as, “a collection of events, programs, experiences, and services designed to support new students as they acclimate to higher education” (para 6). Orientation programs on college campuses typically occur prior to a student beginning their first semester at the institution, and the programs are typically a requirement of enrolling as a first-year student or transfer student. The majority of first-year students enrolling in the fall semester will attend an orientation program over the summer before the fall semester, and many transfer students will attend an orientation program during the semester before their first semester at the institution (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.).

Orientation programs ultimately support a smoother transition for college students which in turn decrease the attrition and increase the retention of college students (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.). Baumhardt and Reilly (n.d.) define a college transition as, “any event or non-event that results in change throughout a student's collegiate journey beginning with pre-college preparation in high school through degree completion and pursuit of advanced degrees” (para. 6). Orientation programs prepare first-year students during their pre-college preparation, and

orientation programs prepare transfer students during a transition during their degree completion (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.). Ishitani (2006) defines attrition as, “students leaving their initially enrolled institutions without returning either to their initial or other institutions” (p. 871).

Baumhardt and Reilly (n.d.) define retention as, “the collective effort of both the student and institution to ensure continued persistence to graduation and degree completion” (para 6).

Baumhardt and Reilly (n.d.) state that orientation programs, “support students as they transition into, through, and out of college” (para. 4). When looking at the formal processes of enrolling at an institution, orientation programs can support students as they transition into an institution and college environment. Orientation programs often assist first-year students and transfer students with attending a meeting with an academic advisor, registering for their first semester of classes, engaging in social opportunities with other new students and current students, and learning more about the specific institution and college environment. Through orientation programs, students can expect leaders to demonstrate values of education and knowledge, inclusion and community, and collaboration and support (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.).

Forbus et al (2011), Lightweis (2014), and Schultz (2004) all found that parent(s) of FGCS have an overall lower level of information about higher education, and the CFGSS (2020) found that FGCS visit financial aid services more often than other campus services. Orientation programs provide an abundance of information and opportunities to both students and parent(s) (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.). The wealth of information shared allows parent(s) to increase their overall knowledge of higher education (Forbus et al, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Schultz, 2004). The orientation programs also allow FGCS to obtain social capital among their peers and learn about other student services aside from financial aid services (CFGSS, 2020).

On-Campus Housing

Graham et al. (2018) explored the many reasons that college students are encouraged to live on campus in residence halls during at least their first year of college. Many institutions have found that grade point averages are higher for students living on campus, and overall, student engagement is much higher for students living in residence halls. Experiences in colleges are greatly impacted by the overall environment of a college campus as well as the pockets of smaller environments on a college campus. A residence hall is an example of a smaller environment with the potential for a large impact on a student. Residence halls host regular programs and initiatives that positively impact the overall student experience which lead to greater social, cultural, and extracurricular involvement for students (Graham et al., 2018). Graham et al. (2018) detailed that there the different types of housing that are provided on college campuses, and the different types of housing serve as factors that may influence students in their decision to enroll at an institution. When looking at overall benefits of living on campus, Chickering and Reisser (1993) found that residence halls and fraternity and sorority houses have a greater developmental benefit for students compared to living off campus.

Living on campus can serve as an incomparable opportunity for FGCS who are likely to be underprepared and have less knowledge about the campus environment (Forbus et al, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Schultz, 2004). However, FGCS must be able to accomplish all of the housing-related obligations that are required by the institutions that offer on-campus housing. Graham et al. (2018) explained that requirements for living on a college campus vary from institution to institution, and types of housing options also vary from institution to institution. Most institutions with on-campus housing have basic requirements including: being enrolled in classes, submitting a housing application, paying a housing deposit, selecting a room and

roommate, and paying for the campus housing (Graham et al., 2018). Higher education administrators, specifically student affairs professionals, can play a critical role in helping FGCS accomplish all of the housing-related obligations that are required by their specific institution.

Medical Documents

Nelson (2021) states that most higher education institutions require various forms of medical documents, but the requirements vary from state to state. Regardless of the state, any submitted medical documents are protected by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Common medical documents that are required by most institutions include: medical history, emergency contact information, a physical exam, documentation of vaccinations, and proof of health insurance. Documents of vaccinations are especially important for students living in residence halls, and many schools require a meningitis vaccination in order for a student to live on campus. Most institutions also offer a student health insurance option if a student does not have health insurance (Nelson, 2021).

As stated by Nelson (2021), medical documents are typically required by institutions prior to a student beginning their first semester at the institution. Therefore, providing the medical documents is part of the formal processes of enrolling in college. The process of obtaining medical documents, obtaining a physical exam, and obtaining a vaccine can be time consuming for new students. After a student completes these steps, the institution still needs time to process the medical documents (Nelson, 2021). Failure to complete these steps could sometimes lead to a student unenrolling from classes due to not meeting requirements for enrollment. This is a potential barrier for FGCS who are attempting to complete the formal processes for enrolling in college.

Support Services

FGCS have historically been supported on college campuses in various capacities. One couple, Eric and Deborah Suder, had a vision to enhance the support of FGCS across the United States. Their efforts of supporting FGCS eventually partnered with NASPA to create the Center for First Generation College Students. Today, the center provides specialized training related to FGCS for institutions across the United States through the First Scholars Program (CFGSS, 2020). The knowledge shared through the CFGSS is known as, “the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students” (CFGSS, 2020, para. 1).

Center for First Generation Student Success

For many years, Eric and Deborah Suder endowed scholarships at The University of Texas at Austin and West Virginia University for FGCS with financial need (Schorr, 2017). Initially, the Suders believed that financial assistance alone would provide the support for FGCS to be successful in college. However, the Suders became more involved with services at West Virginia University, and they quickly learned that FGCS need much more than financial assistance in order to be successful in college. The Suders learned, at the time of their involvement, only 36% of FGCS were graduating college, and the Suders wanted to positively impact the graduation rate for FGCS (Schorr, 2017). The Suder Foundation was developed in 2008 by Eric and Deborah Suder to enhance the support of FGCS across the United States. The foundation developed the First Scholars Program, which was intended to provide holistic support for FGCS (Schorr, 2017). In 2017, The Suder Foundation and NASPA partnered to create the Center for First Generation Student Success (CFGSS). The center combined the existing First Scholars Program with other bodies of knowledge, resources, data, and talented speakers. The

mission of the CFGSS is to, “transform higher education to drive first-generation student success effectively and equitably across education, career, and life” (CFGSS, 2020, para. 1).

First Scholars Program

The First Scholars Program continues to be the premier program for the Center of First Generation Student Success, and it is known as the national model and knowledge resource for holistic success for FGCS (CFGSS, 2020). The program is designed to make an impact at multiple levels including the student level, campus level, and national level. More institutions are now ready and prepared to help FGCS, and the First Scholars Program provides the strategies, knowledge, and guidance to help the institutions implement the most effective practices for FGCS (CFGSS, 2020).

The network of institutions that participate in the First Scholars Program extends across the United States. There are currently 277 institutions in 45 states and the District of Columbia that participate in the First Scholars program. The states with the most institutions participating in First Scholars, 15 or more in the state, include: California, Massachusetts, and Texas. The states with zero institutions participating in First Scholars include: Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, Rhode Island, and South Dakota (CFGSS, 2020).

There are currently two phases of the First Scholars Program. At the end of Phase I, institutions receive the designation of being First-Gen Forward, and they have the opportunity to proceed to Phase II or reaffirm their designation as First-Gen Forward every three years. Earning and maintaining the designation as First-Gen Forward has multiple requirements for institutions including: submitting goals, attending meetings, attending learning events, hosting events for FGCS, and submitting annual reports (CFGSS, 2020)

Institutions must meet specific requirements in order to participate in Phase I or Phase II of First Scholars. The institution must be accredited, located within the United States, and be a member of NASPA. Additionally, the institution must develop a First-Gen Forward Core Team. The team must include a minimum of two faculty or staff members and at least one senior leadership member. The First Scholars program requires that there must be support from senior leadership at the institution in order to ensure success of the program at the institution (CFGSS, 2020).

Support

Support services on college campuses provide critical support for FGCS throughout the admission process, formal processes of enrolling at an institution, and throughout college. However, the personal support individuals that make up a support system for a FGCS can be just as vital to the success of a FGCS. Support individuals in a support system for a FGCS can include parent(s), siblings, other family members, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, mentors, and other adults (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Parent(s)

A parent or multiple parents can serve as the most important person or people in the support system of a FGCS. Although the parent(s) of FGCS have not attained a college degree themselves, they can still be deeply associated with the benefits and value of higher education (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Studies have shown that the parent(s) themselves may have wanted to pursue higher education but were unable to do so due to socioeconomic status, migration processes, and other factors (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Gofen (2009) found that the parent(s) of FGCS had a central piece of advice, which was, “do not be like us” (p. 323). This is essentially a blunt way of parent(s) telling their children that they want them to achieve a college

degree unlike they were able to achieve. Thomas and Quinn (2007) attribute this central advice towards the parent(s) being aware of their child's opportunity to earn a stable income and avoid unemployment after they have achieved a college degree. Parent(s) of FGCS can invest time and resources into ensuring their child's success in college. Despite common socioeconomic challenges among FGCS, it is common for parent(s) to support their FGCS through providing textbooks, providing computers, driving their students to school, supporting their students mentally, and engaging with instructors as needed (Gofen, 2009).

High School Administrators

Teachers, guidance counselors, and other adults in the high school setting have the ability to positively impact a high school student to attend college. The support from these adults is particularly important for FGCS. Kojaku and Nunez (1998) stated that these adults, "have a vital role in creating ideas about one's future or in promoting already existing aspirations to go to college. They can function as mentors who give encouragement and provide information about college courses" (p. 324). Adults who function as mentors can instill confidence in students, which can be necessary for a future FGCS considering college (Kojaku & Nunez, 1998). Simply providing words of affirmation, praise, and appreciation from these adults towards high school students can increase their self-perception (Reid & Moore, 2008).

Attrition

When measuring graduation rates for FGCS, researchers and higher education administrators are measuring the retention of FGCS at an institution through college and to graduation (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.). Baumhardt and Reilly (n.d.) defined retention as, "the collective effort of both the student and institution to ensure continued persistence to graduation and degree completion" (para 6). A concept related to retention that is equally important to

measure with regards to FGCS is attrition. Ishitani (2006) defined attrition as, “students leaving their initially enrolled institutions without returning either to their initial or other institutions” (p. 871). Unfortunately, FGCS have a higher risk of attrition compared to non-FGCS, and the time period with the highest risk of attrition for a FGCS is during the first two academic years (Ishitani, 2006). When specifically looking at the first academic year, only between 67% and 75% of FGCS persist at the same institution (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that the risk of attrition is higher for FGCS that are also married, male and Hispanic, English is not their first language, or attended a private institution. Ishitani (2003) provided research that controlled factors including the factors of: ethnic background, gender, high school grades, family income, type of institution, academic integration, and social integration. The research showed that the risk of attrition remains higher for FGCS even when controlling all of these factors (Ishitani, 2003).

Horn and Premo (1995) provide seven risk factors associated with general student attrition. Seay et al. (2008) examined if these attrition risk factors provided by Horn and Premo (1995) occur more often with FGCS. It was determined that FGCS are at higher risk of attrition due to the following risk factors: delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence, and number of dependents. Thomas and Quinn (2007) examined FGCS in order to gain an understanding of more specific reasons why FGCS leave institutions. Their findings concluded that FGCS most often withdraw from institutions because: course choices, difficult transition from high school to college, unclear academic expectations, absence of academic guidance, absence of support services, alienation and isolation, too many non-academic commitments, and financial issues (Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical perspectives influence the ability of higher education administrators to interpret and understand the experiences of FGCS as they experience the transition of enrolling in college. All students who choose to attend college must fulfill any institutional requirements that are included in the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. The formal processes of enrolling at an institution takes place after a student is admitted to an institution but prior to beginning classes at the institution. The formal processes for enrolling at an institution typically involves paying for tuition, fees, and housing; attending and engaging with an orientation program; registering for on-campus housing; and providing medical documentations. These are all common requirements for enrollment that could cause a FGCS to stop their progression towards attending college if they have lower levels of information or lower levels of support while completing these responsibilities. Support systems are important for all students, but they are critical for FGCS. The following theoretical perspectives will describe theories and concepts that influence FGCS in their transition through the formal processes of enrolling at an institution and the importance of a support system during those processes.

Guiding Framework

The guiding concept for this study is support. Ishitani (2003) and Seay et al. (2008) found that FGCS are at risk for attrition once they are at the institution, and Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) found that FGCS are more successful when they have a support system. Therefore, it can be inferred that it is vital for a FGCS to have a support system during the formal processes of enrolling in college.

In relation to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, Barclay (2017) simply stated that support is, "the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student" (p. 25). Support can

be in the form of parent(s) or other family members, and support can also be outside of the family unit. A support system can include friends, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, mentors, university support staff, student affairs staff, academic advisors, and other adults (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement also acknowledged how important student involvement can be for creating a support system for college students through groups and organizations.

Barclay (2017) discussed how support can look different for individuals at different ages and at different chapters of their lives. For example, the support system for an individual enrolling in college may include their parent(s), siblings, friends, high school teachers, and guidance counselors. Whereas the support system for an individual already in college may include a mentor, student affairs professionals, faculty members, registered student organizations, a fraternity or sorority, or a sports team. Some students, especially FGCS, may need help identifying, contacting, and connecting with their support system (Barclay, 2017).

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory also emphasized the concept of an individual's feeling of mattering. Barclay (2017) described mattering as, "the beliefs people hold, regardless of whether those beliefs are accurate, that they matter to someone significant" (p. 24). FGCS have many challenges during the admission process, formal processes of enrolling in college, and throughout college. Various forms of support can assist FGCS through those challenges and assist students in their belief that they matter, which can be tied to esteem needs described by Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs (Barclay, 2017; Tanjula, 2014). In order for a FGCS to reach self-actualization, which can be interpreted as success in the formal processes of enrolling in college, a FGCS must first achieve these esteem needs (Tanjula, 2014).

Tanjula (2014) described the importance of support as a human need when describing human needs for love, respect, and a sense of belonging as demonstrated by Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. These human needs are not guaranteed, just like support for FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college is not guaranteed. In order for a student to achieve esteem needs and self-actualization, which could be understood as success in the formal processes of enrolling in college, FGCS must first have their social needs met (Tanjula, 2014).

Many forms of capital can, in a sense, transition to support for FGCS. Unfortunately, FGCS tend to have lower amounts of cultural capital and social capital (Ward et al., 2012). However, if a FGCS can obtain cultural capital and social capital, then that can increase their overall support, knowledge of the resources, and comfortability with the system of higher education (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Nicols & Islas, 2016). If a student has more college-related cultural capital and social capital, then they are more likely to succeed in college, and the same can be inferred for their success in the formal processes of enrolling in college (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). With regards to family capital, one of the most important components is the parent(s) of a FGCS. Gofen (2009) discussed that although parent(s) have not attended college themselves, their attitude towards college can greatly impact the support that a FGCS feels and therefore the success of a FGCS in college. Positive dedication and support from parent(s) can ultimately become family-capital, which serves as support for FGCS (Gofen, 2009). This support of family-capital is needed in the formal processes of enrolling college just like it is needed throughout the duration of college.

Cultural Capital

Cultural Capital is seen throughout cultures in the United States and the world, and it is also seen within higher education. LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) define cultural capital as, "the

skills, knowledge, and attitudes of the dominant culture” (p. 5). There are many skills, attitudes, and knowledge associated with the dominant culture in higher education (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). According to data provided by the CFGSS (2020), FGCS are not the dominant culture in higher education. Compared to non-FGCS, FGCS tend to be from a lower socioeconomic status, they do not have parent(s) that attended college, and in general they do not have the same support system and resources as non-FGCS. In order to gain the skills, attitudes, and knowledge associated with the dominant culture in higher education, FGCS need to obtain social capital (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021).

Social Capital

Keeley (2007) defined social capital as, “networks together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (p. 103). However, when related to higher education, Nicols and Islas (2016) framed social capital as access to relationships that facilitate access to resources. Typically, the parent(s) of college students can help their student form relationships with current students, alumni, faculty, or staff members who have knowledge of processes, policies, and resources at institutions (Nicols & Islas, 2016). Unfortunately, FGCS typically do not have these types of relationships with individuals who are familiar with campus processes, policies, and resources due to their parent(s) being unfamiliar with higher education (Ward et al., 2012). Ultimately, FGCS without these relationships are at a disadvantage with regards to college-related social capital. Non-FGCS with these existing relationships have access to a higher level of college-related social capital through the individuals that communicate important knowledge about how to be successful in college. These existing relationships give non-FGCS an advantage over FGCS (Ward et al., 2012). Research suggests that parent(s) are the central individuals who typically facilitate these relationships.

However, it is very possible for teachers, guidance counselors, mentors, friends, and other family members to facilitate these relationships for FGCS (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) support the concept that access to college and achievement in college are directly linked to a student's social background. Ultimately, if a student has more college-related social capital, then they are more likely to have access to college and more likely to succeed in college (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Family Attitudes

Gofen (2009) shifted the perspective of success from college-related social capital towards family attitude. FGCS have a harder chance at success due to college-related social capital, but perhaps they do have a chance at success due to the other resources provided by their parent(s) and families. Gofen (2009) argued that one of the most important needs from parent(s) is having a positive attitude towards education. A positive attitude towards education demonstrates a value for education, which plays an important role in the success of FGCS. Other family values that also positively impact a FGCS in their success in college include: solidarity, respect, achievement, ambition, and individual responsibility for future outcomes (Gofen, 2009). This dedication from family can ultimately result in family-capital for a FGCS. Specifically, this dedication becomes an, "assemble of means, strategies, and resources embodied in the family's way of life that influences the future of their children" (Gofen, 2009, pp. 323-324).

Social Identity

Azmitia et al. (2018) studied FGCS through the lenses of Erikson's (1968) Stages of Development and Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory. Erikson's (1969) Stages of Development identifies that young adults, including college students, experience a transition with various relationships in their lives. The shifts in relationships can include relationships with

family, friends, and romantic partners (Azmitia et al., 2018). Erikson (1968) stated that one of the factors that can influence these transitions is a social group membership. Comparably, Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory states that an individual's self-concept is influenced by social group membership. Azmitia et al. (2018) combined these theories to emphasize that being a FGCS is a social identity, and they emphasized that college is a transition period for the development of this social identity. Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs explores the importance of social identity and social needs, and Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory explores the importance of support through a transition (Barclay, 2017; Tanjula, 2014)

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Tanjula (2014) asserted that Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs is a model that provides a pyramid of five layers of human needs. According to the model, an individual cannot achieve higher levels of needs unless their needs are securely met from the lower levels of the pyramid. The layers of the pyramid from lowest to highest include, physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Tanjula, 2014).

Tanjula (2014) described that college campuses are designed to help college students meet their basic human needs at the levels of physiological needs and safety needs. Some examples of the lowest layer, physiological needs, include air, food, water, and shelter. On a college campus, these basic human needs are often met through campus housing and campus dining. The next layer up, safety needs, includes an individual feeling safe and protected from harm. On a college campus, these needs are often met through the work of student affairs professionals, a campus security officers, local police officers, and other forms of safety measurements (Tanjula, 2014).

Tanjula (2014) described that it can be more difficult for FGCS to progress to the layers of social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization. Examples of social needs include love, respect, and a sense of belonging. These needs are not guaranteed, and it is possible that FGCS can feel a shortage of social needs being met due to their absence of social capital (Ward et al., 2012). Academic achievement is the basic purpose of college, but Martin (2009) found that social achievement is critical to students enjoying their college experience. The programs hosted on college campuses by student affairs professionals, campus housing, and student organizations are designed to assist students with their social needs. These programs are critical on college campuses to ensure that students develop a sense of belonging at the institution. The sense of belonging that an individual student feels assists with overall retention of that student (Tanjula, 2014). FGCS are particularly at risk of not being retained. The absence of social integration is a major risk factor for any student leaving college, but it is especially a risk factor for FGCS (McCay & Estrella, 2008; CFGSS, 2020). If FGCS are able to feel a sense of belonging, then they are more likely to achieve their esteem needs and self-actualization.

If a FGCS fulfills their social needs, then they can progress to the layer of esteem needs. Examples of esteem needs are self-esteem, confidence, independence, self-respect, and recognition (Tanjula, 2014). Self-esteem is particularly important within the esteem needs layer, and unfortunately, FGCS tend to have lower self-esteem compared to non-FGCS (Hicks, 2006). One cause of lower self-esteem for FGCS is experiencing unsupportive people in their lives, especially unsupportive family members. Unsupportive behavior causes FGCS to not feel social needs fulfilled, which in turn causes specific challenges with their esteem needs (Tanjula, 2014). Self-esteem is particularly important because according to Maslow (2001), “satisfaction of the self-esteem needs leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy

of being useful and necessary in the world” (p. 62). College administrators, especially student affairs professionals, have the opportunity to assist FGCS with their self-esteem. Hunter (2006) described that opportunities for FGCS to experience student involvement can increase feelings of inclusiveness and sense of belonging, which in turn can increase their self-esteem. Kojaku and Nunez (1998) also described that mentors of FGCS have the ability to instill self-esteem and confidence in FGCS through their words of encouragement.

If a FGCS is able to have their esteem needs met, then they can move to the top layer of the pyramid which is self-actualization. Maslow (1943) described self-actualization as, “experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration, and total absorption” (p. 111). Essentially, when an individual reaches self-actualization they have recognized, acknowledged, and reached their full potential. FGCS need to feel self-actualization in many areas of the college experience including academically, socially, and culturally (Tanjula, 2014). Sordlet-Leonard (2002) found that TRIO programs, which are funded by the United States Department of Education, assist students in multiple ways. TRIO programs primarily assist students financially and academically, but TRIO programs can also help students increase their self-actualization. TRIO programs are specifically credited for helping increase the graduation rates for FGCS (Sordlet-Leonard, 2002).

Astin’s Theory of Involvement

Peralta and Klonowski (2017) found that FGCS have an overall lower level of involvement, which causes unique challenges for FGCS. Astin (1984) developed a theory to look at the outcome of variables associated with involvement. These variables include input and environment. The input variable includes factors such as past experiences and knowledge, encouragement from parent(s) and families, and demographics. The environment variable

includes current college experiences. The outcome is the level of fulfillment and satisfaction that the student feels with the institution based on these variables (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021).

Astin (1984) suggested that students receiving support in the form of student involvement are more likely to be successful in college. Registered student organizations, club sports, fraternities and sororities, and other campus activities provide a support system for college students that goes beyond their families, high school guidance counselors, high school teachers, and student affairs professionals at the institution. This support system through student involvement increases academic achievement, retention, and sense of belonging (Pike, 2005). The absence of a sense of belonging is among the reasons that FGCS depart college, so there is an increased need for FGCS to become involved on college campuses (CFGSS, 2020).

Achievement Guilt

As established, a FGCS is defined as, “an undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree,” (Center for First Generation College Student Success, 2020, para. 5). Covarrubias et al. (2015) explored the complex emotions that result from the FGCS being the first person or first generation in their family to achieve a college degree. Covarrubias et al. (2015) developed a theoretical concept Achievement Guilt, and they compared it to Piorkowski’s (1983) Theory of Survivor Guilt. As defined by Covarrubias et al. (2015), Achievement Guilt is a feeling of guilt that FGCS feel when they attend college or graduate because they have become more educated than their family members. The level of guilt can vary, but the guilty feeling is most prominent for FGCS with parent(s) that place a high value on family. Many scholars have discussed the importance of family members as support system for FGCS, so Achievement Guilt is important context for understanding the dynamic of the relationship between a FGCS and their family members (Covarrubias et al., 2015).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Nancy Schlossberg developed Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory to assist with examining individuals as they progress through a transition in their life (Barclay, 2017). The transition can be an anticipated event, unanticipated event, or a non-event. Transitions can be either positive or negative, but they are rarely ever neutral. Transitions disrupt an individual's life and create changes in their life (Barclay, 2017). When related to college students, a transition is defined as, "any event or non-event that results in change throughout a student's collegiate journey beginning with pre-college preparation in high school through degree completion and pursuit of advanced degrees" (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d., para. 6).

Perspective can impact an individual's feelings about a transition. Many individuals do not like change, so if the transition is unwelcome, then the individual may feel feelings of anxiety and discomfort. If the transition is desired, then the individual may feel feelings of excitement and joy. Two people may experience the same transition completely differently. For example, one college student may feel that moving to college is scary or dreadful, and another college student may feel that the transition is exiting and wonderful (Barclay, 2017). Regardless of how someone feels about a transition, the transition ultimately requires individuals to adjust their expectations for themselves and their future. The transition may require an adjustment to roles, routines, or relationships (Barclay, 2017).

Barclay (2017) described that growth typically takes place over time, and individuals experiencing a transition experience a developing growth process. For the purposes of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, it is important to understand where an individual is at in the timeline of a transition because each part of the transition can include different experiences. An individual may feel different perspectives about the transition, and they may handle the

transition differently throughout the timeline. The different components of a transition timeline include moving-in, moving-through, and moving-out (Barclay, 2017).

Transition Timeline. Barclay (2017) described each phase of the transition timeline as well as some examples. While moving-in, the individual will experience a period of time involving evaluation, consideration, and planning. Some examples of moving-in for a college student can include physically moving to campus, having a roommate, registering for classes, and handling formal processes for enrolling in college. While moving-through, the individual will experience a period of time involving learning about their new roles, routines, or relationships. Some examples of moving-through for a college student can include balancing existing relationships with school responsibilities, learning college course material, and achieving passing grades (Barclay, 2017). While moving-out, the individual will experience a period of time involving a shift to the next part of life. Some examples of moving-out for a college student can include graduation, applying for jobs or graduate school, and looking for housing on their own after graduation (Barclay, 2017).

Moving-In. The moving-in portion of a transition timeline is critical for the purposes of the research for this study. Applying and enrolling in college can be considered part of the moving-in portion of the transition to college. Some students may enjoy this portion of the transition and thrive, but some students, particularly FGCS, may really struggle during this portion of their transition to college.

Heinisch (2017) described how some college students approach the moving-in portion of the transition to college from the perspective of social preparedness or academic preparedness. Socially, college students prepare themselves for the norms and expectations of the college (Heinisch, 2017). This can be particularly challenging for FGCS due to their often absence of

college-related social capital (Ward et al., 2012). Some decisions related to institution selection can impact a student's social transition. For example, a student from a rural community may have a larger transition if they enroll at a large university in an urban setting instead of a small or mid-size institution in a rural setting. A transition will still exist, but the social responsibilities will differ within these two different experiences. Students who focus more on the social transition may experience a tougher transition related to academics (Heinisch, 2017).

Comparably, Heinisch (2017) also found that students that enrolled in an institution because of a specific academic major experienced less academic transition but a tougher social transition.

Parent(s) of FGCS have an overall lower level of information regarding higher education, including knowledge about institutional requirements for enrolling in college (Forbus et al, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Schultz, 2004). Lower levels of information for both the parent(s) and FGCS ultimately impacts the student's experience during the moving-in portion of the transition to college. Heinisch (2017) found that many FGCS were unwavering about their dedication to attend college, but they were uncertain about how to achieve their goal of attending college. The FGCS experiencing this uncertainty did not have the logistical knowledge of how to enroll in college, which made it particularly difficult to plan and prepare for going to college (Heinisch, 2017).

Taking Stock. Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory includes a process called taking stock. Overall, the process of taking stock helps individuals in a transition navigate the transition more smoothly (Barclay, 2017). More specifically, taking stock is, "a process by which transitioners examine their situation and coping resources for the situation. Taking stock consists of analyzing four domains: situation, support, self, and strategies" (Barclay, 2017, p. 25). The

four domains are individually unique, but each domain impacts an individual's transition (Barclay, 2017).

The first domain is situation. Barclay (2017) simply stated that this is, "the situation at the time of the transition" (p. 25). This is the first step in utilizing Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory for a life event that an individual experiences. The situation of the transition must first be identified as an anticipated event, an unanticipated event, or a non-event. An anticipated event is a situation that an individual expected to happen. An example of an anticipated event is moving away from home to move into a residence hall on a college campus. An unanticipated event is a situation that an individual did not expect to happen. An example of an unanticipated event is a college student being delayed while moving into a residence hall on campus due to a car accident on the way to campus. A non-event is a situation that an individual wanted to happen, but the situation does not happen. An example of a non-event is a high school student wanting to go to college, but perhaps they cannot attend college due to not being admitted or not being able to afford college. Non-events are unique because there is a vast difference in how the non-event impacts individuals. The amount of hope that an individual feels about a potential event or situation will determine how much a non-event impacts the individual. An individual with a larger amount of hope for the event or situation will struggle more with the transition of the non-event compared to an individual that did not attach a lot of hope to the event or situation (Barclay, 2017).

The second domain is support. Barclay (2017) simply stated that this is, "the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student" (p. 25). Support systems are typically made up of support individuals including: parent(s), other family members, friends, and mentors. Support systems are critically important for all college students and especially FGCS. Barclay (2017)

described that support systems look different for individuals at different ages and chapters of their lives, and support systems can be both individuals and groups of people. For example, the support system for an individual enrolling in college may include their parent(s), siblings, friends, high school teachers, and guidance counselors. Whereas the support system for an individual already in college may include a mentor, student affairs professionals, faculty members, registered student organizations, a fraternity or sorority, or a sports team. Some students, especially FGCS, may need help identifying, contacting, and connecting with their support system. Student affairs professionals play a vital role in helping students in that process (Barclay, 2017).

The third domain is self. Barclay (2017) simply stated that this is, “who the student is (identity), their optimism level, and dealing with ambiguity” (p. 25). Self-awareness is a key to factor for an individual within transition, and it can increase the likeness of a smooth transition. Specifically, it is helpful for an individual to have an of understanding of their own demographic characteristics, beliefs, abilities, perceptions, and attitudes. An individual’s transition can be impacted by many demographic characteristics including: socioeconomic status, age, race, and gender. An individual’s transition can also be impacted by other characteristics including: maturity, outlook on life, and commitment or resistance to the transition (Barclay, 2017).

The fourth and final domain is strategies. Barclay (2017) simply stated that this is, “ways and functions of coping” (p. 25). When experiencing a transition, an individual must decide if they will modify the situation before they feel stressed about the situation, control and manage the situation if they already feel stressed about the situation, or deliberately decide to not take any action to modify or manage the situation. The decision an individual makes will depend on the various characteristics described in the third domain: self. Two individuals in the exact same

situation may choose different strategies. If an individual chooses to control and manage a situation, then the individual must understand their coping resources. For example, first-year college students need to accomplish the task of registering for college classes for the first time. Students have the option to contact an academic advisor to assist with registering for the college classes, or students can work through the registration process independently. Neither of these methods of accomplishing the registration process are right or wrong. Each student just has to choose which method is more helpful and effective for them as an individual (Barclay, 2017). As mentioned, FGCS are generally less aware of resources on college campuses, so FGCS may not be aware of academic advisors as a resource (Forbus et al.,2011; Lightweis, 2014; & Schultz, 2004)

Mattering. Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory emphasizes the concept of an individual's feeling of mattering. Barclay (2017) described mattering as, "the beliefs people hold, regardless of whether those beliefs are accurate, that they matter to someone significant" (p. 24). Through the development of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, Nancy Schlossberg found that the individuals in transition often felt that they did not matter to other people because of their changing roles, routines, and relationships. These individuals were essentially experiencing an identity crisis, and that impacted their sense of belonging (Barclay, 2017).

Barclay (2017) described that higher education administrators, particularly student affairs professionals, play an important role in assisting students with their sense of belonging on college campuses. During times of transition, such as engaging in the formal processes of enrolling in college, student affairs professionals should assist students in transition by identifying the ways in which other people believe that the student matters. This can be through the student's roles, routines, and relationships (Barclay, 2017). This can be a particularly

important form of assistance towards FGCS from student affairs professionals. FGCS experience the normal transitions to college, but as described, FGCS have many other challenges also work through during their transition.

Responsibility Higher Education Administrators. Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory provides assistance to professionals like higher education administrators when they are assisting college students through various transitions before, during, and after college (Barclay, 2017). Student affairs professionals are a portion of higher education administrators that may utilize Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory on a regular basis. Barclay (2017) stated:

The role of the student affairs professional is to help students take charge of their transitions and benefit from the challenges of the transition. To accomplish this, students need to learn how to evaluate their challenges, explore options, and increase their coping strategies (p. 24).

As previously mentioned, FGCS and their parent(s) have an overall lower level of knowledge about higher education (Forbus et al, 2011; Lightweis, 2014; Schultz, 2004). As a result, there is a level of responsibility on institutions to assist FGCS through the transition to college. Heinisch (2017) advised that institutions need to emphasize the importance of college visits in person or virtually. Virtual campus visits can include online tours of the campus and residence hall, and they can serve as a more affordable way for FGCS to experience college visits (Heinisch, 2017). Following college visits, the common next step is engaging in an application for the institution. Heinisch (2017) found that FGCS and their parent(s) particularly benefitted when the institution reached out to them during the application process. Heinisch (2017) advised that institutions should facilitate discussions, relationships, and perhaps

mentorships between current students and FGCS. This can allow these students to begin their journey to developing college-related social capital (Ward et al., 2012).

Conclusion of Theoretical Perspectives

The guiding concept for this study is support. In relation to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, Barclay (2017) simply stated that support is, "the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student" (p. 25). Support can be in the form of parent(s) or other family members, and support can also be outside of the family unit. A support system can include friends, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, mentors, and other adults (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement also acknowledged how important student involvement can be for creating a support system for college students through groups and organizations.

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs demonstrates the importance of social needs. In order for a student to achieve esteem needs and self-actualization, they must first have their social needs met (Tanjula, 2014). Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory also emphasizes the concept of an individual's feeling of mattering. Barclay (2017) described mattering as, "the beliefs people hold, regardless of whether those beliefs are accurate, that they matter to someone significant" (p. 24). FGCS have many challenges during the admission process, formal processes of enrolling in college, and throughout college. These various forms of support can assist FGCS through those challenges.

Existing Literature

Many scholars have explored the overall experiences of FGCS. In order to develop this study, components of these previous studies will be incorporated into the body of knowledge surrounding the topic of FGCS in formal processes of enrolling in college. FGCS are particularly at risk of attrition once they are at the institution (Ishitani, 2003; Seay et al, 2008). Overall,

FGCS have lower graduation rates compared to FGCS (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Unverferth et al., 2012). Financially, Schorr (2017) found that FGCS have an overall need for more financial support. A lower amount of financial support can lead to a student being forced to leave college unexpectedly (Schorr, 2017). Socially, Ward et al. (2012) found that FGCS have lower cultural capital and social capital. This results in FGCS having a lower level of understanding of the resources, systems, and individuals who can assist them before, during, and after college (Ward et al., 2012). Financial struggles and social obstacles can lead to issues of attrition, but they also call for the need for support systems. When studying FGCS, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) discovered and emphasized the importance of support systems for FGCS.

Gaps in Literature

Numerous scholars have conducted research about the overall college experiences of FGCS, and scholars have provided information about the attrition risks for FGCS and lower graduation rates among FGCS (Ishitani, 2003; DeAngelo et al., 2011; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Seay et al, 2008; Unverferth et al., 2012). Scholars have demonstrated that FGCS are particularly at risk for attrition once they are at the institution (Ishitani, 2003; Seay et al., 2008). If FGCS experience challenges during the formal processes of enrolling in college that are so severe that it could result in a FGCS not attending college, then there is a responsibility on the part of institutions to improve their processes or support services.

The CFGSS (2020) provides countless resources to institutions about how to best support FGCS on college campuses. However, what about the period of time between graduating high school and arriving on a college campus? During that in-between time, FGCS leave behind their guidance counselors and high school teachers, but they have not yet arrived on a college campus

where there are college faculty and staff members. This time period between high school graduation and arriving at a college campus typically occurs during the summer months. The summer months are also the common due dates for many institutional requirements that are included in the formal processes of enrolling at an institution. Who is supporting FGCS during this time period that is possibly a high-risk time for attrition for FGCS?

Scholars have demonstrated that FGCS are resilient, and they are determined to accomplish their dreams. Azmitia et al (2018) demonstrated that FGCS are resilient, Lightweis (2014) demonstrated that FGCS are persistent, and Forbus et al. (2011) demonstrated that FGCS have a special motivation for success (Forbus et al, 2011). One of the most important factors in the success of a FGCS is their support system and support services on college campuses. Scholars have demonstrated how FGCS feel support from their parent(s), families, and other support individuals throughout college (Hicks, 2006; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). However, scholars have not provided insight to how these support individuals provide support to FGCS during the specific formal processes of enrolling in college.

Conclusion

There are many factors that influence the overall experience of FGCS on college campuses. FGCS face many challenges, and there are many points along the journey where they may fall through the cracks and decide to not attend college or even to withdraw if they do not have the necessary supports in place. These challenges can arise during the admission process, formal processes of enrolling in college, and all throughout college. The purpose of the present study is to learn about challenges during the formal processes of enrolling at an institution from the perspectives of FGCS. The stories told by FGCS will inform higher education administrators about the challenges that FGCS face during college. The overarching theme of support will serve

as the framework for this study. Support can be provided to FGCS in the form of parent(s), other family members, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, mentors, other adults, university support staff, student affair staff, academic advisors, and student organizations (Astin, 1984; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of first generation college students (FGCS) during the formal processes of enrolling in college. This qualitative study utilized a narrative approach to better understand the challenges that FGCS face during the formal processes of enrolling in college and how support systems might assist during the formal processes of enrolling at an institution.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences and challenges of FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling at an institution. The formal processes of enrolling at an institution includes all institutional requirements that must be completed prior to beginning classes at an institution. Individual institutions have the ability to determine the exact requirements for their institution. Examples may include but are not limited to: completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other financial aid requirements; paying for tuition, fees, and housing; attending orientation; registering for on-campus housing; and providing medical documentations (FSA, 2021).

This study was guided by the following research question:

1. What challenges do first generation college students experience when completing the formal processes of enrolling in college?

Methodological Approach

A narrative approach was utilized for this qualitative study. Mertova and Webster (2019) described that narrative approaches allow research to be conducted on the complexity of a human experience while keeping the human centered in the research. Narrative approaches allow individuals to share stories about their life experiences, and narrative approaches allow

researchers to develop an understanding of the implications of those life experiences (Mertova & Webster, 2019).

A narrative method is described as exploring, “the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2019, p. 67). It is then the responsibility of the researcher to analyze the stories told by the individuals (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The process of collecting narrative stories may include interviews, observations, documents, pictures, or group conversations. Individual experiences are shared through these processes, but those individual stories can highlight information about both individual identities and group identities (Creswell & Poth, 2019).

Creswell and Poth (2019) described that context is a vital component of a narrative model, and context must be embedded in the knowledge. The researcher should not simply acknowledge and repeat the experiences of the participants. Rather, the researcher should attempt to explore the external sources that shape those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2019). For the purpose of this study, this included researching and learning about the systems, resources, and support described by participants. Clandinin (2013) stated, “The focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals’ experiences but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individual experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (p. 18).

Creswell and Poth (2018) described that researchers utilize various approaches to narrative inquiry including: life history, autoethnography, biographical, and oral history. Life history explores the experiences that extend over an individual’s entire life. Autoethnography involves including participants in the process of recording and writing their experiences. Biographical studies include the researcher writing and recording the experiences of another

individual's life. Oral history involves an individual telling the causes and effects of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A biographical approach was utilized for this qualitative study. Participants described their experiences with the formal processes of enrolling in college, and their experiences were retold in order to look for broad understandings rather than narrow meanings.

Site for Data Collection

Data collection took place at a large, public, four-year institution in the Southeast region of the United States. NCES (2021) reported that the total enrollment at the institution in fall 2021 was 31,526 students, including 24,931 undergraduate students. Among these undergraduate students in fall 2021, 96% were age 24 and under, and only 4% were age 25 and over. The institution is a land grant institution, and regarding residency in fall 2021, 54% of undergraduate students were in-state students. In fall 2021, the institution received 27,619 applications, and 71% of the applicants were admitted. Among the admitted individuals, 27% of the individuals enrolled at the institution. Among the incoming first-year students in fall 2021, 76% received financial aid including grants, scholarships, or loans (NCES, 2021).

The institution was selected for two central reasons. First, a level of understanding for higher education administrators regarding the formal processes of enrolling at a large institution is necessary due to the large number of undergraduate students enrolled and impacted by the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. Second, the large institution has multiple departments and resources designed to support student success, and the institution was designated as a First-Gen Forward campus by the CFGSS in 2020. In order to qualify as a First-Gen Forward campus, the institution had to engage in in-depth training sessions about FGCS,

and the institution must provide support services designed for FGCS. These support services vary from campus-to-campus, but the support services are guided by the CFGSS (CFGSS, 2020).

Participants and Data Collection

Participants included 18 FGCS who were enrolled in college at the time of the study rather than high school students that were engaging in the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. This distinction was made because enrolled FGCS had the ability to reflect on their entire experience with the formal processes of enrolling in college. Enrolled students had the ability to look back at the entire experience and explain where they felt the most challenges. High school students that are FGCS that were engaging in the formal processes of enrolling at the institution would have been in varying stages of the enrollment process, and it would have been more difficult for them to provide a description of their comprehensive challenges throughout the entire experience.

All participants of this study were FGCS, and they were all enrolled at the institution at the time of their interview. The 18 participants ranged from first year students to seniors, and their ages ranged from 18-31 years old. Among the participants, there were five first year students, three sophomores, six juniors, and four seniors. The races and ethnicities of the 18 participants included: Black, White, German, Persian, and Biracial. There were 12 female participants and six male participants. Among the 18 participants, there were 17 different academic majors represented. Detailed information about the pseudonyms, demographics information, and characteristics of participants is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2*Demographics and Characteristics of Participants*

Name	Year in School	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	Major
Abi	Junior	25	White	Female	Pre-Vet Animal Sciences
Ashley	Freshman	18	White	Female	Chemistry
Billy	Junior	22	Biracial	Male	Aviation Management
Carrie	Junior	20	German	Female	Public Relations
Chris	Sophomore	20	White	Male	Aerospace Engineering
Erica	Freshman	19	White	Female	Architecture
George	Junior	21	White	Male	Mechanical Engineering
Kelsey	Senior	22	Black	Female	Computer Science
Kimberly	Freshman	18	White	Female	Biomedical Sciences
Lafoy	Junior	31	White	Male	Accounting
Liz	Senior	22	White	Female	Professional Flight
Luna	Sophomore	20	Persian	Female	Organismal Biology
Nathan	Sophomore	20	White	Male	Computer Science
Paige	Senior	19	White	Female	Nutrition
Rosa	Junior	21	Biracial	Female	Law & Justice
Sarah	Freshman	19	White	Female	Nursing
Tara	Freshman	19	White	Female	Fine Arts
Xavier	Senior	21	Black	Male	Electrical Engineering

The 18 participants were recruited using purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. With regards to purposeful sampling, participants were selected because of their relevance to the research question (Schwandt, 2015). Participants were purposefully selected because of their status as a FGCS. Various departments at the institution were asked to assist with identifying FGCS enrolled at the institution. Some of these departments included Institutional Research, the Office of Inclusion and Diversity, University Housing, First Year Experience, and Student Affairs Assessment. Participants who were recruited using purposeful sampling were asked to assist with recruiting additional participants, which is known as snowball sampling (Schwandt, 2015). Specifically, the initial participants were asked to identify other FGCS that they were aware of at the institution. The FGCS that were identified by the initial participants were then asked to participate in an interview for the study.

Information was collected through interviews with FGCS who have engaged with the formal processes of enrolling in college. Each participant participated in one interview for approximately one hour. Interviews were semi-structured, and the questions allowed for open-ended responses from participants (Schwandt, 2015). Interviews were conducted orally and via Zoom, which is an online video conference platform. Interviews were recorded using the recording feature on Zoom. Participants were informed of the interview being recorded, and participants were asked to consent to the interview being recorded. The interview recordings allowed the interviews to be transcribed, coded, and organized into themes in order to create meaning of the information.

Context about Individual Participants

This section contains contextual information about the 18 participants of this study. The purpose of this section is to provide context to the experiences of the participants prior to

reporting the findings of this study. All information contained in this section was the most up-to-date information at the time of the study.

Abi was a junior, 25 years old, White, female, and a pre-vet animal sciences major. She considered herself a non-traditional student because of her age and full-time work experience. Abi had two associate degrees and she was employed full-time when she was enrolling at the university at which the study took place. Her mom passed away after she earned her second associate degree but prior to engaging in the enrollment process at the university. Her fiancé and her fiancé's dad were her biggest supporters during her process of enrolling at the university. Her fiancé was also a non-traditional college student, and he enrolled at the same university at the same time as Abi. Her fiancé's dad had a college degree, so he was able to guide both Abi and her fiancé through their processes of enrolling at the institution.

Ashley was a freshman, 18 years old, White, female, and a chemistry major. Ashley knew she wanted to work in veterinary sciences, so prior to attending college, she purposely sought a part-time job in this field. The employees at her job site were very helpful during her process of enrolling in college, and they served as support people in her life. Her job in veterinary sciences allowed her to save money to put towards her overall cost of attendance. The FAFSA was one of Ashley's biggest challenges during the process of enrolling due to her family structure.

Billy was a junior, 22 years old, biracial, and an aviation management major. He shared that his grandpa played a huge role in him transferring to the specific university at which this study took place. Prior to transferring to the university, Billy attended a community college. His grandpa dreamed of Billy attending this specific university so that he could major in aviation management. His grandpa agreed to pay for any out-of-pocket costs at the university. However,

Billy's grandpa unfortunately passed away, and his extended family would not allow Billy's grandpa's assets to go towards his cost of attendance at the university. Billy's mom stepped in to help Billy navigate the process of obtaining loans. Billy shared that his dad has never been helpful with any of his needs regarding enrolling in college or attending college.

Carrie was a junior, 20 years old, German, female, and a public relations major. Carrie navigated the process of enrolling in college mostly on her own. Carrie's mom was involved only when she needed to be involved, such as providing the required income information for the FAFSA paperwork. Carrie expressed that she experienced feelings of frustration during the process of enrolling because her family members told her directions and advice that conflicted with the directions and advice from her high school administrators. She said she felt she had to seek out answers on her own during each step of the process of enrolling at the university.

Chris was a sophomore, 20 years old, White, male, and an aerospace engineering major. He was an out-of-state student, and his hometown was about 18 hours away from the university. His parents were his biggest supporters during his process of enrolling in college, and Chris talked about how going to college so far away was emotional for both him and his parents. He discussed that his parents have been self-employed throughout his whole life and how that impacted him growing up with regards to their income and access to medical care.

Erica was a freshman, 19 years old, White, female, and an architecture major. She said her parents wanted to support her during the process of enrolling, but at times their support was overbearing and ultimately put a lot of pressure on her. She said this caused her to feel stressed during the process of enrolling in college. She said her parents often times talked to her about money throughout her life, and unfortunately her dad lost his job during COVID. She said she had a lot of concerns about the cost of attendance. She highly considered taking a year to work

full-time and save money prior to attending college, but she ultimately decided to go straight into college after high school.

George was a junior, 21 years old, White, male, and a mechanical engineering major. He attended a boarding school in high school, so he was away from his parents during the process of enrolling in college. However, his boarding school brought guest speakers to their campus, and those guest speakers educated George on what it meant to be a FGCS. George was awarded multiple scholarships for his cost of attendance, and the scholarships provided a refund that he used to pay for his off-campus housing and his car loan.

Kelsey was a senior, 22 years old, Black, female, and a computer science major. She had an older brother who attended college prior to her engaging in the process of enrolling in college. However, she said her parents viewed her as their independent child, so they did not expect her to need any assistance from them during the process of enrolling at her institution. Kelsey said she had to navigate the entire enrollment process on her own, and she needed more assistance from her parents than what they provided. Additionally, Kelsey was completely financially independent from her parents, which resulted in her struggling with the financial aspects of college.

Kimberly was a freshman, 18 years old, White, female, and a biomedical sciences major. She said her parents helped her as much as they could during the process of enrolling in college, but her best friend's mom is who gave her the most advice during the process. Her best friend's mom was the Vice Principal of their high school, and she allowed Kimberly to ask questions to her throughout the process of enrolling at the institution. Kimberly also discussed that she only went to urgent care medical facilities growing up, so she experienced difficulties obtaining the required medical records for the institution.

Lafoy was a junior, 31 years old, White, male, and an accounting major. He considered himself a non-traditional student because of his age and full-time work experience. He shared that he was a part-time student and a full-time employee at the institution at which this study took place. Lafoy had an associate degree prior to attending the university. However, Lafoy described that the institution at which he earned his associate degree was the fifth institution that he attended or attempted to attend, and the university at which this study took place was the sixth institution that he attended or attempted to attend in three different states. His biggest supporter was his wife. She had a college degree, and she guided him through the process of enrolling and then ultimately earning his associate degree. She also guided him through the process of enrolling at the university at which this study took place.

Liz was a senior, 22 years old, White, female, and a professional flight major. She considered herself a non-traditional student because of her military status. She was active duty with the Air Force while also being a full-time student. She was completely independent from her parents. Her dad was in her life minimally, and she did not have contact with her mom. Liz's mom kicked her out of the house when she was a young adult, which resulted in Liz experiencing housing insecurity while joining the Air Force and applying for college. Liz gained both independence and stability when she joined the Air Force and then later became a college student.

Luna was a sophomore, 20 years old, Persian, female, and an organismal biology major. Her dad passed away when she was a child, and she had not had contact with her mom since she was eight years old. She was living in her car during the process of enrolling in college. She was able to secure on-campus housing, and she said her on-campus housing assignment provided stability for her life. Luna was in the foster care system as a child, and throughout her entire life

she thought she was in the foster care system for one year. However, she had to contact her old social worker while completing the FAFSA, and through that process she learned that she had been in the foster care system for two years. Luna shared that this impacted her identity development during the process of enrolling in college.

Nathan was a sophomore, 20 years old, White, male, and a computer science major. He shared that both of his parents attended college for a short period of time, but they both left college when his mom became pregnant with Nathan. He said his mom was very insistent that he attend college because she did not have the opportunity to finish college. Nathan described his mom and grandparents as his biggest support people during the process of enrolling in college. Nathan was in the honors college, and he was awarded numerous scholarships which aided with the cost of attendance.

Paige was a senior, 19 years old, White, female, and a nutrition major. She shared that her parents were her biggest supporters. She said her dad really wanted to attend the university at which this study took place, but he was not able to afford the cost of attending college. She shared that her dad lives vicariously through her college experiences, and she tries to share her special moments in college with her dad. Paige discussed the critical importance of securing financial assistance so that she could attend college. She discussed having financial assistance in the form of loans, grants, scholarships, and the Federal Work Study Program.

Rosa was a junior, 21 years old, Biracial, female, and a law and justice major. She engaged in the process of enrolling in college during her senior year of college, which was during the height of COVID. She discussed that she has multiple siblings, and she was the full-time caretaker for her younger brother during the height of COVID. Her brother could not go to daycare, she was at home and completing high school online, and her parents had to go in person

to their job sites. Rosa described that she almost joined the military instead of attending college, but she was awarded a scholarship that provided her with the financial means to attend college.

Sarah was a freshman, 19 years old, White, female, and a nursing major. She said her older sister previously attended college, and Sarah learned that she was a FGCS when her sister attended college. She said the process of enrolling in college was very stressful for her older sister, and her mom served as the support person for her older sister during her process of enrolling in college. Sarah said her mom learned more about the enrollment process while supporting her older sister, which allowed her mom to support Sarah more effectively during her process of enrolling in college.

Tara was a freshman, 19 years old, White, female, and a fine arts major. She grew up living with her grandparents, and her grandpa was her biggest supporter of her dream of going to college. Tara did not understand how to access her school email, which resulted in her getting behind on multiple requirements during the process of enrolling. One of the requirements that Tara missed was enrolling for on-campus housing, so she was placed on a waitlist for on-campus housing. Ultimately, Tara was able to secure on-campus housing, but her uncertainty about on-campus housing caused stress during the process of enrolling in college.

Xavier was a senior, 21 years old, Black, male, and an electrical engineering major. He was raised by a single mom, and his mom and grandma were his biggest supporters during the process of enrolling in college. He said his mom helped him with every step of the process of enrolling in college, and he said she strategically saved money that she knew they would need for various deposits during the process of enrolling. Xavier discussed how critical financial assistance was for him to have the opportunity to attend college, and he shared a unique approach to selecting which college to attend after high school. He first researched colleges with

electrical engineering programs, and he only applied to colleges with electrical engineering programs. He then waited to see where he was accepted, and he applied to scholarships at the institutions at which he was accepted. He then waited to see how many scholarships he was awarded, and he narrowed down his preferences to two institutions based on how many scholarships he was awarded. Then, after taking all of these steps, he finally took campus tours of those two institutions to aid him in making his final decision about where to attend college.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I utilized interviews to gather narrative stories from the 18 participants that participated in this study. This method allowed me to gather rich data from participants about their experiences as FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college. Following the interview process, I analyzed the data thematically. This method allowed me to analyze the narrative stories told by the participants and engage in sense making. Contextual information was also embedded into the analysis and interpretation of the data, as advised by Creswell and Poth (2018).

I utilized the interview recordings to transcribe all interviews for this study. Schwandt (2015) described transcription as, “the act of recording and preparing a record of respondents’ own words, and it yields a written account of what a respondent said in response to a fieldworker’s query” (p. 306). The transcription process included listening to the interview recordings and typing all content that was shared in the interview. Transcribing the interviews myself allowed me to become initially familiar with the narrative stories that were told by participants.

Utilizing the transcriptions, I coded all information through first cycle coding and second cycle coding as described by Saldaña (2021). During first cycle coding, I explored information

from a broader perspective, and information was organized through descriptive coding and in vivo coding. I assigned labels that summarized the information, which aligned with descriptive coding. These labels included single words and short phrases (Saldaña, 2021). Some examples of these labels from first cycle coding included: FAFSA, perseverance, and institutional resources. I assigned short phrases from the participant's own words, which aligned with in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2021). Some examples of phrases from in vivo coding included: lack of organization, absence of support from parents, and attempting college at multiple institutions. For this study, phrases that were repeated by participants were viewed as consistent experiences of FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college (Saldaña, 2021). I utilized pattern coding during the second cycle coding, which developed categories and themes (Saldaña, 2021). During pattern coding, I used the codes from first cycle coding to expand the information into categories and themes (Saldaña, 2021).

After engaging in first cycle coding and second cycle coding, I then analyzed the data further in order to create a framework through restorying (Ollrenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Saldaña, 2021). Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that restorying involves, “gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story (e.g. time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewriting the stories to place them within a chronological sequence” (p. 72). Although many participants shared similar life experiences, these participants all described their experiences differently. Their stories were not told in chronological order, so I engaged in retelling the stories chronologically and contextually. This reorganization of the narrative stories aligned with restorying, which was the construction and reconstruction of the narrative stories about life experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertova & Webster, 2019).

Trustworthiness

Qualitative inquiry can be criticized for trustworthiness. In order for the qualitative research to be considered trustworthy, the information must be reliable and valid (Mertova & Webster, 2019). With regard to narrative research, Mertova and Webster (2019) stated that access to the records of the stories, as told by the participants, is critical for validity and reliability. Schwandt (2015) stated, “An account is judged to be reliable if it is capable of being replicated by another inquirer” (p. 270). Mertova and Webster (2019) supported this idea of reliability and suggested that transferability should be ensured for the narrative research. Additionally, Schwandt (2015) stated, “Validity is a property of a statement, argument, or procedure. To call one of those things valid is to indicate that it is sound, cogent, well grounded, or logically correct” (p. 319). In other words, validity means to have confidence in the statements or knowledge being claimed (Schwandt, 2015). With regards to narrative research, Mertova and Webster (2019) stated that the research outcomes must be supported by the data collected through interviews, observations, documents, pictures, or group discussions. Data was collected through interviews for the purpose of this study (Mertova & Webster, 2019). To ensure trustworthiness in this study, all procedures will be able to be replicated. Processes that are transferable include: recruitment of participants; development of interview questions; individual interviews; transcription of the interviews; descriptive coding, in vivo coding, and pattern coding; and restorying the experiences of the participants.

Limitations

This study was conducted at a large, public, four-year institution in the Southeast region of the United States that has the designation of First-Gen Forward from the Center of First Generation Student Success. Therefore, the experiences of FGCS outside of the United States

and outside of the Southeast region of the United States were not represented in this study, and therefore, these experiences may not be generalizable. Additionally, the experiences of FGCS at small or mid-size public institutions and all private institutions were not represented in this study. Furthermore, the experiences of FGCS may be different at an institution that does not have the First-Gen Forward designation.

This study explored the experiences of FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. However, the institution, like many other institutions, does not specify a list of what qualifies as the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the formal processes of enrolling at the institution included all institutional requirements that must be completed before beginning classes at the institution. These requirements may include but are not limited to: completing the FAFSA and other financial aid requirements; paying for tuition, fees, and housing; attending orientation; registering for on-campus housing; and providing medical documentations.

This study took place at an institution that is designated as First-Gen Forward by the Center of First Generation Student Success. However, the institution does not have a department that is specifically dedicated to supporting FGCS. Therefore, there was not a specific department at the institution to contact to collect the names and contact information for potential participants. Assistance was requested from various institution departments to assist with identifying FGCS enrolled at the institution.

Among the participants of this study, six were juniors and four were seniors at the time of their interviews. It may have been harder for these participants to remember their process of enrolling in college because they engaged in the process of enrolling in college three to four years prior to their interview for this study. Comparably, it may have been easier for first year

participants and sophomore participants to remember their process of enrolling in college because they engaged in the process of enrolling within one to two years prior to their interview for this study.

All 18 participants of this study were currently enrolled at the institution at the time of their interview for the study. This study did not include individuals who were admitted to the institution but never fully enrolled at the institution. This study was not able to dig deeper into why the admitted FGCS did not complete the process of enrolling in college.

Role of Researcher

All researchers bring their past with them to their research. Specifically, all researchers have existing beliefs and philosophical assumptions about the research. These existing viewpoints and personal experiences can impact how the researcher conducts the study. The researcher's positionality can impact the topic the researcher chooses to study, the research question(s) asked for the study, and how data is collected for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I earned my bachelor's degree in 2014. I was not a FGCS, but I was the product of a FGCS. I was only the second person in my immediate family and extended family to earn a college degree. The first and only other person in my family earn a college degree was my mom. Looking back on my college experience, there were many aspects related to admissions, the formal processes of enrolling in college, selecting a major, student involvement, and the entire undergraduate process in general that my mom guided me through due to her experience of also going to college. She earned her bachelor's degree in 1983, so many processes had changed in the thirty years between our college experiences. However, her simply having the experience allowed me to have a person to guide me through the undergraduate process.

I later earned my master's degree in 2016, and I was the first person in my immediate family and extended family to earn a graduate degree. My mom did not attend graduate school, so I no longer had her experience to guide me through experiences such as the graduate school applications, the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), admissions, the formal processes of enrolling in graduate school, classes, assistantships, internships, and the thesis requirement of my graduate program. I first learned about FGCS through my graduate program. I quickly recognized my own privilege in having a mom who guided me through college. I also recognized many college friends of mine who were FGCS. I met many of those friends through orientation programs, residence halls, and student involvement activities. I had a realization that those environments served as the basis of our friendship, but those environments also served as a support system for my friends who were FGCS.

My husband and I met in 2018. He did not have a college degree, and he was the first person in his immediate family to graduate from high school. He was raised by a single dad who did not have a college degree. Despite all of these factors, he still had dreams of attending college. According to common admissions metrics, he was likely to succeed academically in college. He had a high grade point average (GPA), and he earned a 31 on the ACT. However, he fell through the cracks time-after-time with the formal processes of enrolling in college, and I believe his experience was directly associated with his FGCS status. He did not have a support person who had experience and knowledge of the college system. He has since earned his associate degree in 2023, and he is currently taking classes to earn his bachelor's degree.

I acknowledge that this positionality cannot be completely separated from this research. I acknowledge that my existing viewpoints and personal experiences can impact this research. To account for this impact, I engaged in journaling and discussing my findings with peers to make

sense of the data. I have remained committed to challenging my own beliefs, values, and assumptions, and I have remained committed to my dedication to the data of this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences and challenges of FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college. The study utilized narrative approaches to better understand the experiences of FGCS. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews with FGCS at a large, public, four-year institution. Participants included 18 FGCS that were enrolled at the selected institution at the time of their interview. The 18 participants were selected through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. Both institution departments and participants were asked to assist with identifying FGCS who could participate in the study based on their status as a FGCS and a student enrolled at the institution. Participants ranged from first year students to seniors, and their ages ranged from 18-31 years old. Detailed information about the pseudonyms, demographics information, and characteristics of participants is demonstrated in Table 2.

Chapter 4: Findings

All participants of this study were FGCS who had to navigate the process of enrolling in college. Each participant discussed their experience with this process, including what they found frustrating and challenging. Participants discussed the difficult aspects of learning to pay the cost of attendance, and they also discussed other requirements such as attending orientation, securing housing, and completing medical requirements. Participants shared information about common personal experiences that impacted how they navigated through the process of enrolling in college, and they discussed how they were or were not supported during the process of enrolling in college. Participants discussed their experience with self-reliance, and they discussed who or what gave them a sense of mattering at the institution. Overall, the following central themes emerged from the experiences of participants: communication and organization, financial requirements, non-financial enrollment requirements, common personal experiences, support, self-reliance, and mattering. I initially utilized first cycle coding to explore information from a broader perspective. I then utilized those broader codes to engage in pattern coding during second cycle coding, which developed these categories and themes (Saldaña, 2021).

Communication and Organization

Participants were not directly asked about the communication from their institution and the organization of the process of enrolling in college. However, 11 participants discussed communication and organization when discussing the challenges they faced during their process of enrolling in college. Participants desired for there to be more communication and a higher level of organization on behalf of the institution. Participants centralized this theme throughout their interviews, and they harked back to this topic when describing their experiences with other components of the process of enrolling in college. As a researcher, I learned the importance of

communication and organization for FGCS. In order for FGCS to be successful during the process of enrolling in college, the institution as a whole must have effective and organized communication with FGCS. Effective and organized communication can create a solid foundation for FGCS as they engage with all components of the formal processes of enrolling in college. Participants of this study did not experience effective and organized communication from the institution, so they were without as solid of a foundation while they engaged in the formal processes of enrolling at the institution.

Ashley, Tara, Sarah, and Kimberly all stated that they found communication to be challenging during the process of enrolling in college. These participants felt it would have been helpful if an admissions counselor would have reached out to them to offer assistance, and it would have been helpful to have a list of specific departments to contact with certain questions. Ashley described that some institutions have admissions counselors who reach out to incoming students to ask if they need assistance with anything during the process of enrolling, but she did not receive that kind of assistance from the institution that she attends. Ashley said this caused her to struggle with facilitating the communication between her high school and her college, and she struggled with how to communicate updates to the institution about her ACT test score. She also felt that the institution could have been more helpful during the process of completing the FAFSA paperwork, and she felt that an admissions counselor could have guided her towards campus resources for such assistance. Ashley stated:

I think the process could have been more descriptive. I know it is a tedious process that everybody has to do, and it would be hard to reach out about different things, but if they had more availability to reach out. I applied to other schools where the advising

counselors would reach out to ask if there was anything I did not understand. I never received that here.

Tara shared that she did not know how to get into her email that was provided by the institution, so she missed a lot of important information about new student requirements. Tara stated, “I did not necessarily know how to get into my school email for a while, so I was missing a lot of information like housing applications. Communication was a bit difficult.” Assistance from an admissions counselor could have helped Tara avoid the additional challenges she faced due to missing the information and deadlines about on-campus housing. Sarah stated, “I had my enrollment advisor. I think they were always there for if I wanted to reach out and ask a question, but it would have helped if they reached out to me a bit more to ask how the process was going.” She further explained that it would have been helpful if her admissions counselor would have done more to guide her through the new student requirements and connect her with other departments on campus. Kimberly shared that she was aware that she could reach out to an admissions counselor because that information was provided at the end of her application to the institution. However, she said she did not understand how to properly communicate with her admissions counselor. She stated:

I wish I would have known more about my resources. I know there are freshmen enrollment counselors, but I was not sure how that worked. That could have been a really helpful resource. I just was not sure how to use it. That goes back to wishing my high school would have taught me how to utilize stuff like that more.

Ashley, Tara, Sarah, and Kimberly felt that their experience with the process of enrolling at the institution could have been smother if an admissions counselor had initiated intentional and ongoing communication. These participants articulated the various ways in which this type of

communication could have benefited them including: communication between their high school and college, submitting ACT scores, completing the FAFSA paperwork, accessing their school email, and connecting them with other departments on campus. However, after listening to their experiences, I expect that intentional and ongoing communication from admissions counselors could positively impact FGCS during every single step of the process of enrolling in college. Admissions counselors are among the first university representatives to have contact with incoming students, and there should be an expectation for admissions counselors to continue communication with incoming students beyond merely assisting with the institution's recruitment efforts and a student's application process.

Liz, Chris, and Nathan all stated that their primary issue during the process of enrolling in college was the organization of the requirements that needed to be completed by incoming students. Liz stated that it would have been helpful if the institution would have broken down the process of enrolling step-by-step. Liz felt that she had to figure out each of the steps of the process on her own. She stated:

We have no background knowledge of college. Something that would have literally spelled out the process. Colleges do a good job of breaking down their process of you apply, then you pay the deposit, then you enroll and talk to your advisor. I think they do a good job of breaking down their process, but something that would break all of that down from start to finish. Especially for a first generation student since they're going through it on their own and a lot of people do not even know where to start.

Chris stated that he struggled with understanding all of the requirements that he needed to complete, and he said one centralized checklist could have elevated his confusion about the requirements. Chris stated that he kept getting different emails about different requirements, and

he found different requirements on the institution's website. However, he said the institution failed to provide one centralized checklist with all requirements. He stated:

There is not a whole list. I wish there was a whole list of everything I needed to do. I kept getting emails about certain stuff, but there was not an official list of everything I needed to do. That would have been nice and would have helped smooth the process along.

Chris noted other institutions that he applied to that provided centralized checklists for incoming students. Although he did not attend those other institutions, he did value their level of organization. Similarly, Nathan stated that he felt that each portion of the institution's website provided different information about different requirements that needed to be completed by incoming students. Nathan expressed that aside from the general student requirements, he had to keep up with the deadlines for on-campus housing and the Honors College. He stated:

My primary issue was the organization of resources. Every website or every link kind of showed you a different deadline. I am a big calendar person. It was not exactly clear on what pages I should even be looking at to get timelines. None of the deadlines are really out there for when you just search for deadlines.

Nathan acknowledged that he was less confused about the requirements for incoming students after he attended orientation. However, prior to attending orientation, Nathan found himself constantly guessing what departments he should contact regarding certain questions. Nathan got most of his questions answered during orientation, and as a result of attending orientation, he felt much more knowledgeable about which departments to contact with additional questions.

Liz, Chris, and Nathan all expressed how critically helpful it would have been to have been provided with a centralized checklist of all requirements for the process of enrolling at their institution. A checklist of this nature would have the ability to make the overall process of

enrolling in college go much smoother for FGCS. A centralized checklist is a resource that would greatly benefit all incoming students, but it seems that FGCS are a population of students who are most in need of this type of centralized checklist. Non-FGCS have the benefit of having their parent(s) who can advise them on how to gain information from various sources at their institution. On the contrary, FGCS would have to ask other support people for advice on how to gain the information or they would have to take the time to make their own centralized checklists. Either way, these extra steps take more time for FGCS which ultimately slows down their ability to complete the process of enrolling in college.

Rosa stated that she needed more guidance and instructions from the institution about the requirements that she needed to complete. Rosa stated, "I did not know where to start. There were not a lot of instructions. They just kind of plopped me into this pool and told me to swim. I just did not know where to begin." Rosa stated that it would have been helpful if the institution would have provided her with contact information for someone that she could contact to get specialized support as a FGCS. Rosa stated, "I wish they had just provided some information about someone who would have provided some first generation students some support. Just to help navigate everything because it is a lot." Rosa found the institution's website particularly difficult to navigate. She said it took her a significant amount of time to learn how to navigate the institution's website, but once she understood the website, then she was able to complete the new student requirements more smoothly. Similarly, Erica and Kelsey found all of the computer paperwork to be among the most challenging aspects of the process of enrolling in college. Erica stated that it felt challenging to find the paperwork that needed to be completed, figuring out how to complete the paperwork, and staying on track with completing the paperwork by the deadlines. Kelsey stated that she learned that there was a lot more to enrolling in college than just

doing well academically and getting accepted to the institution. She stated that she experienced challenges with figuring out the health information, insurance, and other required paperwork.

Kelsey stated:

The main challenge I can think of was figuring out the paperwork. I was good in school, and I knew that was fine. I knew all I had to do was get a specific score on my ACT. It was figuring out healthcare or insurance or all this stuff. It was all the back work than just applying and getting accepted.

Rosa, Erica, and Kelsey all struggled with the administrative aspects of the process of enrolling in college. Rosa felt embarrassed to admit that she did not understand how to navigate the institution's website. However, the reality was that this lack of knowledge stalled Rosa's progress. She could not move forward with any requirements for the process of enrolling in college if she did not have the basic understanding of how to navigate the institution's website. Similarly, Erica and Kelsey both struggled with understanding and completing the paperwork that was required during the process of enrolling in college. It seems that these participants would have benefited from digital resources or intentional conversations that are intended to teach FGCS basic administrative skills prior to engaging in the process of enrolling in college.

Financial Requirements

Financial requirements were among the primary discussion topics and concerns of participants when they discussed their experience with the process of enrolling in college. While enrolling in college, a couple of participants were provided with assistance from their high schools or community resources, whereas most participants had to learn about financial requirements on their own as they navigated through the process of enrolling in college.

Participants had to navigate stressful conversations with their parents about finances. Almost all of the participants found themselves having to ask their parents about their income in order to complete the FAFSA paperwork. Participants described the tension that this created between themselves and their parents. As a researcher, I observed these participants reliving that tension as they recalled and verbalized their experiences. This tension was present the changes in their tones of voice. Some participants also described the anxiety they felt when their parents had conversations with them about the reality of the cost of attendance and the fact that their family could not afford the out-of-pocket costs of attending college. As a researcher, I observed those participants relive some anxiety while retelling their stories, and I also observed a sense of relief as they recalled the loans, scholarships, grants, and work study programs that allowed them to afford college. Overall, financial requirements were one of the primary concerns that participants discussed when reflecting on their process of enrolling in college. Participants discussed the following topics related to finances: bills, deposits, FAFSA, scholarships, military benefits, and the financial aid office at their institution. Each of these topics are discussed in the following section.

Cost of Attendance

Participants discussed the harsh reality of understanding the cost of attending college. Some participants discussed how they considered postponing college due to the cost of attendance. Overall, none of the participants let the cost of attendance stop them from attending college, but they each had to navigate through the process of figuring out how to pay for the cost of attending college. As previously mentioned, as a researcher, I observed the participants revisiting the feelings of anxiety that they described feeling during the process of enrolling in college. This was observed through their change in breathing and tone of voice.

Kimberly described feeling scared when her and her parents discussed the details of the cost to attend college. She said she initially felt financially secure because she had earned scholarships, but she said the cost of attending college felt more and more expensive as she navigated through the process of enrolling. She said, “When my parents and I started actually getting into the numbers of how much it was going to be, it was definitely a really scary feeling.” She said these overwhelming feelings about the cost of attendance almost caused her to not continue enrolling and to not attend college. She highly considered postponing college to work to save more money. In the end, Kimberly navigated through understanding the cost of tuition and fees, and she ended up enrolling in her first year of college as planned.

One of the limitations of this study is that the study does not include participants who were not able to fully enroll in college. All participants of this study completed all of the enrollment requirements and therefore fully enrolled at the institution. However, if future researchers conduct research on the FGCS who were not able to fully enroll in college, then they may consider exploring how many of those FGCS did not enroll because they were faced with the burden of the overall cost of attendance.

Kelsey described struggling financially during the process of enrolling in college. She discussed the following:

My first year was my most financial struggle year because everything was starting off. I had to pay for housing. I had to pay for a meal plan and that whole nine yards. That was the year when I was not sure if I was still going to be here. I was asking my brother for money. We are 100% financially independent from my parents.

She also discussed how she also had to navigate decisions about optional costs of student activities including football tickets. Kelsey described that she had a hold on her account until she

was able to fulfill all of her financial requirements. Navigating the overall cost of attendance can be overwhelming for incoming students, and it can be particularly difficult for FGCS like Kelsey who are completely financially independent from their parents. Some other participants of this study discussed that their scholarships covered optional additional costs of college such as upgraded on-campus housing, larger meal plans, and football tickets. However, students like Kelsey had to be selective about what they were able to participate in based on what they could afford as additional out-of-pocket costs.

With regards to her parents, Paige said, “My parents were always willing to help as much as they could. My family was kind of middle class but also could not afford too much.” Paige described that her family could not pay out-of-pocket for her cost of attendance that was not covered by the Federal Pell Grant. Paige had to learn about other options for paying for college, and she stated that she wishes her high school could have provided her with more assistance with understanding her options for paying for the cost of attendance. She felt that her experience with understanding financial requirements would have been different if her high school provided more assistance. Similar to Kelsey, Paige’s financial circumstances did not allow her to indulge in some optional aspects of college that come with an additional cost such as more selective on-campus housing, larger meal plans, and football tickets.

Lafoy described that he did not have any issues with understanding the bills for tuition and fees at his current institution. However, Lafoy attempted to attend college at a couple of institutions prior to his current institution, and he did not fully understand the financial requirements at his first institution. He explained that at his first institution, he made it through the entire process of enrolling, but he did not understand that his Federal Pell Grant did not cover his full cost of attendance. He was pulled out of class during the first week of class, and he was

told he could not attend class again until he paid the rest of his tuition and fees. At the time, he felt his only option was to pay out-of-pocket, so he unenrolled from classes and left the institution. He said it felt discouraging at the time, and he said he wishes an employee at the institution would have fully explained to him his options, including loans and scholarships, for paying the remainder of the tuition and fees. Lafoy needed a financial aid employee to provide him with assistance during this difficult moment. He simply needed a financial aid employee who would dedicate time to helping him understand his options. Lafoy was 18 years old when this happened, and leaving the institution due his lack of understanding his financial options delayed his ability to earn an associate degree until he was 30 years old.

Deposits

The institution requires various deposits from incoming freshmen students. Some of those deposits include the enrollment deposit and the on-campus housing deposit. Multiple participants discussed the deposits and how these additional financial requirements impacted them throughout the enrollment process. A common experience among participants was having to strategically secure the finances for these deposits since funds from scholarships, loans, or grants are not available to be used for the deposits. Some participants discussed dedicating entire paychecks of their own towards deposits, some participants discussed having to ask their parents for money for the deposits, and some participants discussed how their parents had strategically set aside extra money for the deposits that would be required during the process of enrolling at the institution. These various methods of paying for deposits impacted the participants differently, and those impacts are discussed in this section.

Nathan stated, “It was tricky to kind of get some of the deposits down.” He described that he had to earn the money for the deposits on his own because he was not able to use money from

scholarships, loans, or grants to pay the deposits. He stated that he had a job at a daycare center, and he dedicated one entire paycheck towards going towards his deposits. As an incoming student, Nathan prioritized dedicating his paychecks from his daycare job to the deposits because he knew the deposits were a mandatory responsibility during the process of enrolling at the institution. However, dedicating his paychecks to the deposits prevented Nathan from saving as much money during the months leading up to arriving on campus. This financially impacted Nathan differently than other students who were able to save money because their parents provided the funds for their deposits.

Similarly, Rosa described that she was not able to use any money from scholarships, loans, or grants to pay the deposits because these costs are not included with the regular tuition and fees. Rosa's process of enrolling occurred during COVID. She explained that she did not have a typical paying job, but due to COVID, she was responsible for taking care of her younger brother at home every day while her parents went to work and she completed high school online at home. This resulted in Rosa having to ask her parents for the money for the deposits. She stated, "It was \$100, after \$100, after \$100, which was really frustrating. I mean, I did not want to be a burden on my parents or family for asking for all this money." As a researcher, I listened to many participants discuss the jobs they worked during their process of enrolling in college. However, Rosa was the only participant who discussed having an unpaid personal responsibility that took as much time and energy as a paid job. Due to her lack of income, Rosa did not have the opportunity to save her own money to pay for the deposits that were required during the process of enrolling in college, which resulted in her having to ask her parents for the money each time a different deposit was due to the institution. This caused tension between Rosa and her parents because they felt like she was constantly asking for money for a different deposit.

Xavier was the third participant to state that he was not able to use his scholarship money to pay for the required deposits. He stated that he was raised by a single mom, but his mom planned ahead financially for additional costs with his college education. He stated, “Luckily my mom had been trying to put some money aside just because she knew that there might be additional fees and things of that nature that we would need to pay out-of-pocket.” Xavier said that his mom did a lot for him, including paying for his deposits. Xavier had a very supportive mom who planned ahead to set him up for success. This allowed Xavier’s process of enrolling in college to go more smoothly. Xavier did not have to work a job because his mom wanted him to focus on school, and Xavier also did not have to continuously ask his mom for money for the deposits because she planned ahead and set money aside for the required deposits.

Kelsey, Sarah, and Paige all described that they felt a sense of relief once they paid their on-campus housing deposits. Kelsey stated that her deposit was paid but not paid on time, which put her opportunity for on-campus housing in jeopardy. Sarah and Paige both stated that they did not have issues paying for their deposits, but they stated that paying the deposit provided them with some relief since they were feeling stressed with the entire process of securing on-campus housing. The required deposits at the institution must be paid in order for incoming students to secure their on-campus housing. First, there is an application fee that must be paid when an incoming student submits their housing application. Next, the student must submit the enrollment deposit if they want to participate in selecting a room on campus. Finally, after the incoming student selects a room, they must pay their housing deposits in order to continue to secure the room that they selected. The participants described feeling a sense of relief once all of these deposits and requirements were secured because this ensured that they would not be dropped from their on-campus housing selection.

FAFSA

Participants were directly asked about their experiences with completing the FAFSA paperwork. Participants had a wide range of experiences with completing the FAFSA paperwork. Some participants explained that their parent(s) filled out the FAFSA paperwork for them, while other participants struggled to have their parent(s) involved in the process at all. Some participants did not find the FAFSA requirements difficult, while some participants felt that the FAFSA requirements were the most challenging part of the entire process of enrolling in college.

Almost all participants stated that their parent(s) did not know how to help them with the majority of the requirements of enrolling in college. However, multiple participants stated that their parent(s) assisted them with completing the FAFSA paperwork because it required income information from their parent(s). Chris stated that his dad completed the majority of his FAFSA paperwork, and he only completed a couple of sections regarding his personal information. Xavier explained that he was raised by a single mom, so she was the only parent listed on his FAFSA paperwork. He stated that he and his mom completed the paperwork together. Erica stated that her mom talked with her about the FAFSA process, but her mom was the person who filled out the FAFSA paperwork. Kimberly stated that the FAFSA paperwork is the thing that her dad was able to help her with the most during the process of enrolling in college. She said it took her and her dad a significant amount of time to figure out how to complete the FAFSA paperwork, but once they understood the requirements, her dad completely took care of her FAFSA paperwork. Kelsey stated, "I was fortunate enough to not have to do my FAFSA myself my first year." She stated that her mom had a friend who assisted Kelsey and her mom with the FAFSA paperwork. Sarah stated that her mom filled out the FAFSA paperwork, and she only involved Sarah in the paperwork when she needed information like her username, password, and

information related to the institution she would be attending. Sarah shared that she has an older sister, so her mom worked through her initial frustrations with the FAFSA paperwork when completing the paperwork for Sarah's sister. Sarah stated that her mom is a very organized person, so her mom kept a binder with all pertinent information for the FAFSA paperwork. Similarly, Paige stated that she also had an older sister, so her mom had previous experience with completing the FAFSA paperwork. Paige stated that her mom completed her FAFSA paperwork, and she felt that it was a smooth process.

Regardless of how these parent(s) assisted their students with the FAFSA paperwork, the common factor was that these parent(s) were finally able to aid their child with one of the many requirements of the process of enrolling in college. Many participants shared how other individuals, besides their parents, were the people who helped them the most during the process of enrolling in college. However, the FAFSA is the common area where the parent(s) of FGCS can help their students the most during the process of enrolling in college.

On the contrary, some participants shared that completing the FAFSA paperwork with their parent(s) was nowhere near a bonding experience. These participants shared that it was difficult to complete the FAFSA paperwork with their parents. Lafoy stated that he is currently a non-traditional student and he works full-time, so he did not have to provide any of his parent's financial information. The FAFSA was based solely on Lafoy's personal income. However, he said when he was 18 years old and originally tried to go to college, he had to provide his dad's financial information. Lafoy explained that he was raised by a single dad, and his dad was not familiar with FAFSA since he did not attend college. Lafoy said it was difficult to complete the FAFSA paperwork because his dad did not initially want to provide his financial information. Lafoy was eventually able to obtain his dad's financial information, but he said it was a difficult

process to complete the FAFSA paperwork with his dad. Similarly, Billy had a difficult time asking his parents about their financial information. He stated that he was raised in a household where income was not discussed, so he felt awkward asking his parents for their financial information. He stated, “Whenever I had to talk to my parents about money, it would be the most awkward thing. That would be the most difficult part of the FAFSA.” George stated that he struggled with completing the FAFSA paperwork, and he specifically struggled with obtaining his parent’s financial information. He stated, “The first time filling out the FAFSA was rough. It was tough. I had to get all of my parent’s financial information. Getting that information out of them was pretty difficult.” Carrie stated that she felt various challenges when completing the paperwork including her mom locating the required financial information to provide to FAFSA, creating both a student account and a parent account, and getting her mom to understand why she needed to complete certain aspects of the FAFSA paperwork. Carrie stated that it was challenging because she was not able to complete the FAFSA paperwork completely on her own like she was with many of the other processes of enrolling in college.

These participants felt frustrated by the fact that the FAFSA requires parental income information. It was hard for these participants and their parent(s) to understand why the parental income was required. If the FAFSA did not require parental income information, then these FGCS could have potentially completed the FAFSA paperwork more quickly on their own or with the help of another support individual. As Carrie reflected, this was the one step in the process of enrolling in college that she could not complete alone and had to involve her mom. For these parent(s), the required income information was an annoyance, and it served as a source of tension between these parent(s) and their children.

Luna and Liz both stated that the FAFSA was difficult because they do not have contact with their families. Luna stated that her dad passed away when she was younger, and she has not had contact with her mom since she was about eight years old. Luna is also not in contact with her extended family. Ultimately, in order to complete the FAFSA paperwork, Luna had to obtain foster care paperwork from a social worker in her state. Luna stated that she felt the FAFSA was especially hard for her since she is not in contact with her family. Luna stated:

My dad died when I was younger, and I have not had contact with my mom since I was eight years old. I had to go with the best of my knowledge and had to get the documentation of what years I was in the system. My entire life I thought I was in the system for one year, but then after calling and getting the documentation, I figured out that I was actually in the system for two years. That was a breakthrough for me.

The requirement of parental information on the FAFSA resulted in Luna having to explore people and experiences that she was ready to leave in her past. Luna experienced a shift in her identity development when she learned that she had been in the foster care system longer than she had always thought throughout her life. This study did not explore identity development among FGCS during the process of enrolling in college, but Luna's experience shows that this may be a worthy topic for future research.

Liz stated that she did not have contact with her mom, and she had limited contact with her dad. She shared that she had to get in contact with her mom the first time she had to complete the FAFSA paperwork, and she said the process did not go well. She stated:

It was a screaming match. My mom did not know what she was doing. I did not know what I was doing. We were on the phone with the FAFSA helpers, and they were clearly getting upset. I was embarrassed the entire time. It was not fun at all.

Liz said she enlisted in the military shortly after applying for college, and her military status relieved her from having to provide any parental information on the FAFSA paperwork. Liz was very adamant that the FAFSA paperwork was the most challenging thing she experienced while enrolling in college. Liz expressed that she feels it would be extremely helpful if there was a waiver for college students who do not have a relationship with their parents or guardians. Liz did not have a relationship with her parents like many of the other participants. Other participants expressed that they engaged in difficult conversations with their parents about their income for the FAFSA, but Liz described a much more intense experience with trying to obtain her mom's income information. As a result, Liz advocated for a better FAFSA experience for future incoming students who do not have a relationship with their parents. As a researcher, Liz's advocacy caused me to pause and reflect because Liz's advocacy should be heard. She is in the Air Force because she enjoys the Air Force, but her reality is that the Air Force was also her only way around the requirement of parental information on the FAFSA. Liz spoke out for students who do not have relationships with their parents.

Abi and Ashley stated that the FAFSA paperwork was difficult for them to complete due to their parental situations. Abi stated that her mom passed away. She said her paperwork became complicated because her mom had claimed her on tax documents prior to passing away. She said it was difficult to obtain her mom's financial information and process the paperwork since her mom had passed away. Overall, Abi said she felt that the FAFSA paperwork was overcomplicated. When asked about her experience with the FAFSA paperwork, Ashley stated, "It was honestly a little bit rocky. I have a very weird situation at home with my parents and my guardian. That was a little bit hard to navigate, and that was one of the things that I could not get many answers on." Ashley stated that she sought help from her high school guidance counselor

and a county office, but not one was able to assist her with the FAFSA paperwork. She sought help from the financial aid office, and they were able to provide her with assistance including reaching out to a FAFSA partner to get their unique questions answered. As previously discussed, it would be beneficial for admissions counselors to have intentional and ongoing communication with FGCS during their process of enrolling at the institution. Both Abi and Ashley's experiences are examples of how advice from an admissions counselor can benefit FGCS. An admissions counselor could have provided clarification and saved these participants time when they were trying to determine who could help them complete the FAFSA paperwork due to their unique circumstances. Abi and Ashley both needed someone to guide them towards the financial aid office, and the person guiding them very easily could have been an admissions counselor.

Two participants, Nathan and Tara, did not have difficulty with the FAFSA paperwork due to community and school resources. Nathan did not have any issues with completing the FAFSA paperwork, and he credited his ease with the paperwork towards a community resource. This community resource had a FAFSA Workshop in which an employee from a local college walked high school students and their parents through the entire process of completing the FAFSA paperwork. Nathan stated, "They told you everything you needed to bring. It really helped me to know how to do everything because we were completely lost. We would have been lost without the FAFSA Workshop." Similarly, Tara stated that her high school guided her and her parents through the process of completing the FAFSA paperwork. She stated, "FAFSA was actually really easy. My high school really focuses on getting that done for all of our seniors, so it was very guided." Tara explained that there was a representative from outside her high school that assisted the students and their parents. She stated that this representative came back to her

high school throughout her senior year to ensure that students were getting the paperwork completed. The conversations with Nathan and Tara about the FAFSA were completely opposite to the conversations with other participants about the FAFSA. Other participants verbally expressed how challenging the FAFSA was for them to complete, and they also exhibited angst when discussing the FAFSA. However, both Nathan and Tara were calm and collected when discussing the FAFSA. These participants want other incoming students to know about community resources that can help them complete the FAFSA. The community resources provided to Nathan and Tara had a long-lasting impact on their overall feelings surrounding the FAFSA.

Loans. Participants were not directly asked about their need for federal loans or private loans to cover the cost of attendance. However, 10 participants discussed the loans when speaking about the FAFSA and cost of attendance. Abi discussed that she received financial assistance as a military dependent, and then she took out loans to cover the remaining cost of attendance. Sarah discussed that she received scholarships, but she still had to take out loans to cover the remaining cost of attendance. Nathan discussed that he also received numerous scholarships that it covered almost the full cost of attendance, but he said he took out a federal loan in order to be able to afford the student health insurance.

Paige compared her first year at her current four-year institution to her time at her previous community college. She stated that at her community college, she had to take out a small loan for \$250 in order to pay for her books. She stated that during the process of enrolling at her current four-year institution, she learned that she would have to take out thousands of dollars in loans to cover the full cost of attendance. However, she said she has kept her number of loans as low as possible through scholarships, the Federal Pell Grant, the Federal Work Study

program, and her second job as a resident assistant which covers her cost of housing. Paige's comparison of her loan debt from her community college verses at her current four-year institution shows the difference in out-of-pocket costs at these two institution types. Financial requirements were a central focus for participants when they reflected on their experience with the process of enrolling in college. Other FGCS should consider the predicted lower out-of-pocket costs that are associated with a community college verses the predicted higher out-of-pocket costs that are associated with four-year institutions.

Luna discussed that she had to take out a lot of student loans her first year of college because she missed the scholarship deadline. She said the deadline for applying for scholarships at the institution was in February, but she did not know she was going to be a student at the institution until March. The 2024 scholarship deadline at the university at which this study took place is March 1, 2024. Although this deadline is later than what Luna experienced her first year of college, it is possibly still too early for a deadline for the majority of scholarships. Some students, such as Luna, are not notified that they are accepted to the institution until March or possibly even later. Additionally, this study has demonstrated how FGCS struggle to understand and manage the many requirements of the process of enrolling in college. If FGCS are focused on other enrollment requirements, then they may miss an early scholarship deadline. Missing scholarship deadlines could result in a FGCS having to take out loans to cover the full cost of attendance, and it could also be a determining factor on a FGCS having the ability to even attend the institution.

Xavier stated that he had to take out a subsidized federal loan his first year to cover the out-of-pocket costs that he owed after scholarships. Regarding subsidized federal loans, Xavier stated, "I knew that was probably the best option for me because I knew I would not have to start

paying it back, and it would not start accruing interest until I graduated.” A student must complete the FAFSA in order to qualify for subsidized federal loans. Xavier had a very supportive mom who helped him complete the FAFSA, which set him for an opportunity to obtain a subsidized federal loan.

Liz stated that she did not initially understand the details of her financial aid. She said she did not initially realize that her military benefits would not cover her full cost of attendance, and she did not realize that she needed to take out loans to cover the remaining balance. When speaking about what she learned about the financial requirements while enrolling in college, she stated, “I had to learn that my financial aid was not going to cover everything. I had to learn how loans work because I did not know that for the longest time.” This was a hard lesson for Liz to learn, and as a researcher, I observed her tone of voice change as she recalled and verbalized this lesson. Liz did not have a relationship with her parents, so she did not have someone that could explain to her that she would have to take out loans and acquire debt while attending college.

Billy discussed that he struggled with the process of obtaining loans, and his mom was the person to guide him through the process. He referred to his loans as a financial burden, and he said it mostly felt difficult to borrow the amount of money for the full cost of attending college. He stated, “Having to get the loans and borrowing money was difficult. Just knowing you have that financial burden. It was a lot of money.” He said he knows he will ultimately have to continue to take out more loans beyond the loans that he took out his first year of college. Some participants discussed that they had to take out loans, but they did not give a lot of thought to the implications of the debt of the loan. These participants were mainly focused on the paperwork for obtaining the loan. However, Billy thought past the paperwork and he thought about how the debt from the loan would impact him long term. He gave thought to how he would

have to continue to take out more loans year after year. These debt from these loans will have a long-term financial impact on Billy, and he did not take that responsibility lightly.

Kimberly said during her process of enrolling, she successfully took out private loans to pay for college, and she also attempted to take out federal loans. However, once she got to college, she learned that she and her parents had missed some required paperwork for the federal loans. She was ultimately able to secure federal loans, but she had to complete some paperwork to secure the federal loans. She said:

Apparently we missed a couple of forms, and I had to do that by myself when I was here. That was a little scary, but we got it sorted out. The hardest part was just knowing what forms to complete, such as the Master Promissory Note. There were additional forms besides just the FAFSA itself if you are going to take out a loan. That is something we definitely did not know going into it.

Kimberly said that during her process of enrolling, she had to learn a lot about the requirements of loans. She credited the financial aid office for helping her understand the paperwork required for obtaining loans. The financial aid office communicates with students about the necessary paperwork for securing federal loans, but sometimes students, such as Kimberly, do not fully understand the requirements for the paperwork. It was easier for Kimberly to obtain a private loan than a federal loan. Kimberly did not discuss the interest rates of her private loan verses her federal loan. However, she could be impacted long term if the private loan has a much higher interest rate than the federal loan.

Similarly to Kimberly, Tara also credited the financial aid office for helping her through the process of obtaining loans. She stated that their family's original plan was to have her dad pay monthly payments, but she ended up taking out federal loans to reduce the pressure of her

dad having to make monthly payments for her cost of attendance. Tara relied on the financial aid office for assistance with completing the requirements for obtaining federal loans. She stated, “Pulling out those loans was actually a really easy process, and going to talk to someone about it really helped me understand how to go about it.” As previously discussed, Billy was a participant who really thought through the long-term financial implications of taking out loans to pay for college. Tara did not express the same sentiments about long-term financial implications. However, her decision to take out federal loans was critical to providing some immediate assistance to her dad who was struggling to afford monthly payments for her cost of attendance.

Federal Pell Grant. Participants were not directly asked if they were eligible for the Federal Pell Grant. However, four participants discussed the Federal Pell Grant when speaking about the FAFSA and cost of attendance. Lafoy is a non-traditional student who is employed full-time at the same institution in which he is a student. He discussed that he qualified for the Federal Pell Grant due to his income. However, he was not able to accept the Federal Pell Grant because he was not able to take classes full-time since he works full-time. He also stated that he qualified for an employee tuition waiver through the institution, which helped him cover his cost of attendance. Lafoy’s experience with qualifying for the Federal Pell Grant was different than other participants because he was old enough to not have to include his parent(s) on the FAFSA. Unlike other participants, he was not able to use the Federal Pell Grant because he was a part-time student. As a researcher, I mostly find it interesting that an employee of the university at which this study took place earns an income that qualifies for the Federal Pell Grant since the Federal Pell Grant is awarded to individuals with significant financial need. Lafoy was thankful that his employer provided him with tuition assistance as an employee benefit, but this

information about his income qualifying for the Federal Pell Grant indicates that institution may need to consider their employee wages.

Nathan discussed that he has been a Federal Pell Grant recipient since his first year as a college student, and it has provided him with \$2,000 a semester towards his cost of attendance. Luna and Paige both discussed that they are Federal Pell Grant recipients, but both stated that they did not initially understand that the Federal Pell Grant did not cover all of their cost of attendance. Luna stated that her estimated family contribution was zero, and she anticipated that she would receive more Federal Pell Grant funds based on her family's financial need. Paige stated that she completed the FAFSA with the intention of qualifying for the Federal Pell Grant, and she stated that she receives \$3,000 a semester in Federal Pell Grant funds. With regards to the amount of Federal Pell Grant funds that she received, Paige stated, "It is that barrier when you're doing the Pell Grant. Some people are right at the minimum where you cannot get the full money you need, but your parents cannot actually pay for it. My parents cannot pay for college." Nathan, Luna, and Paige all shared that they had to explore additional options for paying for the rest of their cost of attendance including scholarships, federal loans, and private loans. Paige specifically stated that securing this additional funding helped her feel more comfortable and reassured her that she would still be able to attend college.

An overall misunderstanding of Nathan, Luna, and Paige was the amount of the cost of attendance that the Federal Pell Grant covers for qualifying students. Lafoy, who was now 31 years old, also had the same misunderstanding when he first attempted to attend a community college when he was 18 years old. All four of these participants expressed that they had significant financial need, and they anticipated that the Federal Pell Grant would cover all or at least most of their cost of attendance at college. These participants misunderstood and thought

the Federal Pell Grant would cover their full cost of attendance. These participants thought they would have no out-of-pocket costs similarly to how they had no out-of-pocket costs for their public education in grades K-12. This is a misunderstanding that needs to be clarified for FGCS as they complete the FAFSA and make plans for how they will pay for the full cost of attendance through various financial means.

Federal Work Study Program. Participants were not directly asked if they were eligible for the Federal Work Study Program. However, one participant discussed her qualification for the Federal Work Study Program when speaking about the FAFSA and cost of attendance. Paige stated that her parents are not able to assist her with the cost of attending college, and she is personally responsible for her cost of attendance outside of the funds from the Federal Pell Grant and scholarships. She said, “There was the stress of making sure I can get the money. I have to keep up with finances on my own.” She stated that she qualified for the Federal Work Study Program at the community college that she first attended, and she also qualified for the Federal Work Study Program at her current institution. Her Federal Work Study at her community college was in the student library, and her Federal Work Study at her current institution is in the graduate school. She stated that she also works a second job on campus as a resident assistant, which helps her with the cost of housing. Paige was one of the participants that did not understand that the Federal Pell Grant would not pay for her full cost of attendance at college. After learning this information about the Federal Pell Grant, Paige was open to all forms of financial assistance. This resulted in Paige engaging with the Federal Work Study Program when it was offered to her. The Federal Work Study Program allowed Paige to begin college with an on-campus job that provided her with consistent income for her needs while attending college.

Scholarships

Participants were not directly asked if they qualified for scholarships at the institution at which the study took place. However, 15 participants discussed scholarships when speaking about the cost of attending college. Participants described how various scholarships, including scholarships specifically for FGCS, provided them with the opportunity to attend college.

Kimberly and Xavier both shared that they were awarded one internal scholarship that is specifically for FGCS, and Paige shared that she was awarded two internal scholarships for FGCS. All three participants discussed how these scholarships impacted their overall ability to afford college and therefore attend college. Paige stated that her FGCS scholarships have allowed her to feel comfortable with the cost of attending college. She stated:

When I was in high school, I had to work really, really hard to get good grades and to be able to get the scholarships that I got. I've been able to get a scholarship for first generation students as well, which helped me out a lot. The scholarships allowed me to feel comfortable and like I was going to be able to afford to go to college.

Paige was among the group of participants that misunderstood how much her overall cost of attendance would be covered by the Federal Pell Grant at a four-year institution. She began applying for scholarships once she understood that the Federal Pell Grant was not going to cover her full cost of attendance at a four-year institution. Paige, Kimberly, and Xavier were all fortunate to qualify for scholarships that were specifically for FGCS. Some other participants stated that they were not aware of scholarships for FGCS when they were first enrolling at the institution, but they have since learned about these scholarships for FGCS. All scholarships have the ability to support the needs of FGCS, but it is especially important for institutions to have scholarships that are specifically designed for FGCS and awarded to FGCS. The deadlines for

scholarships can be a challenge for FGCS who may be admitted later or may be focused on navigating other enrollment responsibilities. Therefore, I suggest that institutions should consider assigning a later deadline for scholarships that are awarded to FGCS.

George stated that he first learned about scholarships for FGCS through the boarding school that he attended for high school. He said his boarding school introduced him to the fact that he is a FGCS, and he said he was able to apply for colleges with an awareness of his FGCS status. George said, “We would have seminars about different experiences you can have in college, and first generation always came up, especially when they were talking about scholarships.” He said he received a lot of scholarships, which resulted in him receiving a refund to his student account. He said he was not used to having that amount of money, and he found himself spending the money pretty quickly. George said:

I actually got pretty good scholarships. I had to use my refund to pay for housing, and I was also using the refund to pay off my car note at the same time. There was a little bit of a financial struggle. Just managing my finances.

George said he eventually slowed down with spending the money, and he also got a job at the library on campus. He said he learned a lot about managing his finances when was first entering college. George is the only participant who discussed that his high school intentionally helped him understand that he was a FGCS. George attended a boarding school, and he learned what it meant to be a FGCS through guest speakers that were brought to his boarding school. This was a powerful realization for George, and other high schools should make an intentional effort to educate FGCS about what it means to be a FGCS. For George, his knowledge of his FGCS status allowed him to apply for more scholarships that he was ultimately awarded.

Kelsey and Carrie both stated that they receive multiple scholarships that cover the majority of their cost of attendance, and they both place a great deal of pressure on themselves to never do anything that would jeopardize their scholarships. Nathan discussed that he was awarded multiple scholarships, which covered almost his entire cost of attendance except his student health insurance. He stated that he has a \$3,000 external scholarship, and all of his other scholarships are internal scholarships within the institution. Ashley stated that her cost of attendance was mostly covered by external scholarships from her county and other agriculture scholarships. She stated that she has a couple of internal scholarships through her institution. Rosa stated, "I was really fortunate with scholarships. I had some good people looking after me while I was applying for college. I did not think I would even have a chance to go to college straight out of high school." Rosa continued to explain that she had planned to join the military because she did not think it was possible for her to afford college. She said her external scholarship is what allowed her to attend college. Many participants expressed gratitude for their scholarships, but Kelsey, Carrie, Nathan, and Rosa really emphasized just how appreciative they were for their scholarships. These students have financial need, and their scholarships were a major factor in their ability to afford to attend a four-year institution. Without their scholarships, these students may have been forced to attend a more affordable institution or possibly could not have attended college at all.

Sarah stated that she felt like most of the requirements of enrolling in college felt like a checklist, but she felt that one of the harder parts of enrolling in college was obtaining scholarships. She explained that she had to navigate the process of applying for scholarships alone since neither of her parents attended college. Her parents were supportive of her applying for scholarships, but her parents did not fully understand how difficult it can be to obtain

scholarships. Sarah stated that her mom would state, “Well, you can write essays! You’re good at writing things!” She said her mom did not understand the competitive nature of obtaining scholarships. Sarah stated, “Well, I can write essays and still get denied from numerous applications. There is an issue of trying to stand out amongst a bunch of people.” She stated that her parents were not alumni of the institution she was attending, and she felt she was at a disadvantage with scholarship applications. She explained one factor she could control was her ACT test score. Sarah continued to retake the ACT test to increase her score and therefore increase her odds of obtaining scholarships. As previously discussed, George’s high school educated him on what it meant to be a FGCS. Goerge was then able to apply for scholarships that were designed for FGCS and awarded to FGCS, and he was also able to discuss his FGCS status on other scholarship applications. Sarah discussed that she found it challenging to stick out on scholarship essays among many qualified applicants. If Sarah had a better understanding of her FGCS status, then she could have applied for scholarship that are specifically awarded to FGCS, and she could have spoken about her experiences as a FGCS on her other applications.

Erica discussed that she struggled with finding scholarships in which she qualified, finding the motivation to apply for scholarships, and completing the required essays for scholarships. Erica stated:

For the financial part of it, I applied for scholarships. Finding scholarships and having the motivation to actually apply for the ones where you have to write essays was hard. My parents were really on me about that, and that was one of the most stressful things. She discussed that her parents put a lot of pressure on her to apply for scholarships because her dad lost his job during COVID. She said her dad had always been someone who taught her the value of money, but she said the pressure increased when her dad lost his job. She said she felt

responsible for figuring out the cost of attending college by applying for scholarships. She said she took the ACT test multiple times in order to increase her likelihood of being awarded scholarships. Erica discussed that she struggled to find motivation to complete scholarship applications and essay requirements. However, I think it is important to acknowledge what Erica was managing while she was trying to motivate herself to complete scholarship requirements. Erica, like many other participants, struggled with understanding and managing the multiple enrollment responsibilities, and she was doing her best to manage this learning curve. In addition to experiencing stress from enrollment responsibilities, Erica was also dealing with family changes since her dad lost his job during COVID. This created financial uncertainty for her family, and it placed a great deal of pressure on Erica to obtain scholarships. Erica was understandably overwhelmed during her process of enrolling in college, and that surfaced as she struggling to motivate herself to complete scholarship requirements.

Luna stated that she struggled to pay for her first semester of college. She shared that she had been a child in the foster care system, and she was unhoused when completing the process of enrolling in college. She was solely responsible for a significant amount of the cost of attendance. She missed the deadline for internal scholarships at the institution because she was not admitted to the institution until after the internal scholarship deadline. She was awarded the Federal Pell Grant, and she took out loans for the cost of attendance. She stated that she was awarded an additional \$1,000 grant from the financial aid office. However, this still did not cover her full cost of attendance. She shared that this caused significant stress because she did not think she would be able to attend college. However, she stated that the financial aid office helped her secure a one-time \$8,000 scholarship, which covered her additional cost of attendance for her first semester. Since her first semester, she has applied and obtained other scholarships, and she

became a resident assistant to assist with the cost of housing. The 2024 scholarship deadline at the university at which this study took place is March 1, 2024. Although this deadline is later than what Luna experienced her first year of college, it is possibly still too early for a deadline for the majority of scholarships. Some students, such as Luna, are not notified that they are accepted to the institution until March or possibly even later. Additionally, this study has demonstrated how FGCS struggle to understand and manage the many requirements of the process of enrolling in college. If FGCS are focused on other enrollment requirements, then they may miss an early scholarship deadline. Missing scholarship deadlines could result in a FGCS having to take out loans to cover the full cost of attendance, and it could also be a determining factor on a FGCS having the ability to even attend the institution.

Xavier shared a unique approach to selecting an institution, and his approach was primarily based on scholarships. Xavier's approach was to research colleges with engineering programs, apply to those colleges, and apply to the internal scholarships at the institution. He then determined which campuses to tour based on who offered him the most scholarships. He toured two institutions, and the combination of the scholarships and the campus visit is how determined which college to attend. He did not tour any college campuses until he knew how much scholarship money he would be awarded from that institution. He stated,

The main thing I was thinking during the entire process was once I got admitted, I needed to worry about the money. That was the most important factor for me. I knew I needed a set of money to actually be able to go to college because I did not want to put myself in a lot of debt.

Xavier stated that the most challenging parts of this process was meeting deadlines and writing essays for each scholarship application. His approach was unique and uncommon, but I think his

approach was wise for a student like Xavier who expressed that he had financial need. This approach prevented him from committing himself to an institution that he would later learn that he could not afford. This approach also prevented him from having to take out an excessive amount of loans for his overall cost of attendance. High school administrators need to be more intentional about educating their students about what it means to be a FGCS. When educating these students, high school administrators should also consider advising Xavier's method of choosing an institution to attend.

Military Benefits

Participants were not directly asked if they qualified for military benefits for college. However, three participants discussed the GI Bill when speaking about the cost of attending college. Abi and Kelsey both discussed that their fathers are veterans of the military. Abi and Kelsey are not in the military themselves, but they qualify for dependent benefits through their fathers, which has helped them with the cost of attending college. Liz discussed that she enlisted in the Air Force before becoming a college student, and she has continued to be enlisted in the Air Force during her entire time as a college student. She stated that being a member of the military assisted her with the financial requirements of college. She discussed the cost of attending college, and she said:

It is very expensive to go to college. I honestly do not know how I have made it this far.

Whenever I went to campus for the first time, I was like there is no way I am affording this, but I was not affording it. The military was affording it.

Liz's overall cost of attendance was not fully covered by the GI Bill, so Liz had to take out some loans to cover the full cost of her attendance. Liz did not initially understand that she would have to take out loans and acquire debt to attend college, and this was a tough lesson for her to learn.

The financial aid office is who educated Liz about obtaining loans to cover her remaining cost of attendance. However, veterans resource offices should also be equipped to have these types of conversations with students who utilize military benefits. This study did not specifically seek FGCS who used military benefits, but this is a subset of the FGCS population that could be explored more in the future. Liz considered herself to be a non-traditional student because she is also active duty in the military. It is possible that other FGCS using military benefits may also be considered non-traditional students if they are active duty or if they are a veteran.

Both Liz and Abi discussed the veterans resource office at their institution. Abi stated that the veterans resource office helped guide her through understanding the dependent benefits that she received. She stated, “Dealing with the military side of financial support is definitely hard. The veterans resource office is there to help guide you through it, and they are really great at that.” Liz compared the veterans resource office at her first institution and current institution. When speaking about her experiences with both offices, she said, “They were like night and day.” She stated the veterans resource office at her current institution was significantly more helpful during her time enrolling at the institution and her entire time as a student. She discussed that the assistance from the veterans resource office impacted her ability to understand the financial aspects of her military benefits while enrolling in college. The veterans resource office may not have known that Liz and Abi were both FGCS when they provided them with assistance. However, their approach to guiding these students was simply to be helpful. This an approach that I would recommend for any office that is assisting a FGCS. I would also advise that veterans resource offices should be aware of a student’s FGCS status when assisting them with their military benefits.

Financial Aid Office

The financial aid office at the institution proved to be a useful resource for FGCS as they navigated financial requirements at the institution. Multiple participants discussed the financial aid office when asked who or what provided them with assistance when navigating the financial requirements. These participants discussed going in person to sit down and meet with employees of the financial aid office.

Abi felt that the university was straightforward with financial requirements, and she felt that the financial aid office was helpful whenever she had questions. Kaitin used the words “nice” and “helpful” when describing her experience working with the financial aid office. As mentioned above regarding the veterans resource office, any office who is assisting FGCS should simply have a mission of being helpful. Departments, especially the financial aid office, should not assume that a FGCS has a full understanding of their policies, processes, or requirements. Numerous participants of this study expressed that they have financial need, which implies that they would have various forms of financial aid. Therefore, the financial aid office should be aware of all FGCS at the institution, and they should be mindful of a student’s FGCS status if they are assisting a FGCS.

Kimberly stated that the financial aid office was extremely helpful every time she had questions or concerns related to financial requirements. She expressed that she specifically had difficulty with the paperwork required for obtaining federal loans. She said the employees in the office took the time to sit down with her and review the requirements including how to find paperwork, how to fill out the paperwork, and the expected timelines for the paperwork. Kimberly used the word “great” when describing her experience working with the financial aid office. Similarly, Tara also credited the financial aid office for assisting her through the process

of obtaining loans. She stated, “Pulling out those loans was actually a really easy process, and going to talk to someone about it really helped me understand how to go about it.” A specific effort of the employees of the financial aid office that deserves recognition was their willingness to sit down with FGCS in person to answer their questions and walk them through paperwork requirements. Many departments prefer to quickly answer questions to students and parents through phone calls and emails. These forms of communication may be efficient for the department, but these forms of communication are not as helpful for FGCS. It can greatly benefit FGCS when departments are willing to sit down in person and discuss information face to face. This type of meeting allows the FGCS to ask questions and seek clarification, and it also allows the FGCS to build rapport with an employee at the institution. This type of rapport can provide long term support to a FGCS.

Ashley explained that she had a difficult time completing the FAFSA paperwork due to the status of her parents involving both a divorce and the death of a parent. She sought help from multiple individuals including her family, her high school guidance counselor, and an office in her county. These individuals stated that they did not know how to help her fill out the forms due to her parental situation, so she sought help from the financial aid office. She stated:

We contacted financial aid because I asked my counselor at high school, and she had absolutely no clue. Then I went somewhere in my county, and they had no clue. So I went to financial aid, and I guess they had encountered a similar situation. They knew the fastest way to get through the paperwork. There was a lot of back and forth with a team with FAFSA.

Ashley stated that she would not have been able to figure out the FAFSA paperwork without the help of the financial aid office. In Ashley’s situation, she should have been advised sooner about

the employees in the financial aid office at her institution. First and foremost, her high school guidance counselor should have been aware of basic resources at institutions of higher education such as financial aid offices. Additionally, Ashley could have learned this information from an admissions counselor if they would have had ongoing communication with her. FGCS are faced with difficulties during the process of enrolling in college, and their experiences are made more difficult when they cannot locate the resources that they need. A limitation to this study is that the study did not include participants who were FGCS but did not fully complete the process of enrolling in college. However, if this topic is explored in the future, then researchers should consider that FGCS may stop their enrollment efforts if they hit roadblocks like the one described by Ashley.

Liz described that she felt the employees in the financial aid office cared about her financial situation and cared about her on a personal level. She stated, “The person in the financial aid office. I feel like he had a care in him about the situation. I appreciated that.” Liz stated that she did not initially understand that she would need to take out loans to cover the full cost of attendance at the institution, and this resulted in her having a hold on her account. The financial aid office helped her understand the full cost of attendance, and they helped her understand the process of getting loans for her education. Liz felt that the employees in the financial aid office demonstrated understanding towards her financial needs. As previously discussed, any departments that help college students should have a list of FGCS at the institution. Knowledge of a student’s FGCS status can allow employees to be more intentional when helping and guiding a FGCS. The employee in the financial aid office may not have been aware of Liz’s FGCS status, but he demonstrated that he cared for her as a person. His level of care made a huge difference for Liz.

Non-Financial Enrollment Requirements

One of the primary concerns of participants were their financial requirements. Although they discussed their financial requirements at length, they also discussed other requirements that they had to complete during the process of enrolling in college. The primary enrollment requirements, aside from financial requirements, included: attending orientation; securing housing; and fulfilling medical requirements such as providing their medical history, receiving vaccinations, and completing a tuberculosis (TB) test. The following sections describe participant experiences with these requirements during the process of enrolling in college.

Orientation

Participants described varying experiences with attending orientation. Orientation is a mandatory component of the process of enrolling in college. Some participants viewed it merely as a mandatory step they had to complete, and some participants willingly and happily participated. A few participants described that their orientation occurred during the height of COVID, so it was either online or a condensed version of the typical in-person orientation.

Nathan, Erica, Tara, Ashley, and Sarah all described positive experiences with orientation. Nathan remembered feeling confused about the requirements he needed to complete as an incoming student, but he said attending orientation made a huge difference in his level of understanding. He said orientation provided answers to many of his questions and it helped him learn which departments to contact with other questions. Nathan said, “I loved orientation! It was the ultimate information overload, but it really told me everything I needed to know. It was super, super good. They made everything very clear.” Without attending orientation, Nathan would have had to continue searching for answers on his own. The knowledge he gained from orientation provided a solid foundation while he continued to engage in the formal processes of

enrolling at the institution. Orientation at the institution was not only fun and knowledgeable, but it was also an organized experience. Nathan was among the participants who felt frustrated with the organization of communication from the institution as a whole. Effective and organized communication could have provided this type of solid foundation for Nathan earlier in the process of enrolling rather than him having to wait until he attended orientation during the summer.

Erica said she had been to the college campus for a summer camp prior to attending orientation, which made her excited to come back to the campus. She said she met multiple friends during orientation. She said, “It was a good learning experience and a good experience for me to meet new people.” For Erica, orientation was a means of expanding her social capital. Her network was expanded by new friends, orientation leaders, and employees at the institution. Parent(s) or other support people of FGCS who attend the guest portion of the orientation program also had the opportunity to expand their social capital by meeting employees at the institution, orientation leaders, and other guests who attended with both FGCS and non-FGCS.

Tara described having fun at orientation. She said she has not maintained friendships with the other students that she met at orientation, but it was still a good way for her to meet people and spend some time on campus. She said she has maintained a relationship with her orientation leader, and she still reaches out to her orientation leader as a resource. Ashley enjoyed her orientation experience. She felt it was very informative, and she particularly felt it prepared her for what to expect with her academic requirements and classes. Kiera described how much she enjoyed orientation, and she felt it was the perfect introduction to college. She said she kept all the paperwork and resources that were given to her during orientation, and she continued to refer to the paperwork and resources during her process of enrolling in college and even throughout

her first semester of college. Kiera said, “Orientation was great. It left me wanting to stay on campus and not wanting to come home.” Orientation provided different means of support for these participants in various ways. The orientation program provided social support, a mentor through an orientation leader, and long-term knowledge about resources at the institution. For some FGCS, orientation was also a means for becoming more comfortable with their surroundings. For other FGCS, orientation provided them with a solid foundation of knowledge that they were seeking during the process of enrolling in college.

Luna described how much orientation changed her perspective on her future as a college student. Luna was unhoused during the process of enrolling in college, and attending the overnight orientation gave her a glimpse of her future of living on-campus as a college student. During orientation, Luna met her first friend at the institution, which would later become her roommate during her first year of college. Luna said:

Ah! I loved orientation. It was everything to me. I was going from living out of my car to being on a college campus. The overwhelming sense of community is what really got me. Everyone was so warm and welcome. I cannot emphasize it enough. It was like the feeling of home.

Luna also described how organized orientation was, which allowed her to not feel stressed during the orientation process. She said, “The orientation was not stressful for me because everything was laid out. Everything was planned out. I thoroughly enjoyed it.” Luna had a unique experience during her process of enrolling at the institution, and her orientation experience served as a powerful turning point in her life. She expressed immense happiness when she spoke about her experience at orientation. Orientation provided a solid foundation of knowledge for many FGCS who attended, but it provided even more for Luna. Orientation

provided a solid foundation for Luna's entire future where she would have her basic needs met through on-campus housing and would no longer have to live in her car.

Paige described feeling scared of orientation, and she described feeling anxious about the process. She said:

Orientation scared me. I was so terrified. I am first generation, so it was hard because my parents could not give me any advice. They did the orientation for parents and everything, but they were new to all of it too.

Paige said she met someone in her orientation group who was also a FGCS. Paige said she and this other student were able to talk about some of their experiences as FGCS, and this overall made Paige feel better about attending orientation. Paige's social capital was expanded by meeting other students at orientation. Meeting another FGCS at orientation was powerful because it allowed Paige to feel less alone, isolated, or different because of her FGCS status. By attending the guest portion of orientation, Paige's parents expanded their social capital, expanded their knowledge of the institution, and gained skills to better assist Paige through the remainder of her orientation program. Nathan shared that his mom did not attend orientation with him because she felt he should attend orientation alone since he was going to attend college alone. However, the information gathered from this study infers that FGCS had positive outcomes from their parent(s) attending the guest portion of orientation.

Xavier was an incoming student during the height of COVID, so he had to complete his orientation online. He did not have as joyful of feelings about his orientation experience being online. He said, "I did it to get through." He said he was not worried about making lasting friendships through the online orientation. Xavier was among the participants who viewed orientation merely as a mandatory step that he had to complete. He only completed orientation

because it was required. It was more difficult to make lasting friendships during an online version of orientation, so Xavier was not able to expand his social capital.

Similarly, Kelsey also had to complete her orientation requirements online due to COVID. In person orientation is typically two days at the institution, and Kelsey described that the online orientation was still two days long. Kelsey did not feel that orientation needed to last two days in an online setting. In general, Kelsey did not enjoy her online orientation experience. She stated, “It was COVID. It was COVID. It was COVID. Orientation was over Zoom. I literally watched a recording of fireworks being shot off at the football stadium because we could not be in person.” Kelsey’s tone of voice changed when she described this experience. Her emotions were flat, and she did not express joy like the participants who were able to attend orientation in person. Departments, including the orientation office, did their best to transition normal operations to online operations during COVID. However, Kelsey’s experience demonstrates that an in-person experience cannot be seamlessly transferred to an online experience. Specifically, the orientation that typically lasts two days in person probably should have been cut down to one day online. I would advise an in-person orientation experience for a FGCS if it is at all possible.

George, Rosa, and Carrie attended orientation the summer after Xavier and Kelsey. George said, “We were just starting to come out of COVID. We had the option to do orientation online or in person. I did not think I was able to afford a trip to campus for a weekend at that time, so I did my orientation online.” Throughout his interview for this study, George discussed that he has financial need, and he discussed how he was awarded multiple scholarships for his cost of attendance. However, students are not able to use their financial aid, including scholarships, for the cost of attending orientation. Orientation at the institution at which this

study took place costs \$150 per student and \$75 per guest. Lodging is provided for the students, but lodging is not provided for guests. If students and their guests attend in person, then they are financially responsible for their transportation, meals outside of the orientation days, and lodging for the guest. As George alluded, this is not financially feasible for some FGCS who have financial need. It is unfortunate if a FGCS cannot attend the in-person orientation experience, because as expressed by the participants of this study, the in-person orientation experience has a powerful impact on FGCS.

George stated that he did not enjoy his online orientation experience, but he believes if it had been in person then he would have enjoyed orientation more. He said:

My online orientation was terrible. We sat for three hours at a time, took a lunch break, and then sat for another three hours. We did a virtual tour, and we did a lot of talking about information on Zoom.

Similarly to Kelsey, George had a flat tone of voice when describing his online orientation experience. It was obvious that he did not enjoy his online orientation experience, which was vastly different than the joyful memories that were shared by the participants who had an opportunity to attend orientation in person. If it is financially feasible, then I would advise an in-person orientation experience for a FGCS.

Similar to George, Rosa also attended orientation during the summer of 2021 when students could decide if they wanted to complete orientation in person or online. Rosa chose to complete her orientation online. She said that orientation was very informative, but she thinks her environment at home impacted her ability to learn the information. Rosa stated, "I would have loved to have gotten to go to orientation in person." Rosa has multiple siblings, and she was a primary caretaker for her little brother during the height of COVID. Attending orientation

online meant that Rosa remained in her parent's house with multiple family members for the duration of the orientation. Rosa gained knowledge from orientation, but she did not have the experience of many other participants who met new friends and familiarized themselves with the layout of campus.

Carrie also attended orientation during the summer of 2021, but she chose to attend orientation in person. Orientation at this institution is typically two days and includes staying overnight in a residence hall on campus. However, due to COVID, the orientation was only one day. Carrie stated, "The orientation I had was only a one-day thing because it was a COVID year, and I personally really enjoyed that. I would have hated staying overnight." Carrie felt that she was still able to get all her questions answered during the one-day orientation verses the typical two-day orientation. One-day orientation programs are offered to transfer students at the institution, but typically first year students are only offered the two-day orientation experience. As expressed by Carrie, she enjoyed the fact that she did not have to stay overnight in a residence hall. However, many other FGCS in this study expressed how much they enjoyed the full two-day orientation experience, including staying overnight in a residence hall. The findings of this study suggest that most FGCS tend to enjoy the full two-day orientation program.

Chris chose to attend orientation online instead of in person. Chris's orientation did not fall during the height of COVID, but he made the choice to attend orientation online because he was an out-of-state student and could not afford to fly and rent a car to travel to campus for orientation. He felt that attending orientation online prevented him from making friends prior to moving to campus. He said:

You are not really going to meet anyone on the Zoom orientation. If someone is able to go in person, then they can meet a lot of people upfront. That is a great way to meet

friends right away. I was kind of just by myself when I first came down here because I did not know anyone.

Chris said he thought the orientation was still helpful. He said, “I thought It was pretty good for being online.” Chris stated if he could have afforded to attend the orientation on campus then he would have attended in person, but he said it was not feasible for him and his parents to fly and rent a car to travel for orientation. Chris still remembered his orientation leader by name, and he said his orientation leader has always been someone he can contact when he has questions. The online orientation provided valuable knowledge for Chris. He was among the participants who felt frustrated with the organization of communication from the institution as a whole during the process of enrolling at the institution. However, the organization of resources from the orientation staff provided a solid foundation as he completed the other processes of enrolling at the institution. He was not able to form friendships during his online orientation, and that impacted his transition to campus when the academic year began in August. However, Chris did gain a valuable social connection with his orientation leader.

Billy, Abi, and Liz were all transfer students to the institution, and they had a different perspective on their orientation experience. Their transfer student orientation was a one-day orientation. Billy remembered that orientation was an early event and a long event. He said he felt he learned the rules and expectations for being a student, and he formed a relationship with his orientation leader. He said he kept in contact with his orientation leader long term. Abi felt that the information provided at orientation was more focused on fun things to do on campus. One example she specifically remembered was a focus on how to obtain student tickets for football games. She said she wanted her orientation experience to be more focused on academic information such as tutors, supplemental instruction, and academic advising. Abi said:

Orientation was okay. It was more based off what you can do. They tell you about the football games you can go to and how to get free packages for those, but I am not the type of person that I am worried about that. I am worried about tutoring and SI sessions and academic advising and things like that.

Abi's perspective was a valuable perspective that campus departments should be aware of when working with FGCS. Some FGCS want to know about non-academic aspects of college, but other FGCS, such as Abi, are extremely focused on their academic success. Departments need to be mindful that FGCS have a lot of pressure put on them to be successful, so FGCS may not be as interested in non-academic information when they are first entering the institution.

Liz said she understands that orientation is beneficial for students who are coming straight out of high school, but she said she would have preferred to not have had to attend orientation. With regards to her orientation, she remembers there being a large emphasis on the college experience. She said:

So many people are worried about the college experience. I feel like a lot of first generation students, if their parents have not made it well off, then they care less about the college experience and more about surviving the college experience.

Liz's perspective was a powerful perspective on all aspects of being a FGCS. She highlighted the pressure that was placed upon her as a FGCS when she expressed that her priority was to survive the college experience. This was a perspective that made me pause as a researcher. This impacted my perspective of the stories and memories that were shared by participants in this study who may have also been in survival-mode. Liz's perspective made me rethink how the participants navigated the process of enrolling at the institution.

Liz said she felt that some information at orientation was helpful, but she said during the majority of orientation she wished she could have been at work. She said, “Some of it was pretty helpful, but for the majority of it I was thinking I could be at work right now making money. I thought some of it was really silly.” Liz shared multiple times throughout her interview how she wished she could have been at work instead of at the various mandatory enrollment requirements, including orientation. Work played a big role in Liz’s life because she did not have a relationship with her parents and therefore was completely financially independent. Her job was her priority, and therefore she viewed orientation as a mandatory step that she had to complete rather than a joyful experience like other participants.

Housing

Participants described their experiences with needing to secure housing at college, including on-campus housing or off-campus housing. On-campus housing is offered to all students, but some participants chose to explore off-campus housing. For the participants who explored on-campus housing, different participants felt various portions of the on-campus housing process were more or less difficult. Participants described that the on-campus housing process involved completing the housing application, paying the housing deposit, finding a roommate, and selecting a residence hall and room.

Nathan lived on campus during his first year in college. Nathan remembered feeling stressed about completing the requirements for on-campus housing by the assigned deadlines. He recalled that he was focused on timelines related to his housing application, paying his housing deposit, and selecting a room. He recalled that he was able to achieve the deadline for the housing deposit. He said he achieved the deadline, but he had to plan ahead and dedicate a whole paycheck from his job to cover the cost of the housing deposit. Nathan selected to live in a

Resident Learning Community (RLC) his first year of college, which was a designated community for students of the same academic major. As an incoming student, Nathan prioritized dedicating his paychecks from his daycare job to the housing deposit because he knew this deposit was mandatory if he wanted to secure his on-campus room assignment. However, dedicating his paychecks to the deposits prevented Nathan from saving as much money during the months leading up to arriving on campus. This financially impacted Nathan differently than other students who were able to save money because their parents provided the funds for their deposits.

Luna and Paige both lived on campus, and they both described that the toughest factor of the on-campus housing requirements was securing a room. They both described that they applied for on-campus housing, but their application did not guarantee them a spot in on-campus housing due to the campus having a limited number of rooms. Luna had a best friend who was also enrolling at the same institution, and she wanted to live with that friend. However, Luna ended up having to prioritize securing a room at all versus rooming with her friend. Luna said:

By the time I was able to pick a room, there was slim to nothing left. That stressed me out. I held out on housing for a while, and I kept checking every day because I really wanted on-campus housing. I eventually saw a room pop up, and I was able to get it. At that point I did not care who my roommate was. I would take anyone at that point.

It was critical for Luna to prioritize securing an on-campus room assignment. Luna was living in her car during her process of enrolling in college. It was critical for Luna to secure housing so that her basic needs could be met while she was attending college. After this basic need was met, then Luna was able to focus on the other requirements during the process of enrolling at the institution.

Paige said she knew she wanted to live in on-campus housing, and she specifically wanted to live in an all-women's residence hall. Paige described that it was difficult to secure any type of room in on-campus housing, and the all-women's residence halls were even more limited. Paige called the housing office, and they provided tips to her of how she may have the best chance of securing a room in an all-women's residence hall. Paige said, "I called housing multiple times trying to figure out when was a good time to check my online housing account. I had one person tell me if I checked on a Monday morning or midday Monday, then that is when they would be checking off cancelations." Paige discovered that this timeframe is when a room was most likely to become available. She said, "It was stressful. I was in my anatomy class, and I was sitting there refreshing the housing page during the lecture. I was just continuously refreshing." Paige ultimately secured housing in an all-women's residence hall, but the tradeoff meant that she would not know her roommate. She said having a roommate assigned to her initially scared her, but ultimately she and her roommate became friends. Paige is an example of a FGCS who was persistent in achieving her goal, which was to live in an all-women's residence hall. However, it is possible that other FGCS would not be as persistent or simply would not know who call with their questions. The housing department was helpful once Paige reached out to them to ask them for additional information and assistance. However, it would be beneficial if the institution could provide the housing department with a list of FGCS. This would provide the housing department with an opportunity to intentionally reach out to FGCS to ask if they have questions or need additional assistance with the on-campus housing process.

Tara and Chris both described that they applied for on-campus housing later, which resulted in them being assigned to a room rather than having the opportunity to select a residence hall and room. Both Tara and Chris were thankful that they were able to secure on-campus

housing, so they took the rooms that were offered to them. Tara was late to applying for housing because she was not sure how to access her school email, and this email is where the housing application information was emailed. Once she was able to access the email, then she was able to complete the housing application. For Tara, the residence hall that was assigned to her was her first preference on residence halls, so she was very happy with her housing assignment. Similarly to Paige, Tara would have benefitted from an employee in the housing department reaching out to her to see if she had questions or needed additional assistance. This could have provided relief when Tara was worried about finding on-campus housing since she applied for on-campus housing later than other incoming students. Chris said he was late to applying for housing because he did not know until a couple of months prior to school starting that he would be attending the institution. He said the residence hall he was assigned to was not within his top preferences, but he said he adjusted to living in the building and was ultimately satisfied with his on-campus housing experience. Chris was not able to live in his top choice for on-campus housing, but he was still able to live in on-campus housing in general. Obtaining on-campus housing secured one of his basic needs, which allowed him to focus on the other aspects of the process of enrolling at the institution.

Carrie and Sarah felt that the most challenging part of the on-campus housing process was finding a roommate. Carrie felt it was both difficult and scary to find a roommate. Sarah said finding a roommate was the most stressful part of the housing process. She said she knew she had a deadline to find a roommate if she wanted to have her roommate finalized when she chose her residence hall and room. She described the process of messaging multiple other incoming students to determine if they might be a good match as a roommate. Finding a roommate can be challenging for FGCS. Other non-FGCS may have friends, siblings, or cousins who attend the

same institution that they can live with during their first year at the institution. Colleges utilize websites where students can create a profile, meet other incoming students, and decide if they want to consider living together. Students also have an opportunity to live with a roommate who is assigned to them by the housing department. Regardless of if a FGCS chooses their roommate or accepts an assigned roommate, FGCS could benefit from additional information being provided to them during their decision making about a roommate. If the institution provided the housing department with a list of FGCS, then they could have intentional conversations with FGCS about how navigate the roommate portion of the housing process.

Rosa felt confused during the process of securing on-campus housing, and she described that she needed help during the process. She said she applied to on-campus housing later than other students because she was initially not able to figure out the process. She said she did not know what to do, and her parents did not know what to do. She said her parents encouraged her to talk with her high school guidance counselors, but she felt too shy to ask for their help. Rosa's circumstance is another great example of a FGCS that the housing department could have intentionally reached out to and offered their guidance. Rosa did not understand the housing process, and she did not even know who to contact with questions. If the housing department had a list of FGCS, then they could intentionally reach out to those FGCS to offer guidance and let the FGCS know how to contact their department with questions pertaining to on-campus housing.

In addition to feeling confused about the process, Rosa described feeling frustrated that students have to pay a housing deposit in order to secure on-campus housing. She said:

It was pretty expensive to even get a chance to have a spot open up for you. I was really frustrated with it. I get that I was going to a really nice school, but I kept feeling like they

were asking for more money. I did not really have that money to shell out. It was not covered within my tuition either. It was just something that they were expecting me to have on the spot.

Many participants discussed having a job during their process of enrolling in college. However, Rosa was the only participant who discussed having an unpaid personal responsibility that took as much time and energy as a paid job. Due to her lack of income, Rosa did not have the opportunity to save her own money to pay for requirements such as the housing deposit. This resulted in her having to ask her parents for the money each time a different deposit was due to the institution. This caused tension between Rosa and her parents because they felt like she was constantly asking for money for a different deposit. However, Rosa had no choice but to ask her parents for the money for the deposits because she did not have an income and she could not use her scholarship funds for the deposits. Just like all incoming students, she had to pay for her housing application when she applied for on-campus housing, she had to pay her new student enrollment deposit prior to being able to select her on-campus room assignment, and then she had to pay her housing deposit in order to secure her on-campus room assignment. Aside from these concerns, Rosa felt that the process was straightforward after she completed the housing application and the housing deposit. She was satisfied with the process of choosing a room, and she felt that portion of the process was nicely structured.

Ashley, Liz, and George chose to live in off-campus housing. Ashley stated, "I knew I wanted to be off campus. I just personally have always wanted to have a separate life from school." Ashley was a more traditional FGCS, but non-traditional FGCS may share this same sentiment if they work full-time, have a family, are active duty with the military, or have other personal factors contributing to their decision to live off campus. Ashley felt that the university

and the local community did an adequate job of advertising off-campus apartments, so she was able to find an off-campus apartment easily. The on-campus housing department provides information about off-campus housing options for students that wish to live off campus but within proximity to the campus. Ashley explained that she built a savings account with money she earned from her job in high school, and that is how she was able to pay for her housing. She said, “I had a good bit of money saved up from working in high school, but if I did not have that, then I would have had no way to provide money for that.” Many FGCS, such as Ashley, do not have parents that can pay for their college housing out-of-pocket. It can be difficult for students to earn enough money for their monthly housing costs if they cannot work full-time due to being a full-time student. That being said, if FGCS do not have money saved like Ashley or do not have enough monthly income to cover the cost of housing, then their option would be to use a portion of their loans or scholarships to pay for their housing. George is an example of a FGCS who discussed using his refund from his scholarships to cover the cost of his off-campus housing.

Liz explained that she lived with someone from her Air Force unit and his family until she was able to secure her own off-campus housing. Liz utilized Facebook Market to secure her own off-campus housing, and she ended up living in an apartment with another college student. George explained that securing housing was one of his biggest challenges during the process of enrolling in college. He said he missed the deadline for the on-campus housing application, so he did not have the option to live in on-campus housing. George had some friends who were already planning to live in off-campus housing, so they guided him towards their same apartment complex. He explained that the leasing agent was helpful and made the process run smoothly. However, George found out a week after he secured his off-campus housing that his friends no

longer could live at the apartment complex, and they all ended up living in separate places. Ultimately, George was assigned roommates in the off-campus apartment. He said looking back, he wishes he would have known more information about on-campus housing deadlines so that he could have had the opportunity to live in on-campus housing during his first year of college. Liz and George both had social connections at their institution, which is what aided them in finding off-campus housing. Locating and securing affordable housing can be more difficult for other FGCS who do not have social connections established before their first year at the institution. The housing department at the institution at which this study took place already aids students with finding off-campus housing that is within proximity to the campus. When assisting FGCS who are looking for off-campus housing options, the housing department should be mindful of their need for affordable housing options.

Medical Requirements

Some participants did not recall having any challenges related to the medical requirements during the process of enrolling in college. On the contrary, some participants felt strongly about the challenges they experienced related to the medical requirements. Most challenges related to medical requirements seemed to vary on a person-by-person basis, but multiple participants discussed that their institution required each incoming student to complete a tuberculosis (TB) test.

Rosa, Paige, Chris, Nathan, and Lafoy all stated that they did not struggle with completing the medical requirements. They recalled that they had to get a TB test and report the results to the institution. They did not recall any challenges related to obtaining their medical records or information about their past vaccinations. Nathan recalled that his job in high school required him to complete a TB test every year, so he was familiar with the expectations for the

TB test. Lafoy described that he felt that being an in-state student aided in his completion of the medical requirements. He was also able to easily go to the medical center on campus to complete his required TB test. I made the observation that all except one of these participants mentioned at some point during their interviews that they were raised in the state in which the institution was located. Their status as an in-state student seemed to aid in their ability to access their medical records as opposed to the out-of-state participants and the participants who discussed living in multiple states growing up. Medical centers on college campuses should be aware that out-of-state FGCS may have a more difficult time obtaining their medical records compared to in-state FGCS.

On the contrary, George, Billy, Kelsey, and Kimberly described that they struggled with locating their medical records. George explained that he changed primary physicians, so he had to contact multiple medical providers to locate his medical records. He said:

I was not sure of everything I had or did not have because getting ahold of my medical records was hard. We finally tracked them down. It took a couple of visits to get my records. It was pretty close to the deadline. I just remember it was really confusing.

Billy described having to go to different locations to obtain all of his medical records. He said, “Going to different places and trying to locate where my medical records were, that was a little bit of a pain. Getting it all together was the hardest part.” Obtaining the required medical records ended up being time consuming and taxing on both George and Billy. Institutions should be mindful of how time consuming and confusing this process can be for FGCS who may be navigating the process without guidance from their parents. It would be helpful if a university department, such as the university medical center, could create resources to assist FGCS with more seamlessly obtaining the required medical documents.

Kelsey explained that she was born in a different state than the state she grew up in and the state in which the institution was located. She said her mom had to assist her with locating her medical records from different states. Kimberly also described that her family moved a lot while she was growing up, so she never had a primary doctor. She described that her parents always took her to urgent care when she needed to see a doctor, which resulted in her medical records being in multiple places. Kimberly said:

I did not have a primary care doctor. I just always went to urgent care before coming to college. It was kind of hard to get the documents and the immunizations. I had to get about eight shots when most of my friends did not have that many. I had gotten a little behind.

Kimberly explained that it was challenging to track down her medical records. She said her parents were not able to help her, and someone at the institution had to help her navigate the process of finding the medical records. Through the process of finding her medical records, she also learned that she would need to get multiple vaccinations prior to college. Most in-state participants described being able to easily obtain their required medical documents, especially when compared to out-of-state participants or participants who lived in multiple states throughout their lives. Kelsey and Kimberly discussed that living in multiple states throughout their lives caused difficulties when obtaining their required medical documents. As discussed, it would be helpful if a university department, such as the university medical center, could create resources to assist FGCS with more seamlessly obtaining the required medical documents. When creating these types of resources, an institution should consider these unique challenges for out-of-state FGCS.

Ashley described that she had difficulty with the online program in which she had to submit her medical information. She said she did not know that the online program did not accept the documents she submitted, which resulted in her having a hold on her student account. She said she ultimately had to email her medical documents to the institution, which satisfied the requirements. Academic holds can prevent students from adding or dropping classes from their class schedules, obtaining transcripts, and graduating from the institution. As an incoming student, Ashley's academic hold would have impacted her the most by not allowing her to add or drop classes from her class schedule if needed. Students are often not aware that they have a hold on their account until they attempt to register for classes. In Ashley's situation, she was able to easily remedy the issue by emailing her medical documents to the institution. However, getting a hold removed from an account is not always that simple and can greatly impact a FGCS and their ability to progress as needed at an institution.

Luna described that it was difficult for her to obtain her medical records because she did not have contact with her family. Her dad passed away when she was a child, and she had not talked to her mom since she was about eight years old. Luna was also not in contact with her extended family members. However, she ultimately had to contact her grandma to ask for help accessing her medical records, and her grandma provided her with assistance. She said her grandma knew who to call and how to explain Luna's situation. She said her grandma obtained the information for her and sent her the necessary information. Luna's situation is an example that sometimes the requirements of enrolling in college force FGCS to communicate with family members, even if the FGCS wants to complete the process completely independently. In Luna's case, she completed her enrollment requirements independently as much as possible, but the

requirement of her medical documents brought her to a point where she had to ask for help from her grandma even though they were not in communication.

Carrie, Erica, and Tara all stated that they were the most challenged with the timing requirements for the TB test. Carrie stated, "It was confusing to me. The TB test had to be done so far in advance but also not too far in advance." Erica recalled that she completed the TB test and submitted the results of the TB test, but she still ended up with a hold on her student account. She said she learned that she had completed the TB test too early, and she had to complete the TB test again. Tara said she waited to have her TB test until after she had moved into her apartment at college. She explained that she waited until after she moved in so that she could meet the requirements for the timing of the TB test. All three of these participants discussed that they felt most stressed about the timeline of the TB test. I acknowledge that there may be scientific reasoning for the strict timeline requirements for the TB test. However, college campuses that have medical requirements such as the TB test should consider if the timing requirements need to be as strict as described by these students. If institutions can adjust or extend the timeline for medical requirements such as the TB test, then that can alleviate some of the pressure from FGCS as they navigate the multiple medical requirements that are part of the process of enrolling at the institution.

Nathan, Abi, and Liz discussed their health insurance as a factor with the medical requirements. Nathan mentioned that he was offered a federal subsidized loan after completing the FAFSA, and the only reason he took out that loan was so that he could afford student health insurance. Student health insurance is offered to all students at the institution at which the study took place, but undergraduate students are not required to purchase the student health insurance if they can prove that they have their own health insurance or that they are a dependent on

someone else's health insurance. Nathan did not expand upon his reasonings for purchasing the student health insurance, but it can be inferred that he needed the insurance because he was not going to be on a different health insurance plan when he arrived at college. Health insurance seems to be a priority to Nathan since he went to the length of taking out a federal subsidized loan to afford the student health insurance.

Liz's biggest challenge was that she has Tricare health insurance through the military, and the university medical center did not accept this health insurance. She explained that she had to go to an off-campus urgent care health facility to complete her TB test. She described that she was frustrated that this requirement took her away from her job. She said, "I got the TB test. It was fine. It just took away from time that I could have been at work." Liz shared multiple times throughout her interview how she wished she could have been at work instead of at the various mandatory enrollment requirements, including her TB test. Work played a big role in Liz's life because she did not have a relationship with her parents and therefore was completely financially independent. Her job was her priority, and therefore she viewed the TB test as a one more mandatory enrollment requirement that took time away from working at her job.

Abi discussed that she had to obtain two vaccinations that were not covered by her health insurance. These were vaccinations that she had received in the past, but she needed to get updated doses of the vaccinations. She said:

I'm an older college student, so two of my vaccinations were not within the five or 10 years. I had to get two vaccinations that weren't covered by insurance, so it cost me \$600 to get those vaccinations just to be able to attend college.

Abi stated that she understands the importance of the required vaccinations, but she wishes the institution could have assisted her and other college students who may be in similar situations.

She advised that she thinks it would be helpful if institutions could offer the vaccinations to students for a more affordable cost if their health insurance does not cover the cost of the vaccination. Abi's experience with the required vaccinations caused me to pause and reflect. The institution required her to obtain updated doses of two vaccines, but those vaccines were not covered by her health insurance. Even if Abi had the student health insurance like Nathan, these vaccinations would not have been covered by the student health insurance because students have to obtain these vaccinations prior to officially being a student at the institution. Students cannot use their student health insurance ahead of attending the institution, similarly to how students cannot use their scholarship funds for enrollment requirements such as deposits, the cost of orientation, and the cost of vaccinations. If students were able to use scholarship funds ahead of attending the institution, then Abi could have used those funds for these required vaccinations. Institutions should consider the financial burden that enrollment requirements, such as these vaccinations, can place on FGCS who have financial need. Institutions should consider how they can specifically help FGCS who may be in financial need but also have costly vaccination requirements during the process of enrolling at the institution.

Common Personal Experiences

There were various common experiences that participants discussed. Many of these experiences were non-academic related, but they influenced how participants experienced the process of enrolling in college. Some of these experiences included the fact that the participant had attempted college multiple times prior to their current institution, information about their parents and their upbringing, and details about the importance of having a job. These personal experiences provided context to how the participants experienced the process of enrolling in college. These personal experiences are discussed in the following section.

Attempting College at Multiple Institutions

Four participants discussed that they had attended college at other institutions prior to attending their current institution. This does not include participants who discussed participating in dual enrollment during their senior year of high school. All four of these participants could be considered non-traditional students. Most of these participants discussed that they struggled to understand and complete the process of enrolling in college, but then someone in their life, aside from a parent, stepped in to assist them with navigating the process of enrolling at a four-year institution. The findings of this study have demonstrated the importance of support individuals, aside from parents, in the lives of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. The information provided by these four participants further supports this finding. The help that these FGCS received from support people other than their parents served as a turning point that allowed these FGCS to successfully enroll at the institution at which this study took place.

Lafoy described that his current four-year institution was the sixth institution that he attended or attempted to attend in three different states. Lafoy graduated high school in 2011, and he first enrolled at an out-of-state community college in 2011. He had extended family that lived in the state in which he attended a community college, so they provided him with a place to live and necessary school supplies such as a laptop. However, Lafoy quickly had to leave that community college. He said:

I got admitted, I moved to the different state, and I went through the process of picking out a schedule. Unfortunately, in the middle of class on my third day, someone had to come get me out of class and explained that my financial aid was not going to pay the full cost of attendance. I had to come up with the money out-of-pocket to continue to go to those classes. That was discouraging.

Lafoy stated that no one from the community college explained financial options to him, such as loans and scholarships, so he felt he could not afford the cost of attendance. He ultimately left the community college and decided to no longer attend. Lafoy needed a financial aid employee to provide him with assistance during this difficult moment. He simply needed a financial aid employee who would dedicate time to helping him understand his financial options. Lafoy was 18 years old when this happened, and leaving the institution due his lack of understanding his financial options delayed his ability to earn a college degree. Lafoy ultimately moved back home, started working full-time, and he later enrolled at an in-state community college in 2013. He said it became too much to work full-time, take classes part-time, and assist with taking care of his single dad's health concerns at home. He ultimately left this community college. In this circumstance, Lafoy needed guidance from support services at the community college in which he was attending. His single dad supported him as much as he could, but he did not have a full understanding of the responsibilities that Lafoy was trying to balance. In 2018, Lafoy moved back to the state where his extended family lived. He began working in fine dining, and he had a goal of attending culinary school. He visited the culinary school and began the process of enrolling at the institution, but he ultimately did not attend the culinary school because the process of enrolling was difficult. In this circumstance, Lafoy needed the assistance of an admissions counselor. He aspired to attend culinary school, but he was overwhelmed with the requirements of applying and enrolling in the culinary school. Lafoy did not know who could answer his questions, so his questions remained unanswered. He ultimately did not enroll at the culinary school. He moved back to his home state in 2019 because he met the woman who is now his wife. His wife ultimately became the person to help him navigate the process of getting fully enrolled at an institution. He enrolled at a community college in 2020 while also working

full-time. He completed four classes at this institution over the course of the 2020-2021 academic year. He transferred to a different community college in 2021 because they offered more financial assistance, and he successfully graduated with his associate degree in 2023. He then transferred to the four-year institution at which this study took place in 2023 to continue earning his bachelor's degree. Lafoy's wife assisted him with enrolling at a community college, transferring to a different community college that offered more financial assistance, and then ultimately transferring to the four-year institution at which this study took place. His wife was able to utilize her experience and knowledge of earning her own college degree to help Lafoy during his process of enrolling at these institutions. Lafoy attempted to navigate college on his own, but his turning point was when he met his wife. She served as his primary support person.

Abi explained that her current institution was the fourth institution that she attended. She first earned an associate degree from a community college in 2018. Abi had a good experience as a FGCS at this community college, and she did not discuss any concerns with the process of enrolling at this institution. She then transferred to a smaller state institution in 2019 to pursue her bachelor's degree, but she only attended this institution for one semester. Abi described that she had a positive experience as a FGCS at the community college that she attended, but she had a negative experience at the smaller state institution that she attended. She felt that the departments and the employees at the smaller state institution played a part in her not being as successful during her time at the institution. She felt that the support services at her community college were much more supportive than the support services at the smaller state institution. She was academically successful at her community college, but she struggled academically at the smaller state institution. She stated, "I went from having a 3.5 GPA to barely passing. I think I passed with 2 Cs that semester. I knew something was not right." Abi was supported at the

community college that she attended, but she did not feel supported at the smaller state institution that she attended. Community colleges are meant to provide access to higher education for members of a community, and community college are typically more affordable than four-year institutions. Therefore, community college can be a good fit for FGCS. Abi decided to leave the smaller state university, and said she decided to move forward with what she called her backup plan of becoming a Licensed Veterinary Technician. She enrolled at a second community college, earned a second associate degree in 2021, and she began working full-time as a Licensed Veterinary Technician. She later enrolled at her current four-year institution in 2023 with a goal to become a veterinarian. She credited her fiancé and her fiancé's dad for motivating and guiding her towards earning a bachelor's degree and one day becoming a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. Abi's fiancé's dad has a bachelor's degree, so he was able to help her understand more of the process of enrolling at a four-year institution. Similarly to Lafoy, Abi was okay with settling with her backup plan of working full-time because she was overwhelmed at the thought of attempting to enroll at another four-year institution. However, her fiancé's dad served as the support person for Abi, and this was a turning point in her journey towards earning a bachelor's degree.

Billy explained that he first began college in 2020 at a community college, but he left the community college in 2021. He said, "I took the break, and I was pursuing different avenues. That did not work out." He later applied and ultimately started attending his current institution in 2022. He said one of his biggest challenges with attending college was securing the finances for college. Ultimately, his grandpa motivated him to attend college again, and his grandpa agreed to pay for his cost of attendance. He explained that his grandpa was a big supporter of the institution he now attends. Billy's grandpa unfortunately passed away, which meant he no longer

had his primary support person who provided both guidance and financial assistance. Billy demonstrated resilience during this time, and he turned to his mom to provide assistance in place of his grandpa.

Liz explained that she graduated high school in 2019. She applied to college in 2019, but she decided to enlist in the Air Force instead of attending college. She first enrolled in college in 2021 at a smaller state institution. She later transferred to her current institution in 2022. Liz explained that she is a little bit older than other college students, and she still has a few years left to complete her academic requirements because she is active duty in the military while also being a student. Liz explained that joining the military helped her have separation from her mom because it allowed her to no longer need her mom's information on items like the FAFSA paperwork. Liz's experience was different than these other three participants who attempted college at multiple institutions. Liz experienced support from her coworkers at her job and her fellow military service members, but she did not have a single individual who was her primary support person. Liz was completely independent at the two institutions that she attended.

Upbringing

Participants were not directly asked about various aspects of their upbringing, but some participants shared aspects that impacted the way they perceived college and navigated the process of enrolling in college. Some participants explained having limited or no contact with their parents or family, some participants discussed their siblings, some participants discussed their parents not having high school educations, and some participants discussed their parent's jobs. These various factors impacted participants when they were navigating the process of enrolling in college.

Lafoy shared that not only was he the first person in his immediate family to go to college, but he was the first person in his immediate family to graduate high school. He explained that his single father, older sister, and multiple extended family members did not graduate high school. He said, "I was the first one in my immediate family to graduate high school, and as far as my extended family, there are only a few others who have graduated high school." He went on to explain that the individuals in his extended family that graduated high school included an aunt and two older cousins. He has two younger cousins are still in junior high and high school. As a researcher, Lafoy's experience caused me to pause and reflect. He carried the weight of being a FGCS, but he also carried the weight of being the first person in his immediate family to graduate high school. This study demonstrated the experiences of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college, but Lafoy was the only participant who disclosed that he was also a first generation high school graduate. The findings of this study apply to Lafoy as a FGCS, but there is even more that can be discovered from FGCS who are also first generation high school graduates.

Luna explained that she was overwhelmed when navigating the process of enrolling in college because she was unhoused and living out of her car before coming to college. She explained that her dad died when she was a child, and she had not had contact with her mom since she was about eight years old. She explained that she was in the foster care system, and then her grandma was her caretaker after she was no longer in foster care. She said she was not in contact with her any of her extended family during the process of enrolling in college, but she had to get in contact with her grandma to ask some questions pertaining to her medical records. She also explained that she had to get in contact with a social worker from the foster care system for documentation for her FAFSA. She explained that she always thought she was in the foster

care system for one year. However, through working with the social worker, she learned that she had been in the foster care system for two years of her childhood. She said she always thought she was in the foster care system for one year of her childhood. She said this information was unsettling, and she had to process this information in the middle of completing the process of enrolling in college. Luna explained that completing the process of enrolling in college was difficult. She said, "It was definitely harder for me. I had to contact family members that I do not talk to anymore. I had to talk to my grandma. I had to contact my social worker that dealt with my case as a child." Luna experienced a shift in her identity development while she was enrolling in college. She had to reconnect with a family member in which she did not have communication, she had to contact her social worker from her childhood, and she had to process the newfound information that she was in the foster care longer than she previously understood that she was in foster care. This study did not explore identity development among FGCS, but this is a topic that could be explored by future studies on FGCS. Luna was also the only participant to disclose that she was unhoused while engaging in the process of enrolling in college. The findings of this study apply to Luna as a FGCS, but there is even more that can be discovered from FGCS who are also unhoused during the process of enrolling at an institution.

Similarly, Liz discussed that she has not talked to her mom in five years, and she has limited contact with her dad. She explained that when she was newly graduated from high school, her mom kicked her out of the house. Liz began living with a boyfriend, and she walked to-and-from work while initially applying to college. She ultimately decided to join the Air Force instead of immediately going to college. Joining the Air Force allowed Liz to have some separation from her mom, specifically with regards to the FAFSA paperwork. Liz explained that in addition to their rocky relationship, Liz's parents and grandma were not able to assist her with

the process of enrolling in college due to not having any experience with college. Her mom finished school through eighth grade, and her dad graduated high school. Her mom and grandma were both bartenders, and her dad was a truck driver. She explained that she believes some of her struggles with her mom were a result of her mom's upbringing. She said, "I do not want to put the blame entirely on my mom, because I came from a better background than my mom. Her background was pretty rough." Liz said her biggest challenge is trying to not compare herself to other students. She said:

I compare myself to a lot of the other students that somehow have bookbags of money. Especially coming into my flight major. There are a lot of people whose dad is a pilot, their mom is a pilot, their mom does aviation management, or somehow somehow they have basically already made it into the field. In a way it secures their spot in the field. They come with the dialogue and the aviation terms – they already know them. When I was coming into the flight major, I did not have money, I did not have the terms, and I had no idea. I just knew I wanted to fly a plane.

Liz explained that she was proud of how she persisted and navigated the process of enrolling in college alone. She said, "It feels good to know nothing about something and then fully immerse yourself in it and figure it out on your own. I feel like it is kind of a prideful thing." As a researcher, I could feel the emotions coming through Liz's words as she recalled and shared this information. Her emotions came through her words, her breathing patterns, and her tone of voice. The majority of participants in this study described that their parents were not able to assist them with their process of enrolling in college, but they still had relationships with their parents. Liz's parents did not help her at all with the process of enrolling in college, but the reasoning was because Liz did not have a relationship with her parents. The findings of this study apply to Liz

as a FGCS, but there is even more that can be discovered from FGCS who do not have a relationship with their parent(s) compared to FGCS who have a relationship with their parent(s).

Sarah also found herself comparing herself to other students when completing the scholarship requirements. Her parents did not attend college at all, so they were therefore not alumni of the institution in which Sarah was going through the process of enrolling. Kiera explained that her college really prides themselves with their alumni, so she felt she was at a disadvantage when applying for scholarships. She explained:

It was hard that my parents are not alumni. I know that is a very big source of pride for my college is having the children of their alumni attend the same college. Not having that cushion when being looked at for scholarships is definitely something that I felt like was a barrier and a challenge.

Sarah said the fact that her parents were not alumni did not hold her back from applying for scholarships, but she still felt at a disadvantage compared to other students. As demonstrated by this study, Sarah experienced difficulties during the process of enrolling in college, including the process of applying for scholarships, because of being a FGCS. Sarah was able to complete scholarship requirements, but she felt that she was viewed differently on scholarship applications at her specific institution because her parents were not alumni of that specific institution. FGCS were not able to write in their scholarship essays that their parents were alumni and therefore they were a legacy to the institution. However, FGCS are able to write in their scholarship essays about their experiences as a FGCS and what that means to be the first person in their family to attend college. In order to highlight their experiences, FGCS first need to understand that they are a FGCS. George described that his high school educated him on what it meant to be a FGCS, and he explained how that made a difference for him as he was enrolling in college. All high

schools should have intentional conversations with their students who are planning to attend college and are FGCS. This conversation should help the FGCS understand what it means to be a FGCS, and this conversation should incorporate their intentions of providing extra support to FGCS during their process of enrolling in college.

Carrie explained that a big task for her when enrolling in college was to apply for and obtain scholarships. She said she was able to obtain scholarships, and she takes her scholarships very seriously. She was awarded scholarships, and she focuses very hard on maintaining the requirements for those scholarships. The main requirement to maintain her scholarships is her grades. She said she feels other students at the institution are not as worried about their scholarships because they may have financial means as a backup plan. She said:

It is really stressful. It is always in the back of my head about grades that if I do not get certain grades then all of my money for school could be gone. Especially at my college where a lot of students are not necessarily worried about their scholarships. They do not take that into consideration when they skip class or get a bad grade on an assignment.

Whereas people like me, it is my whole education.

Carrie also explained that she has family in Germany. Her mom has told her if she cannot secure funding for her college in the United States, then she would send Carrie to Germany for college. Carrie said she enjoys visiting Germany, but she did not wish to attend college in a different country. She said this has been a big motivator to her securing and maintaining her scholarships. As previously discussed, FGCS are under immense pressure during the process of enrolling in college. Throughout her enrollment process, Carrie worked incredibly hard to apply and earn scholarships. She had financial need, and she depended on scholarships to assist with her cost of attendance. Carrie felt an immense amount of pressure to earn scholarships. Once she

successfully earned scholarships, then the pressure shifted to her academic achievements so that she could maintain her scholarships. Carrie took all of this very seriously, and that was communicated in her interview through her words and tone of voice. The institution at which this study took place has a scholarship office that maintains all information related to scholarships at the institution. None of the participants discussed that they were provided specific support from this scholarship office due to being a FGCS. However, scholarship offices should consider providing specific support to FGCS. When supporting FGCS, scholarship offices should be mindful that FGCS may not have a full understanding of what it means to be a FGCS. Scholarship offices should also consider the financial needs of FGCS, and they should consider that a FGCS might not have a support person helping them with scholarship applications and essays.

Rosa discussed how her siblings impacted her during the process of enrolling in college. She discussed that the FAFSA paperwork asked how many individuals were living in the household, and at the time of completing the paperwork, it was just her, her parents, and her little brother. However, she said in the years leading up to completing the FAFSA paperwork, she had six siblings living in the household. She explained, “I came from a family that most of my life, I lived with six other siblings along with my parents. My parents had decent jobs, but we did not have money stored up.” Rosa’s experience provides context for FGCS when they express that they have financial need. There are various reasons why the family of a FGCS may not have money saved for college. In Rosa’s situation, her parents dedicated their income towards raising their children and were not able to set aside money for Rosa to attend college. Rosa expressed frustration that she was not able to provide this context to FAFSA when she expressed her financial need. Unlike the FAFSA, Rosa would have had the opportunity to explain this context

through scholarship essays. Additionally, Rosa explained that COVID was a major factor when she was completing the process of enrolling in college. She explained that her brother was four years old, she was in high school, and her parents had jobs in which they still had to physically go to their job sites during the height of COVID. This resulted in Rosa having to complete high school at home and take care of her four-year-old brother every day. She said, “My parents worked a lot, and COVID happened. I was stuck at home with my four-year-old brother. I had to feed him, make sure he was doing his school, feed myself, get all the clothes done, and do all the chores of the house. It was a bit of a balancing act.” This all occurred at the same time that Rosa was navigating the process of enrolling in college. Rosa’s caretaker responsibilities for her younger brother took the same time and energy as a paid job, but it did not provide any income. Rosa was expected to fill this caretaker role to help her family during the height of COVID. Unlike other participants, Rosa was not able to earn an income that she could contribute towards enrollment deposits, the cost of orientation, and other college related costs.

Chris explained that mom is a hairstylist, and his dad owns his own plastics manufacturing company. Chris explained that both of his parents are self-employed, which has resulted in occasional stressful situations for his family. Chris explained that this specifically impacted their status with health insurance and other benefits that are common for employees to receive from employers. Chris said these stressors were present when he was navigating the process of enrolling in college. He did not discuss factors like student health insurance, but this student health insurance was discussed by Nathan. Student health insurance is available for students like Nathan and Chris if they do not have another health insurance provider. If FGCS enroll in the student health insurance, then this is another responsibility that must complete during the process of enrolling at the institution. This is another example of an enrollment task

that should be discussed with FGCS. This type of task should also be added to an enrollment checklist if an institution provides a checklist to incoming students. The findings of this study suggest that an enrollment checklist would greatly benefit FGCS during the process of enrolling in college.

Having a Job

Participants were not asked if they had a job when engaging with the process of enrolling in college. However, 14 participants discussed how having a part-time job or full-time job impacted them during the process of enrolling in college. Participants shared how their jobs impacted their time management, assisted them with being able to afford the required deposits, and provided them with coworkers who turned into a support system. Some participants did not have a job during the process of enrolling in college, but they sought jobs at the institution at the same time that they were navigating the process of enrolling at the institution.

Nathan discussed his job at a daycare center. He said, "I was already working at a job that required me to have my medical record on file and a TB shot every year." He stated that his job required him to get a tuberculosis (TB) test annually, and his college also required that all students get a TB test. He was better prepared for the TB test requirements from the college because he had already been completing the TB test through his job. Nathan's job unintentionally provided support to him during the process of enrolling in college by requiring some of the same medical information as Nathan's college. He was more prepared for medical requirement at his college because he had previously fulfilled this same requirement for his job. Additionally, Nathan discussed dedicating entire paychecks towards the required enrollment deposit and on-campus housing deposit. Nathan stated, "When it came to the deposit, I think it was \$250. I dedicated a whole pay period to it." Dedicating his paychecks to the deposits

allowed Nathan to fulfill the deposit requirements, but it prevented Nathan from saving as much money prior to his arrival on campus. This financially impacted Nathan differently than other students who were able to save money because their parents provided the funds for their deposits.

Lafoy and Abi were the only participants that discussed being employed full-time at the time that they were completing the process of enrolling in college. Lafoy stated that he worked at the institution in which he was applying to be a student, and he expressed that his supervisors and coworkers were supportive of his desire to earn a bachelor's degree. He stated that his status as a full-time employee means that he only takes classes part-time. Lafoy described how his job provides financial benefits for the cost of attendance. He stated, "My tuition is actually being covered because I work at the university where I am getting my degree from. That is an employee benefit that they give us. They will pay for so much tuition each academic year."

Abi explained that she had already become a full-time Licensed Veterinarian Technician, but she decided she wanted to go to school to become a veterinarian. She described that she was employed full-time while she engaged in the process of enrolling in college, and then she quit her full-time job so that she could attend college full-time. This study did not specifically seek FGCS that were also full-time employees at the time that they completed process of enrolling in college. However, Lafoy and Abi shared insightful information about the nuances of being a full-time employee and also navigating the enrollment process. As a researcher, I observed differences between Lafoy who continued to work full-time after he enrolled in school part-time and Abi who left her full-time job to dedicate herself to school full-time. Their experiences cannot be blanketed for all FGCS, but their experiences are specifically applicable to other non-traditional FGCS.

Liz described how she wanted to always be at work, and it agitated her when she had to leave work to complete requirements for the process of enrolling in college. She understood the importance of completing the requirements, but she felt it was a nuisance to have to leave work for requirements such as orientation and completing medical requirements. Liz stated, “Pretty much everything that I had to leave work for was such a nuisance. I would think that I could be at work right now making money. I thought some of it was really silly.” She said she regrettably missed the scholarship deadline during the process of enrolling because she was so focused on her job, and she was constantly working. Liz explained that she does not have contact with her parents, so it was incredibly important for her to have a job so that she could support herself. She said she felt close with her coworkers like family. Liz had a different experience than other FGCS because she did not have a relationship with her parents. Therefore, she was completely financially independent and had to dedicate a significant amount of time towards her job. Liz was not able to enjoy the process of enrolling in college as much as other participants. For example, Liz viewed the orientation program as a silly requirement that took her away from her job, whereas other participants shared joyful memories of their orientation program. Liz was not able to fully enjoy these aspects of the process of enrolling in college because she was so focused on working as many hours as possible at her job. Her focus on her job caused her to miss the scholarship deadline, which was unfortunate for Liz since she expressed having financial need. There is no denying that Liz’s job was important, and she needed to spend time working at her job. However, Liz could have greatly benefited from someone at the institution, such as an admissions counselor, who could have implemented ongoing and intentional communication to ensure that she did not miss important deadlines such as the scholarship deadline.

Ashley stated that while she was in high school, she sought a job that would allow her to begin working in a veterinary setting because she wanted to major in pre-vet animal sciences.

She stated:

I went ahead and got a job that was in the path of my career. My major was animal sciences pre-vet. My bosses helped out a ton because they went through the exact same curriculum. They helped me with my college decisions, and they were a big help.

Ashley further explained that her supervisors at her job helped her make decisions like exactly what to major in and what college to attend. Additionally, Ashley stated that her job allowed her to save a lot of money, which she used to pay for her off-campus housing at college. She stated if she did not have the money saved up from her job, then she would not have been able to afford housing at college. Many FGCS, such as Ashley, do not have parents that can pay for their college housing out-of-pocket. It can be difficult for students to earn enough money for their monthly housing costs if they cannot work full-time due to being a full-time student. Ashley was able to save money prior to attending college, but for many FGCS with financial need, their option is to use a portion of their loans or scholarships to pay for their housing. Ashley's job provided her an opportunity to save money for the cost of her housing in college, but her job also provided her with individuals in her future career that could guide her during the process of enrolling. Ashley came up with the idea of a part-time job in her future career field on her own, but as a researcher, I have learned that this is an idea that could greatly benefit other FGCS. Obtaining a job in their future career field would allow a FGCS to meet individuals who could support them during their process of enrolling and can continue to support them once they are fully enrolled.

Xavier and Paige described that they did not have jobs in high school, but they were immediately seeking jobs at their institution. Xavier obtained a job in the engineering department, and Paige obtained a job at the graduate school. Both students described how they applied for these jobs during their process of enrolling in college. Paige's job was specifically a Federal Work Study Program that she was offered due to her financial need. The Federal Work Study Program allowed Paige to begin college with an on-campus job that provided her with consistent income for her needs while attending college. FGCS who have a plan for an on-campus job at the institution ahead of arriving on campus can feel a sense of security for their financial plans. An on-campus job can provide them with an income, but an on-campus job is typically more flexible and understanding of a college student's academic schedule. As a researcher, I would advise an on-campus job as opposed to an off-campus job for FGCS who are seeking a job at college.

Other participants described jobs they had in high school and how much those jobs assisted them financially during the process of enrolling in college. Chris worked at a local pizza shop, Kelsey worked at Pizza Hut, Billy worked at Mama Goldbergs and as a valet, and George worked as a lifeguard and Door Dash food delivery driver. Carrie and Kimberly did not share their exact job experiences, but they stressed the importance of having a job during this timeframe. Kimberly stated, "I was one of those people that as soon as I could drive, I was ready to work." Carrie stated that having a job during the process of enrolling in college impacted her ability to balance the responsibilities of the process. She said she had to find time to visit family and complete medical requirements. All participants of this study expressed their financial need and the importance of obtaining scholarships, loans, and grants to cover the cost of attendance. This finding that multiple participants also had part-time jobs or full-time jobs while completing

the process of enrolling in college aligns with these participants describing financial need. This finding demonstrated that FGCS had to balance a job at the same time as balancing the enrollment process and other responsibilities.

Support

Participants discussed various people who provided them with support throughout their process of enrolling in college, and participants also discussed people who could have provided them with more support during the process of enrolling in college. Participants discussed various people or groups of people including: parent(s), grandparent(s), spouses and partners, other family members, friends, coworkers, high school administrators, and academic advisors. Some participants discussed these individuals or groups of individuals being their biggest supporters. However, some participants discussed how these individuals or groups of individuals did not support them during their process of enrolling in college and how they needed more support from these individuals.

Parent Support

Almost all participants discussed their parents in some aspect when discussing the support they did or did not feel when enrolling in college. FGCS are defined as, “An undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree” (CFGSS, 2020, para. 5). Therefore, many participants thought of their parents when thinking of their status as a FGCS and their experiences during the process of enrolling in college. Some participants talked positively about the support they received from their parents, and some participants talked about wishing they had more support from their parents. Some participants who discussed lack of support from their parents shared that their parents chose not to provide them with support, while

other participants acknowledged that their parents could not support them or did not know how to fully support them.

Nathan and Xavier said their moms were their biggest supporters, and they both said their moms guided him through the entire process of enrolling in college. Nathan said both of his parents had some level of understanding of college and the required timelines because they both attended one semester of college. Nathan said, “My mom was very, very concerned with my success because the reason why she left college her freshman year was because she had me. She was very, very adamant on me going to college and not pausing college.” Nathan said his mom guided him, but she still let him figure out many experiences on his own. For example, Nathan’s mom did not attend the orientation program for parents. He said his mom told him he was now in college and did not need her to attend meetings for him anymore. He felt he was able to accomplish all orientation requirements on his own and without his mom in attendance. The findings of this study suggest how helpful it can be for parent(s) of FGCS to attend orientation programs with their children. On one hand, college students are adults who need to navigate systems on their own. However, on the other hand, FGCS specifically need support, and it is helpful if their parent(s) can support them in any way possible. One example of this type of support is attending orientation programs with FGCS. College students experience identity development in college, and they should have an opportunity to gain their independence while in college. However, the findings of this study suggest that FGCS still need support as they are transitioning from high school to college.

Xavier said his mom was a single mom, and he said she supported him financially by strategically setting aside extra money for expenses that she knew to expect to pay out-of-pocket

such as test fees, application fees, and enrollment deposits. Xavier's mom was his primary support person during the process of enrolling. Xavier said:

My mom really did a lot. She took me to all my ACT tests. She paid for all those tests. She paid for all the enrollment fees. She took me on my college visits. She did all the planning for my medical requirements.

Although Xavier's mom did not attend college herself, she was aware of the many requirements that Xavier needed to complete prior to applying to the institution and during the process of enrolling at the institution. She guided him through the requirements, which ultimately set him up for success in college. As previously discussed, college students experience identity development in college. However, Xavier's mom recognized that he needed her assistance during his transition from high school to college so that he could be successful once he was fully enrolled and attending the institution.

Chris said both of his parents were his biggest supporters. He said his parents were financially supportive of him attending college, and they were also emotionally supportive. He said his parents attended all college tours with him, and they were very open to wherever he wanted to attend college. He said the process of enrolling in college was emotional for both him and his parents. He said, "It is an emotional experience. It is a pretty big thing to go to college, especially when no one in your family has gone. I just want to fulfill my parent's wishes and my wishes of becoming a college graduate." Most participants who discussed support from their parents discussed support from the lens of emotional support, providing advice, and guiding them through the requirements of enrolling in college. Chris was among the few participants who discussed his parents supporting him financially. As an out-of-state student, Chris would have had more out-of-pocket costs prior to fully enrolling at the institution. For example, Chris would

have had to travel approximately 18 hours from his hometown to campus just to take a tour of the campus. He opted to complete his orientation program online so that he and his parents did not have the additional cost of traveling to campus for orientation. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that other FGCS benefit more from in-person orientation programs compared to online orientation programs. Overall, Chris was able to successfully complete the process of enrolling at the institution despite the financial burden of being from a town so far away from the institution. However, for other FGCS who have financial need, it may be the most affordable for FGCS to attend an in-state institution.

Similarly, Paige discussed how emotional and scary it was for both her and her parents to have her going to college. Paige said her parents were not able to give her advice during the process of enrolling in college, but they provided her with emotional support. She said her parents did everything they could by providing emotional support, attending the orientation program for parents, and providing financial support when possible. Paige told a story about how she learned during the process of enrolling in college that her dad wanted to attend the same exact college when he was her age, but he was not able to afford cost of attending any college. She said her dad told her that he was living through her experience that he was not able to have himself. Paige was emotional when speaking about the support she received from her parents, and she began to cry during her interview. FGCS like Paige may not be able to receive guidance from their parent(s) since their parent(s) are not familiar with higher education, but they certainly have an opportunity to receive emotional support from their parent(s). The emotional support provided to Paige helped her feel confident enough to independently handle the process of enrolling at her institution, and it also helped her feel more confident about reaching out to campus departments when she had questions.

Ashley and Rosa said their parents were encouraging, but they really struggled with not having parent(s) that they could ask for help or advice from when completing the process of enrolling in college. Both Ashley and Rosa described that they had to search for a lot of answers on their own. Rosa said her parents never knew the answers to her questions, but they would encourage her to ask her guidance counselor at her high school or her academic advisor at the institution in which she was enrolling. The encouragement from Ashley and Rosa's parents was another form of emotional support for these participants. The parent(s) of FGCS are likely to not know the answers to the questions that their FGCS have during the process of enrolling. However, it is beneficial to FGCS when their parent(s) can at least guide them towards the idea of asking their questions to high school administrators or campus departments.

Erica and Sarah said their parents caused them to feel stress during the process of enrolling in college. Erica said, "My parents were stressing me out. I had it under control, but when someone is telling you to something over and over, it just makes you more stressed about it." She said she knew she would get all requirements completed by the deadline or sooner, but her parents continued to pressure her. Erica said she wished that her parents would have let her complete more of the requirements on her own. Sarah said her parents pressured her to apply for scholarships, and her parents did not understand how difficult it can be to obtain scholarships. She said her parents knew that scholarship applications required essays, so they were encouraging of her ability to obtain scholarships based on her strong ability to write scholarship essays. She said they did not understand that there was more to obtaining scholarships than just being able to write strong essays. It seemed that Erica and Sarah's parents were attempting to provide emotional support and encouragement during their process of enrolling. However, their parent's persistent questions throughout the process caused these participants to feel stressed

instead of supported. High school administrators could help curve some of this stress for FGCS by providing some educational resources to parents about what to expect if their child is planning to go to college and will be a FGCS. For example, it would have helped Sarah if her high school administrators could have helped educate her parents about the competitive nature of scholarship applications.

Luna, Liz, Lafoy, and Abi talked about not having support from one or more parent(s). Liz described not having contact with her parents. This resulted in her having to complete the entire process of enrolling in college on her own. However, Liz first attempted to attend college straight out of high school, so she had to involve her mom with the FAFSA. Liz expressed how unhelpful her mom was during that process. She later joined the Air Force and being in the military meant that Liz no longer had to provide her mom's information on the FAFSA. Liz is an advocate for other FGCS who do not have communication with their parent(s) and how unhealthy it can be for the FAFSA to essentially force those FGCS to reach out to their parent(s). Luna's dad passed away when she was a kid, and she had not had contact with her mom since she was about eight years old. She did not have to reach out to her mom to complete the FAFSA, but she did have to reach out to a social worker that assisted with her being in the foster care system. Lafoy described that he was raised by a single dad, and his dad had passed away by the time he was enrolling at the institution at which this study took place. His dad was alive when he attempted to attend college straight after high school, but he described that his dad was not able to provide support aside from emotional support. By the time Lafoy returned to college later in life, his dad had passed away and therefore was no longer able to provide him with any support. Similarly, Abi described that her mom had passed away. Her mom was alive when she attended her community college, but her mom was not alive when she enrolled at the institution at which

this study took place. She said her dad tried to help support her, but he was not sure how to fully support her since he had never attended college. Liz, Luna, Lafoy, and Abi all completed their process of enrolling without the assistance of parent(s). These participants described being content with having to be more independent during the process of enrolling in college. However, their sentiments may be different if they had an opportunity to know what it would have felt like to be supported by parent(s) throughout their process of enrolling in college.

Billy described that his mom has been one of his primary supporters, but he also described that his dad has completely lacked support of his journey towards college. He explained that his mom mainly helped him with figuring out how to pay for the cost of attendance. He said, “She was my strong point, and she helped me through it. We figured it out financially. We were able to make it work. Her being able to help me was the best thing.” He further explained that his parents are divorced, and his dad has not been as helpful with any aspects related to college. Billy said, “My parents divorced when I was younger. My dad is in my life, but it seems more like a burden to him than anything. I never want to ask him for anything because it always seems like a burden.” As a researcher, I could hear sadness in Billy’s voice as he described this lack of support from his dad. This perspective from Billy demonstrates how FGCS have to balance interpersonal relationships on top of the pressure that comes with the process of enrolling in college. Existing issues within interpersonal relationships can worsen throughout the stress of the process of enrolling in college, and these interpersonal issues can add even more stress to FGCS.

Kelsey said her parents have a rule that all their children have to go to college or go into the military. Kelsey said she did not want to join the military, so she decided to go to college. Kelsey explained that she had an older brother who attended college, and their mom was helpful

to her brother during his process of enrolling in college. However, Kelsey said she is known as the “independent child” in their family, so her parents and older brother did not think she needed their help during the process of enrolling in college. She said she wishes her parents or brother would have helped and guided her more, and she described that she felt alone throughout the process of enrolling in college. Additionally, Kelsey explained that she and her siblings are financially independent from their parents. She said she knew not to ask her parents for money whenever she needed it for college. She explained that during the process of enrolling and learning about the cost of attendance, she had to ask her brother for some financial assistance. This perspective suggests that FGCS can be independent throughout other aspects of their lives, but that does not automatically mean that they can handle the process of enrolling in college without support. Kelsey’s parents expected that she would not need their help because she had demonstrated so much independence with other aspects of her life leading up to college. As previously discussed, it could benefit parent(s) of FGCS if high school administrators provided them with information about what to expect if their child is planning to go to college and their child is a FGCS. Among the information shared with parent(s) of FGCS should be that their children are going to need their support in various forms, even if their children have been incredibly independent all throughout high school.

Grandparent Support

Five participants discussed their grandparents when discussing the individuals who provided them with the most support during the process of enrolling in college. Nathan, Xavier, and Billy all said in addition to their moms, their grandparents were their next biggest supporters. Nathan referred to his mom and grandparents as his, “support structure.” A group of multiple support individuals can also be referred to as a support system. However, Nathan’s usage of the

word “structure” painted a picture of his mom and grandparents providing a solid foundation for him through their support. Xavier said, “My mom and grandma always stressed to me about education first, and they wanted me to have a better experience than they had. They wanted to give me opportunities that they did not have.” His family’s sentiments about prioritizing education and desiring a better experience for Xavier than they had indicates that his family believes that the path to a successful future is through education. He prioritized his education in high school, and the support from his family allowed him to prioritize his college education through the process of enrolling at the institution. Billy said his grandpa always talked with him about going to college, and he was very supportive of Billy attending the specific institution that he now attends. He said, “My grandfather and I always dreamed of me coming to this college, joining the professional flight major, and becoming a pilot.” Billy’s grandpa not only offered him emotional support, but his grandpa also offered him financial support for college. Not all family members of FGCS are able to provide financial support in addition to emotional support. Many participants expressed that they have financial need, and they described that their families were not able to provide them with financial support. However, Billy was very fortunate that he had a grandpa who helped him develop his dream of becoming a pilot and then offered financial support to help Billy achieve his dream. Unfortunately, Billy’s grandpa passed away and therefore he was not able to provide continued financial support to Billy. He was faced with having to obtain loans to cover the difference in the cost of attendance. This finding demonstrates how FGCS often do not have a financial safety net as a backup plan. He had a grandpa who was willing to help him financially, but then when his grandpa passed away, his only option was to take out loans to cover the cost of tuition. Most participants of this study

described that they have financial need, which indicates that they also do not have a financial safety net.

Tara said her grandparents were her closest and biggest supporters during the process of applying for college and enrolling in college. She said she lived with her grandparents prior to college, so they were constantly around when she was applying to college and navigating the process of enrolling in college. She said, “If I was talking about it, then my grandparents were going to be listening for it. They really pushed me to get things done and make sure everything was done correctly.” This is an example of emotional support from grandparents. Her grandparents may not have understood the nuances of the enrollment requirements, but they paid attention because they knew it was important to their granddaughter. This perspective suggests that it can go a long way if a support person demonstrates that they truly care for a FGCS and what they are going through.

Luna discussed that her grandma was her caretaker for part of her life, but she was not in contact with her grandma at the time she was engaging in the process of enrolling in college. However, she needed help from her grandma for certain requirements such as medical documents. She reached out to her grandma to ask for her medical documents, and her grandma provided her with that information. As a researcher, I observed Luna feeling frustrated that she had to reach out to her grandma during the process of enrolling. Luna is an example of a FGCS who was content with navigating the process of enrolling on her own and without the help of other people. Her experience suggests that there are certain components of the enrollment process, such as FAFSA or obtaining medical documents, when FGCS are almost forced to involve their family members in the process of enrolling at their institution. As higher education

administrators, we need to consider the implications of a FGCS having no choice but to reach out to a family member in which they have chosen to not have communication.

Spouse and Partner Support

Lafoy and Abi discussed their spouse or partner when discussing the individuals who provided them with the most support during the process of enrolling in college. Both Lafoy and Abi were adamant that they did not think they would be enrolled at their current institution if it was not for their spouse or partner. Lafoy also received support from his mother-in-law who has a college degree, and Abi received support from her future father-in-law who has a college degree. This finding suggests how powerful it can be for a FGCS to have other support people with college degrees. Lafoy's wife and mother-in-law had college degrees, and Abi's father-in-law had a college degree. These individuals made the difference for Lafoy and Abi who had been previously trying to navigate college without a support person who had a college degree. This finding suggests that a support person with a college degree can help a FGCS feel less pressure, and it can help the FGCS more seamlessly complete the processes of enrolling in college.

Lafoy said the college he is currently enrolled at is the sixth institution that he has attended or attempted to attend. Prior to meeting the woman who is now his wife, he did not have anyone in his life who provided him with support, and he was navigating all aspects of applying and enrolling college all on his own. He said meeting his wife is what made the difference for him. He said:

My wife is my biggest motivator. I think I could have easily chosen to be satisfied without a college degree. She encouraged me, and she helped me through every step of the process. She knew what the next steps were, so she was able to guide me in the right direction. She knew the right questions to ask.

Lafoy explained that his wife already had both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree when they met, so she had multiple years of experience with navigating college campuses. His wife stood by his side during every step of the way with applying for college and fully enrolling in college. Lafoy's mother-in-law has a bachelor's degree, and she also provided him with support, guidance, and encouragement during the process of enrolling in college. His mother-in-law specifically provided advice and guidance on the financial aspects of paying for the cost of attendance. Lafoy's experience suggests how powerful it can be for a FGCS to have support people that already have college degrees. Lafoy's wife and mother-in-law had college degrees. Their knowledge and experience with higher education allowed Lafoy to experience a turning point. He had previously been navigating the process of enrolling in college on his own, but their experience with higher education provided the exact kind of support he needed. This finding suggests that a support person with a college degree can help a FGCS feel less pressure, and it can help the FGCS more seamlessly complete the processes of enrolling in college. Lafoy was raised by a single dad, and his dad had passed away by the time he was navigating the process of enrolling at the institution at which this study took place. Lafoy did not have the option to have support from parent(s) during his process of enrolling at his institution, so this added even more emphasis to how important the support was from his wife and mother-in-law.

Abi said her biggest supporters were her fiancé and her fiancé's dad. She explained that her mom passed away, and her dad tried to be as supportive as he could be despite the fact that he never went to college. She said her fiancé is also a non-traditional student, and he is also working on completing his bachelor's degree. Her fiancé's dad has both a bachelor's degree and master's degree, so he was familiar with the process of enrolling in college. Abi said, "The first person I have ever ran into that deliberately gave me more support because I am a first

generation college student was my fiancé's dad – my future father-in-law.” She said her dad did not know exactly how to support her because he had never attended college, but her future father-in-law who had attended college was able to guide her through making decisions, completing requirements, and making plans. Abi said her fiancé and his dad supported her mentally, physically, and financially. Similarly to Lafoy, Abi's mom passed away by the time she was enrolling at the institution at which this study took place. Her dad was alive and able to provide emotional support, but his support was limited since he did not have knowledge of the workings of higher education. The support from Abi's fiancé's dad who had a college degree provides strength to the finding of this study that a support person with a college degree can be incredibly effective for a FGCS.

Other Family Support

Lafoy, Ashley, Luna, and George explained that they received support from their extended family members. Lafoy said no one in his immediate family had graduated high school let alone college, and only a few people in his extended family had attended college. He said, “I did not know if it was in the cards for me, but when I started enrolling in college, my family was definitely encouraging. They just all told me that I was the first one to go and do this.” Similarly, Ashley said, “I receive a lot of encouragement from my family. Not just my direct family, but also my aunts, uncles, and cousins.” She said her extended family members were very excited that someone in their family was going to college. George said his family was not able to support him through every step of the process of enrolling in college, but they were able to provide him with emotional support. George said his family was encouraging of him attending college, and they verbalized that encouragement to him. Luna discussed how her father passed when she was a child, and she does not have contact with her mom or grandma. However, she

said when she was 14 years old, she became aware of her dad's brother through Facebook. She said he has been supportive of her attending college, and he has provided her with financial assistance for her basic needs. The family members of these participants were not able to provide them with guidance or knowledge of higher education since their family members did not attend college themselves. In Lafoy's circumstance, he was also a first generation high school graduate. However, their families were able to provide emotional support during their process of enrolling in college. Emotional support would not necessarily help a FGCS with the logistical parts of the process of enrolling in college, but it can provide FGCS with comfort and reassurance that they have people in their lives who care for them and want them to be successful.

On the contrary, Billy said lack of support from his extended family was one of his greatest challenges when enrolling in college. Billy said his grandpa offered to pay for his full cost of attendance at college, but then his grandpa got sick and passed away. Billy said his extended family did not agree with allowing his grandpa's money to pay for his college expenses, so they told him the money was non-existent. Billy felt this information was not true because his grandpa was financially organized and had shown Billy the funds he intended to use for his college expenses. Legally, Billy was not able to obtain the money from his extended family members, so he had to explore multiple other avenues of paying for the cost of attending college. Billy's circumstance with his extended family demonstrates how FGCS may have to process complex personal issue while they are in the process of enrolling in college. FGCS may have financial plans for their cost of attendance, but plans can always fall through or change. The findings of this study show that FGCS are not likely to have a financial safety net if their financial plans fall through like in this circumstance with Billy. He was fortunate that his mom was able to help him navigate how to obtain loans for his cost of attendance, but financial aid

offices should be prepared that FGCS may need help formulating a backup plan if their financial plans change.

Friend Support

Eight participants discussed their friends and how supportive they were during the process of enrolling in college. Some of these participants also discussed how helpful and supportive their parent's friends were during the process of enrolling in college. The knowledge and support shared from participant's friends and their parents allowed these participants to more easily complete the process of enrolling in college.

Luna explained that she would sometimes feel overwhelmed and want to no longer enroll in college, but her two best friends would calm her down, reassure her, and motivate her to continue enrolling in college. She said her friends helped remind her of what she had already accomplished and what she was capable of accomplishing if she continued to complete the process of enrolling in college. Additionally, Luna explained that she felt support from her best friend's parents through the process of enrolling. She said, "There were times when I had to ask my best friend's parents if they could explain what things meant, especially when finances were involved because that always made me anxious." The support from Luna's friends was emotional support, and the support from her friend's parents involved guidance and advice. FGCS who are navigating the process alone can benefit from friends or parents of friends who can provide any of these types of support. The findings of this study suggest that FGCS need various types of support.

Similarly, Kimberly explained that her biggest supporters were her best friend and her best friend's mom. She explained that her best friend's mom was the Vice Principal of their high

school, and she was knowledgeable about what Kimberly needed to complete during the process of enrolling in college. She said:

My greatest advice came from my best friend's mom. We had a lot of kitchen table conversations about what I should do. We even had a lot of conversations about finances before my parents and I did. She explained what I needed to do if I wanted to go to a certain college.

Kimberly explained that she was able to take the information from her best friend's mom and use that when conversing with her own parents about what she needed to complete during the process of enrolling in college. Kimberly did not state that her best friend's mom had a college degree, but it can be inferred since she was the Vice Principal at their high school. Kimberly's experience strengthens the finding that a support person with a college degree can make a powerful impact for a FGCS. A support person with a college degree can help a FGCS feel less pressure during the process of enrolling, and they can help the FGCS more seamlessly complete the processes of enrolling in college.

Chris described how he played ice hockey for 13 years. He said he formed good friendships during his summer league, including a friendship with the owner of the league. He said the owner became his friend and then became a mentor. He said the owner helped him with college applications, and he helped him with the financial aspects of enrolling in college. The owner had experiences with one of the institutions in which Chris was applying, so he guided him through how to obtain additional financial aid at that institution. In addition to this mentor, Chris described two family friends who are both principals at schools. He said they attended college and their kids were in college, so they were able to assist him with aspects of applying, enrolling, and attending college. Chris did not explain if the owner of the ice hockey league had

a college degree, but at a minimum he at least had knowledge of how to support a perspective college student since he had helped his own sons who attended college. This finding suggests that parent(s) with children who have attended college may be more knowledgeable of higher education even if they did not attend higher education themselves. Additionally, similarly to Kimberly, Chris did not explain if his family friends had college degrees, but it can be inferred that they had college degrees since they were both principals of schools. The support he felt from these two individuals continues to strengthen the finding that a support person with a college degree can make a powerful difference for a FGCS during their process of enrolling in college.

Xavier and Carrie both explained that they were in Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school. They said many of their classmates and friends in those classes were also applying and enrolling in college, so those classmates and friends provided guidance and support to Xavier and Carrie. Xavier explained, "I was in AP classes, so everyone around me was in the same boat as me. People in my classes were also planning to go to college." Similarly, Carrie said, "Everyone in my AP classes was doing it. It was something we were all doing." This finding suggests that peers can also serve as support individuals for FGCS. High school students in AP classes are likely to be interested in attending college, so classmates and friends in AP classes could potentially serve as helpful support individuals for their FGCS classmates. These classmates and friends would likely not understand how the process of enrolling can be particularly challenging for their FGCS classmates. However, just having their emotional support, knowledge, and guidance can make a difference for a FGCS.

George explained that his friends were his biggest supporters when he was completing the process of enrolling in college because his friends were also planning to attend college. He said was able to ask how the process of enrolling was going for them, and he was able to ask

them questions about components of the process of enrolling in college that they had already completed. Securing housing at college was a major step in the process that George's friends helped him navigate. George said he missed the deadline to apply for on-campus housing, and he was not sure how to secure off-campus housing. George's friends had already secured off-campus housing, so they guided him towards the same off-campus housing option. Similarly, Liz's friend in her Air Force unit helped her secure housing at college. Liz was accepted to her institution, but she had not secured any on-campus housing or off-campus housing. Her lack of housing was potentially going to prevent her from attending the institution. However, her friend went to their Sergeant, who happened to live in the same town as the institution, and asked if Liz could live with him and his family until she could secure housing. The Sergeant and his family agreed, and Liz initially lived with him and his family when she first moved to the college town. She said she was shocked that her friend arranged this with their Sergeant, but she was thankful that this allowed her the opportunity to attend the institution. George and Liz both had established friendships with community members or other incoming students at the same institution. These social connections aided them in finding off-campus housing. Their experiences suggest that having an established social connection at the institution at which a FGCS is applying can aid a FGCS when they navigate the process of enrolling at the institution.

Coworker Support

Ashley, Erica, and Liz all discussed how their coworkers provided support to them during the process of enrolling in college. Ashley explained that she purposely obtained a job in the field of her desired career, which was pre-vet animal sciences. She said her supervisors provided her with a lot of assistance because they have experience in the career field. She said, "My bosses helped me out a ton because they went through the exact same curriculum. They actually

helped me with my college decision.” Erica explained that her supervisor at her job was one of her biggest supporters. She said she had known her supervisor since she was in first grade, and she was very supportive of Erica’s pursuit to attend college. She said all of her older coworkers were very excited for her and also supported her through the process of enrolling in college. Liz described that her coworkers became her family since she was not close with her parents or family. She said, “It is nice to have a caring factor from the people you’re immediately in contact with, especially if you do not come from that.” All of these participants discussed how much they enjoyed their jobs. They obtained their jobs for different reasons, but they all enjoyed their work experience and the income they earned from their jobs. Additionally, these participants described social connections at their job sites. The individuals at their job sites provided them with emotional support, knowledge, and guidance during their journey towards college.

Support from High School Administrators

Some participants felt that their high schools were very helpful during the process of enrolling in college. However, some participants thought their high schools could have been a lot more supportive and helpful. Some participants described that their high school did not provide them with any support, which they understandably found frustrating.

Ashley and Sarah said their high school administrators were their biggest supporters. Ashley said there were times when she had numerous questions throughout the process of enrolling in college, and the administrators at her high school were able to answer those questions for her. Sarah said her high school administrators cared about her emotional investment in the process of enrolling in college. She said she grew up in a college town, and a lot of graduates from her high school typically attend the college in her hometown. She said her guidance counselors understood that she wanted to attend a different college, and they were

helpful to her navigating a different process than her classmates. Sarah said her guidance counselors helped her compare colleges, compare majors, consider financial aspects, and look for scholarships. This finding suggests that FGCS can benefit from emotional support, knowledge, and guidance from their high school administrators. High school administrators should be intentional about their support and guidance for students who want to attend college and would be FGCS. These participants did not discuss if these high school administrators had college degrees, but it can be inferred since they were in an advising position at a high school. This further strengthens the finding that support from individuals with college degrees can have a powerful impact on a FGCS.

Nathan explained that his senior guidance counselor was helpful, but she had hundreds of other students that she was also trying to assist at the same time. He said his guidance counselor was not fully able to assist all of her students, and Nathan said overall he needed more support from his guidance counselor. Nathan also noted that support from his high school was complicated because his school district changed a lot of procedures after the height of COVID. He said this resulted in a lot of confusion, and he said this specifically created difficulties with his transcript. The experience of Nathan is an example of how a FGCS can feel neglected by administrators that are overbooked and overworked. Nathan's experience was with his high school guidance counselor, but this same sentiment can be applied to college administrators who are overbooked and overworked. Other findings of this study suggest that FGCS often do not know who to ask their questions to, and they need the support from their high school guidance counselors to advise them on how to obtain answers to their questions about their college. A FGCS may be less likely to seek out a guidance counselor, and a guidance counselor may need to intentionally seek out a FGCS that they know may need assistance.

Xavier said he learned about the process of applying and enrolling in college through his AP classes, but he said his high school as a whole did not provide support or guidance to students who were interested in college. He said, “There was not anything that went out at my school about preparing for college, going to meet with your advisor, getting college information, and things of that nature.” Xavier said he received tutoring from a college-educated woman during the first part of high school. He said she was no longer tutoring him during his senior year of high school, but she still provided support to him when he was navigating the process of enrolling in college. Xavier said he feels that the fact that she had attended college is what allowed her to have the ability to provide him with guidance. This finding suggests that Xavier was able to experience support from his peers, but he did not experience support from his high school administrators. As a researcher, I am of the belief system that high school administrators should be talking with all high school students about the possibility of attending college, and then the student can ultimately decide if college is the correct step for their future. Considering this information, I find it concerning that Xavier’s high school was not even having conversations with students in AP classes about college. High schools like the one Xavier attended should certainly have conversations with students in AP classes. However, they should also be mindful that students outside of AP classes may have even less support and may be even more in need of intentional conversations and resources from high school administrators.

Rosa and Erica both said they needed more support from their high school administrators, specifically their guidance counselors and teachers, and they both felt they could have navigated through the process of enrolling in college more smoothly if these individuals had provided them with more guidance and support. Rosa said her guidance counselors and teachers taught her and other students how to apply for college and how to write essays for scholarships, but they did not

help with any other aspect of the process of enrolling in college. Erica explained that her guidance counselors would tell students to make an appointment, but then when she attended her appointments, the guidance counselors were very short and did not provide the help she needed. She said, “The guidance counselors were very short with us and did not provide that much help. They would just send us home with a piece of paper that said information about college. That was about it.” Carrie, Kelsey, Paige, and Chris all felt that their high schools could have provided more support through resources. Carrie said her high school did not have any college or university representatives come to her school like what is common practice at other high schools. She said it would have been helpful if her high school would have facilitated having college representatives come to her school so she and other students could ask questions about both the application process and the process of enrolling at their institution. Kelsey said her high school was very focused on making sure all seniors took the ACT test, but they did not provide any other college preparation or assistance while students were navigating the process of enrolling in college. Kelsey felt her high school prepared her for applying for college because they made sure she took the ACT test, but they did not prepare her for what to expect during the process of enrolling in college. Paige shared that she attended a small county school. She said her school had an overall lack of resources and funding. She said this was out of the control of her guidance counselor and that her guidance counselor really cared about her, but she wished that her school could have provided more for her and other students if they had more resources. Chris said he expected his high school to provide him with more support since so many students before him had gone to college. He said he expected them to know the ins-and-outs of how to guide him through the process of enrolling in college. He said he wishes they would have had a workshop outside of regular school hours where they explained to him and other students what they needed

to do to navigate the process of enrolling in college. Lafoy explained that his high school did not provide him with any support for attending college. He said the guidance counselor scheduled an appointment for him, but the appointment was interrupted by another student who had frantic questions about college. The guidance counselor asked Lafoy to leave the appointment so she could help the frantic student, and she said she would reschedule Lafoy. The guidance counselor never rescheduled Lafoy, and he did not reach out to the guidance counselor to reschedule. He said he now understands how helpful the guidance counselor could have been to him in his pursuit for college, but he said he did not understand that when he was in high school. Additionally, similar to Carrie, Lafoy said his high school did not have any college or university representatives come to his school like what is common practice at many high schools.

The experiences of these participants demonstrate high school administrators who displayed minimal effort when helping high school students with their journey towards college. Rosa's high school administrator assisted with her admissions process, but then she was essentially on her own once she was accepted to an institution. Erica's high school administrator provided her with a document, which was intended to be helpful, but a FGCS like Erica needs someone to have an intentional conversation where they explain the document and answer questions. Carrie's high school never brought any college representatives to the high school to provide any information to students interested in attending college. Kelsey's high school was purely focused on making sure their students took the ACT, but then they did not help those same students with the admissions process when they needed to utilize their ACT scores or the enrollment process if they were accepted to an institution. Paige's high school administrators cared about her, but they did not provide the knowledge or guidance that she needed. Chris had higher expectations for the support that would be provided to him, and his expectations were not

met. As a future FGCS and a first generation high school graduate, Lafoy did not understand how important it was for him to follow up with his guidance counselor for assistance. These high school administrators could have provided significantly more resources to these FGCS and other FGCS. High school administrators should be providing information about college to all students at their schools, and they should be intentionally seeking students who would be FGCS if they attended college. This study focused on the process of enrolling in college, but high school students who would be FGCS need someone like a guidance counselor who can walk them through their entire college journey including college tours, the admissions process, and the process of enrolling in college. FGCS need their high school guidance counselors to provide assistance during their transition from high school to college.

Support from Academic Advisors

Various participants talked about their academic advisor when asked who supported them the most or who could have supported them more during their process of enrolling in college. Billy discussed that his academic advisor was one of his biggest supporters with regards to his academic requirements and registering for classes. He remembered the academic advisor by name, and he credited her for helping him develop an academic plan. Similarly, Abi discussed how helpful her academic advisor was for all academic questions. Abi stated that she met with her academic advisor at least three different times to ask questions or request changes with her classes. She described her academic advisor as relatable, and she said she was understanding of her status as a FGCS. These experiences of Billy and Abi demonstrates how helpful it can be for college administrators, including academic advisors, to have personal meetings with FGCS to answer their questions and provide guidance. These participants greatly benefited from personal meetings with their academic advisors at their institution. As previously discussed, many

participants could have also benefitted from personal meetings with both high school administrators and admissions counselors at their institution.

On the contrary, George, Luna, and Lafoy all stated that they needed more support from their academic advisors during the process of enrolling in college. George stated that his academic advisor met with him and developed a list of classes to take, but his academic advisor did not take the time to fully explain the enrollment period, prerequisite classes, why George needed to take classes in a certain order, and how the academic plan related to his major. George said this left him feeling confused and frustrated. Luna said she did not have an opportunity to meet one-on-one with her academic advisor. She said she was with a small group of individuals who met with the academic advisor, which resulted her feeling confused about the process of registering for classes. During the interview, Luna stated that she was currently a sophomore, and she admitted that she still does not fully understand the process of registering for classes. Lafoy was a transfer student when he was engaging with the process of enrolling at his current institution, so it was important for him to speak with his academic advisor to discuss what classes he needed to take at the new institution based on his transcript. He stated that it was difficult to get in contact with his academic advisor, and in general he felt that his academic advisor could have helped make his transition smoother. He struggled to find classes that were still open for registration, and he felt his academic advisor had no choice but to just guided him towards what classes were, as Lafoy viewed them, “the leftovers.” He felt that it would be helpful if academic advisors could advocate to hold a certain number of open seats in classes for transfer students. He also felt that it would have been helpful if his academic advisor would have continued to check in with him on a more regular basis to make sure he understood which classes to register for and how to navigate the class registration system. George, Luna, and Lafoy all met

with their academic advisors during their orientation programs. Academic advisors have multiple incoming students that they meet with during every orientation program, so it is possible that these academic advising meetings were more rushed than the meetings described by Billy and Abi. The experiences of participants of this study suggests that FGCS can benefit from ongoing communication with their academic advisors to ensure that all of their questions are being answered. FGCS can communicate with their academic advisors through phone and email, and they can also take the initiative to schedule meetings with their academic advisors. Based on the experiences of the participants of this study, I would encourage FGCS to have ongoing communication and personal meetings with their academic advisors.

Self-Reliance

As previously discussed, many participants needed more support from the people in their lives, but many of those individuals chose to not provide support, could not provide support, or simply did not know how to provide support. This resulted in participants describing self-reliance. When asked who their biggest supporters were during the process of enrolling in college, some participants were direct in saying that they themselves were their biggest supporter.

Ashley said her parents were not able to help her with the process of enrolling, so she often times had to figure out answers to questions on her own. She said it was challenging to find people who could answer her questions, but she said it resulted in her having more connections. She said, "I had to do a lot of outside outreach, which worked out for me, because now I have a lot of connections." Although it may have felt difficult for Ashley to obtain answers to her questions during the process of enrolling in college, her independence through the process provided her with long-term knowledge and long-term connections that she could turn to in the

future if she had additional questions. Sarah discussed setting goals for herself throughout the process of enrolling in college. She said those goals included each of the requirements for the process of enrolling in college, and her goals also included requirements for the Honors College application and admission. Sarah said she relied on herself to stay motivated and focused to complete everything by the assigned deadlines. Goal setting can be a valuable technique for FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. This technique proved to be helpful for Sarah, and it can be helpful for other FGCS. Some FGCS may naturally participate in goal setting, and other FGCS may benefit from high school administrators or admissions counselors encouraging this technique. Similarly, as previously mentioned, Kelsey said she had an older brother who went to college and her parent's helped him with the process of enrolling, but her parents did not help her because they viewed her as the "independent child." Kelsey said would have appreciated their help, but she said she had to self-motivate herself to make sure she was completing all requirements. As previously discussed, it would be beneficial to FGCS if high school administrators provided some insight to parents about the assistance that FGCS may need from them during the process of enrolling in college. Kelsey's parents may not have been able to provide her knowledge of higher education, but they still could have provided her with more emotional support as she navigated the process independently.

Carrie, George, Liz, and Luna all said they were their own biggest supporters during the process of enrolling in college. When Carrie was asked who her biggest supporter was, she said, "I genuinely think I did it all myself. Everyone said to let them know if I needed them, but I researched and found answers myself." When George was asked who supported him, he said, "I definitely did everything on my own." FGCS such as Carrie and George may experience family members who offer to help them with the process, but FGCS may not know when to ask for help

or how to ask for help. Most participants learned about the enrollment process as they navigated the enrollment process. Both FGCS and parent(s) could benefit from high school administrators providing them with knowledge about what to expect during the process of enrolling in college and when a FGCS might need help.

When Liz was asked this who provided her with support, she said, “Probably me. I do not know who else to answer for that question. It was definitely me.” Liz said her mom kicked her out of the house shortly after high school. Liz decided to join the Air Force to gain some independence, and she eventually enrolled in college. Luna was unhoused before coming to college, and she did not have contact with her parents or grandma. She said she was completely on her own, and she felt a range of emotions while navigating college-related tasks on her own. She said:

I made things harder than they should have been because I was just so nervous about messing something up or filling something out incorrectly, not realizing it, and then somehow getting in trouble. I was nervous it would affect me getting into college or being able to afford to go to college. I looked over things at least like a hundred times. I second guessed myself.

Liz demonstrated resilience and perseverance through these experiences with her mom. Liz easily could have given up on her goal of attending college since she did not have personal or emotional support from her mom, but she did not let her negative experiences stop her. Her experience provides strength to the finding of this study that FGCS must balance interpersonal relationships at the same time as navigating their journey towards college. Existing issues within interpersonal relationships can worsen throughout the stress of the process of enrolling in college, and these issues can add more stress to FGCS.

Luna was independent throughout the process of enrolling in college. She described that she created her own network of help through YouTube videos, Tik Tok videos, her social worker from when she was in the foster care system, her uncle, and her two best friends. Luna is the only participant who described seeking knowledge and guidance from the internet and social media, but this technique was not surprising for a college student. FGCS who are lacking support during their process of enrolling in college may benefit from Luna's idea of seeking knowledge and guidance on the internet. The findings of this study suggest that high school administrators and college departments can do more to guide FGCS during their process of enrolling in college. Aside from personal communications with FGCS, high schools and colleges should consider providing resources online for FGCS like Luna who seek information from the internet.

Mattering

During their interviews, some participants shared stories about specific people, incidents, or processes that positively impacted their experience during their process of enrolling at the institution. The stories of these specific people, incidents, and processes emerged into a theme of the concept of mattering. The participants who shared these stories felt that they mattered to a specific person, department, or the institution as a whole.

Lafoy said the year he applied to the institution, there were over 48,000 applicants. He said the fact that he was one of the 5,000 students who were selected and enrolled at the institution made him feel incredibly special. He said he had put in a lot of hard work at his community college to earn an associate degree, and he felt that hard work paid off when he was selected to attend the institution. Lafoy would have been made aware of this information from the institution at which this study took place. This data was sent through an email to students, faculty, and staff, and the data was also shared with local news outlets. The institution should

continue to report all forms of data, but it is a bonus when the data makes a FGCS feel special at their institution.

Ashley said the individual departments and resources at the institution made her feel like she mattered. She said she felt like there was always someone to call or somewhere to go if she needed help with something. She said, “It felt really great knowing that I could wake up, have an issue, and there was someone there to help with that.” Ashley said she did not have this kind of support or resources from her high school, so that is why she really valued this at her college. FGCS should be made aware of resources at their institution. As demonstrated by this study, FGCS often do not know who to contact to ask their questions. Somewhere along the way, Ashley was made aware of the resources at her institution, and it made all the difference for Ashley during her process of enrolling at the institution. It would be beneficial if campus departments had a list of FGCS and they initiated contact with FGCS to provide guidance and answer questions.

Nathan discussed that he is a student in the Honors College, and when he was an incoming student, he had additional enrollment requirements to complete for the Honors College. He said he was paired with a Lead Mentor through the Honors College. The Lead Mentor was meant to be a mentor to Nathan during his process of enrolling in college and during his first year at the institution. He said his Lead Mentor made him feel like he belonged at the institution and in the Honors College. This inspired Nathan so much that he is now a Lead Mentor, and he is helping incoming students the way his Lead Mentor helped him. Nathan’s experience demonstrates how helpful a social connection can be for a FGCS as they navigate the process of enrolling in college. Liz and George experienced the benefits of a social connection when they were looking for off-campus housing, and Nathan’s experience with a social connection helped

him both academically and socially. Orientation provided similar types of social connections for other participants prior to arriving on campus to start classes.

Luna and Sarah both said they felt the feeling of mattering during orientation. Luna said, “I loved orientation! It was everything to me.” She explained that she felt an “overwhelming sense of community” during all aspects of the orientation program. She said, “I cannot really emphasize it enough. It was just like the feeling of home.” She specifically remembered a portion of orientation that took place in the football stadium. She said there was a speaker who told the students that the admissions process was very difficult and they deserved to be there. She said this gave her another sense of the campus feeling like home. Sarah said she felt like she mattered during orientation because of the connections she made with other students and her orientation leader. She said it had a lasting impact on her, and she kept all of her paperwork, resources, and items that were given to her during the orientation. Orientation provided social connections for FGCS through new friends, orientation leaders, and employees at the institution. These social connections provided valuable support to FGCS who did not have social connections prior to orientation. These social connections contributed to their feelings of mattering, and the connections set them up for success when they were coupled with the knowledge they were provided during orientation.

Tara described one person at orientation that made her feel like she mattered. She said she got a little lost when trying to find the location for orientation. She said she ran into someone and asked for help. The person she ran into happened to be the director of the campus office for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The director helped Tara find the location for the orientation, and then they continued to talk more during the orientation. Their conversation centered around where Tara was supposed to go on her first day of classes, and the director invited Tara to

various programs. Tara said when the director learned that she was a FGCS, she provided Tara with information about a coordinator in their office that directly assists FGCS. Tara said this woman made her feel special, she helped Tara's experience go smoothly, and she helped Tara feel like she belonged at the institution. This experience described by Tara is an example of an employee going out of their way to help an incoming student. This employee was willing to help Tara before she ever knew that she was a FGCS, and then she provided even more support when she found out that Tara was a FGCS. This employee's level of care made Tara feel special, which ultimately made her feel connected to the institution.

Xavier recalled two incidents when he felt the feeling of mattering. The first time he felt this way during the process of enrolling was when he attended an admitted students day for his major in engineering. He said the engineering department head spoke to him and his mom during the admitted students day. She invited him to attend a panel program that afternoon, she told him about a summer engineering program, and in general she was very warm and welcoming to Xavier and his mom. He said the department head made him feel special. The second time Xavier felt the feeling of mattering during the process of enrolling was when he attended the summer engineering program that the department head had previously told him about. The summer engineering program was hosted by the engineering department for incoming students in the major. The program allowed students to get a base knowledge of what to expect with the major, and it allowed them to meet other incoming students in the major. Overall, Xavier said the program made him feel a sense of belonging at the institution and within his major. Similarly, Erica and Kimberly also discussed coming to campus for summer programs, and they discussed how much those programs made them feel the feeling of mattering. Erica said when she realized that she wanted to major in architecture, she came for a summer architecture program. Similarly,

Kimberly said she came for a summer nursing program. Kimberly said the summer nursing program positively impacted her outlook on attending college on a large college campus. She said she could not believe people took the time to help her with questions she had about enrolling at the institution, and she could not believe that professors remembered her name. She said, “That was when I felt like I mattered even on a huge college campus. That was really awesome.” Similarly to Tara’s experience, employees went out of their way to help Xavier, Erica, and Kimberly feel special and cared for at the institution. As previously discussed, it could benefit FGCS if campus departments were given a list of FGCS and made intentional efforts to reach out to them to provide guidance and support. This type of intentional effort can make other FGCS feel as guided and supported as these participants felt. Multiple departments on college campuses have summer programs for high school students, incoming students, and current students. FGCS could greatly benefit from campus departments personally reaching out to them to notify them of the programs and encourage the FGCS to attend. As demonstrated by these participants, attendance at these types of programs can help FGCS feel like they matter at the institution and belong in higher education.

Two different participants, Billy and Carrie, discussed how much the school’s mascot made them feel welcome and made them feel like they mattered. The institution’s mascot has won multiple national championships, and the mascot is well loved by the college campus community. These participants stated that the mascot made them feel like they were part of the college’s most beloved traditions, which ultimately made them feel the feeling of mattering. Regarding the mascot, Carrie said, “He brings the most cheerful, exciting energy to anywhere he goes.” School mascots can sometimes be viewed as only being necessary at sporting events. However, the experiences of these two participants demonstrates that the presence of a school

mascot in all areas of the institution can help a student feel like they matter. Institutions should consider incorporating their mascots and other traditions into campus tours, admissions processes, and enrollment processes.

Abi and Chris both described the local community and campus community when describing what made them feel like they mattered. Abi said she feels like the institution does a good job making sure students are involved in some capacity on campus. She said she was able to make friends through students who are involved in groups and organizations on campus, which ultimately made her feel like she mattered at the institution. Chris said he feels that people in the local community are nice and welcoming. He said the town has a “small town feeling” which resonated with both him and his parents since he is an out of state student. Institutions are intentional about getting all students involved on campus and in the local community. However, institutions should consider how they are specifically engaging FGCS on campus and in the local community. Liz discussed that she feels that FGCS are merely trying to survive the college experience, and nearly all the participants discussed needing to have at least a part-time job. Therefore, some FGCS may not have the time to be involved on campus or in the local community, but it should at least be offered to FGCS so they can understand the benefits from involvement. For example, Xavier discussed that he became involved in leadership organizations that ultimately provided him with more scholarships for his overall cost of attendance. The participants of this study discussed financial need, so FGCS may be more interested in involvement on campus and in the community if it can provide some financial assistance towards their college education.

Conclusion

Participants discussed many aspects of their experiences of navigating the process of enrolling in college as FGCS. The aspect that seemed to impact participants the most was the cost of attending college. Participants talked at length about how they had to navigate learning to pay for college through scholarships, loans, grants, and work study programs. Participants described several factors that influenced their experience with navigating the process of enrolling in college. They discussed other requirements of the process of enrolling at their institution, discussed the support they did or did not receive, and discussed the feeling of mattering. The findings of this study suggest that key themes are closely related to the experiences of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. These themes include: finances, housing, medical requirements, organization of resources, support, capital, perseverance, mattering, and social identity. These key themes, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research are discussed further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

There are numerous requirements that incoming college students must complete after they are accepted to an institution of higher education but before they can attend their first day of classes. These requirements vary from institution to institution, but some common requirements include but are not limited to: completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other financial aid requirements; paying for tuition, fees, and housing; attending orientation; registering for on-campus housing; and providing medical documentations. Specific requirements are determined by individual institutions (FSA, 2021). For the purpose of this dissertation, these requirements are referred to as the process of enrolling in college. This study sought to understand the experiences of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. This chapter discusses the findings of the study, connects the findings to the theoretical framework, connects the findings to existing literature, discusses implications for practice, and provides recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

This qualitative study utilized a narrative approach to better understand the experiences of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews with FGCS at a large, public, four-year institution. The institution is designated as a First-Gen Forward campus from the CFGSS. Participants included 18 FGCS that were enrolled at the institution at the time of the study. These 18 participants were selected through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. The specific institution does not have an office specifically dedicated to supporting FGCS, so various institution departments were asked to assist with identifying FGCS who could participate in the study.

This study was guided by the following research question:

1. What challenges do first generation college students experience when completing the formal processes of enrolling in college?

Numerous theoretical perspectives were explored throughout this study. These theoretical perspectives provided insight and context to the known experiences of FGCS. The information gathered in this study provides additional context based on the experiences of the participants. Theoretical perspectives that were explored included: cultural capital, social capital, family capital and family attitudes, social identity, Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement, and Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory. A guiding theme through many of these theoretical perspectives is support and social needs because of the importance of support for FGCS (Spieger & Bednarek, 2013).

Key Themes

FGCS who participated in this study described several factors that influenced their experience with navigating the process of enrolling in college. Some of these themes were expected to emerge in this study, and some factors were less expected. The findings of this study suggest that these key themes are closely related to the experience of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. These themes include: finances, housing, medical requirements, organization of resources, support, capital, perseverance, mattering, social identity, and COVID.

Finances

The participants in this study expressed that they have financial need. All 18 participants discussed that they completed the FAFSA during their process of enrolling in college, and all participants discussed receiving some sort of financial aid in the form of scholarships, loans, grants, or work study programs. This aligns with previous research that stated that FGCS tend to

come from a lower socioeconomic status and likely need federal grants, federal loans, private loans, or scholarships in order to afford the cost of attendance (Unverferth et al., 2012).

The need to secure financial support aligns with the second level of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which involves safety needs. Safety and security needs can involve many factors, and securing financial needs can fall into this stage of the model. This need comes after the most basic human physiological needs such as food, water, and shelter. FGCS must first meet their physiological needs before they can fully secure safety and security needs. One participant in particular discussed being unhoused during the process of enrolling in college.

Understandably, she described struggling to secure her financial needs. Due to not having her physiological needs met, she was struggling to also have her safety and security needs met. After securing safety and security needs, including financial assistance, then participants were able to explore needs involving social needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Tanjula, 2014).

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators released a report in 2013 that found that financial aid information contained in a variety of financial aid offers were overwhelming and confusing to students and their families (JBL Associates, 2013). A separate study by Taylor and Bicak (2019) found that across the United States, many students are not familiar with basic financial aid terms and phrases including: FAFSA, entrance counseling, and exit counseling. These previous findings by JBL Associates (2013) and Taylor and Bicak (2019) align with the experiences of the FGCS participants from this study. Participants of this study experienced confusion when they engaged with FAFSA, scholarship applications, and understanding their financial aid offers. Many participants discussed being confused with the FAFSA paperwork and overwhelmed with scholarship applications. Two participants discussed

that they were so confused about their financial aid offer while enrolling in college that they ended up not accepting enough financial aid to cover the full cost of tuition, which jeopardized their ability to attend college.

Many participants of this study discussed the financial aid office on their college campus and how much that office helped them during their process of enrolling in college. The CFGSS (2020) found that FGCS were significantly less likely than non-FGCS to utilize support services on college campuses. However, they also found that the support service that FGCS engaged with the most was financial aid. The findings of this study align with the findings of the CFGSS (2020). Participants described how the financial aid office on their college campus greatly impacted them by helping them with FAFSA paperwork, accepting loans, securing grants, and applying for scholarships.

Participants also discussed the various financial requirements that they had to pay out-of-pocket prior to obtaining funding from these various sources. Some examples of their out-of-pocket expenses included: new student enrollment deposit, on-campus housing application, on-campus housing deposit, and the cost of attending orientation. At the institution at which this study took place, the new student enrollment deposit is \$250, the on-campus housing application is \$100, the on-campus housing deposit is \$200, the cost of a student attending orientation is \$150, and the cost of a parent or guardian attending orientation is \$75 per person. This is a total of approximately \$775, and that does not include the cost of transportation or lodging while attending orientation. These out-of-pocket expenses are a financial burden for FGCS. These out-of-pocket costs can make the difference of a FGCS having the opportunity to live on campus, attend orientation in person, or have a parent or guardian attend orientation. The findings of this study indicate that it is beneficial for FGCS to attend orientation in person rather than online, and

it is also beneficial for the parents of FGCS to attend orientation. The findings of this study suggest that FGCS and any student from a lower socioeconomic status could benefit from waivers that assist with the cost of the new student enrollment deposit, on-campus housing application, housing deposit, and the cost of orientation.

Housing

Financial requirements were by far the biggest stressor for FGCS during their process of enrolling in college. However, securing their on-campus housing or off-campus housing seemed to serve as the second biggest stressor for participants when they were navigating the process of enrolling in college. Different participants found different parts of the on-housing process to be more or less stressful. However, the common stressors for participants included applying for on-campus housing by the deadline, paying the on-campus housing deposit, finding a roommate, and selecting a residence hall and room. Securing housing as part of the process of enrolling in college can be connected to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. The most basic human needs as described by Maslow (1943) include physiological needs: breathing, food, water, shelter, clothing, and sleep. With regards to the process of enrolling in college, securing housing would secure a college student's need for shelter. Individuals cannot move through the levels of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs unless the previous level's needs are met. Therefore, it logically makes sense for participants to have experienced higher levels of stress regarding the need to secure housing arrangements at college because it is a basic physiological need. Once participants were able to secure their physiological needs, such as housing arrangements, they described feeling a weight off their shoulders. This allowed participants to move into the levels of safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Tanjula, 2014).

Participants did not discuss their experience with obtaining a meal plan at their institution, but their meal plan would also fulfill a physiological need by providing food to FGCS. Once students are moved into on-campus housing, then they will experience more levels of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs through their on-campus housing experience. On-campus housing has various levels of security measures, which ensures a FGCS safety needs. FGCS are able to make connections with other residents, their resident assistant, and other faculty and staff members within residence halls. On-campus housing staff members work hard to facilitate connections and friendships for residents through floor meetings, programs and events, and other forms of community development. If a FGCS gets involved within their residence hall, then they have the opportunity to fulfill their esteem needs through status and recognition. Some examples of involvement within a residence hall may include: attending programs and events; participating in Hall Council; participating in National Residence Hall Honorary; and obtaining a student job such as a resident assistant, desk assistant, or a housing ambassador. As FGCS achieve these higher level of needs, they are eventually able to achieve self-actualization.

It is recommended that FGCS live in on-campus housing so that they have an opportunity to experience these various levels of needs and ultimately experience self-actualization (Maslow, 1965). However, in order to live in on-campus housing, FGCS must first navigate the process of obtaining on-campus housing. The participants of this study described the process of obtaining on-campus housing as confusing and costly. Therefore, administrators should be intentional about supporting FGCS during their process of obtaining housing. Administrators can support FGCS by obtaining a list of incoming students who are FGCS. A list of FGCS will provide administrators with an opportunity intentionally reach out to FGCS, and it will also allow

administrators to be aware of a student's FGCS status when a FGCS reaches out with questions. Additionally, administrators can better assist FGCS with this process by providing waivers to FGCS and other students with financial need to assist with the new student enrollment deposit, on-campus housing application fee, on-campus housing deposit, and the cost of orientation. This will increase the odds of a FGCS being able to successfully navigate the process of obtaining on-campus housing.

Medical Requirements

Most higher education institutions require various forms of medical documents, but the requirements vary from state to state (Nelson, 2021). Participants of this study discussed experiencing difficulty with gathering their medical documents. Participants who lived in the same state as the institution described a smoother experience than those who were from out-of-state or those who moved around various states throughout their lives. Some participants discussed that due to moving throughout their lives, their medical documents were not all in one place. Some of these participants described having their parent(s) assist them with locating their medical documents, but many participants described having to navigate this process of tracking down medical information by themselves. A few participants described that they did not have some of the vaccinations that their institution required or that their vaccinations had expired. This resulted in these participants having to attend multiple medical appointments, and some participants had to pay out-of-pocket for these vaccinations. These vaccinations were an unexpected financial burden during the process of enrolling in college. Almost all participants discussed that their specific institution required them to obtain a tuberculosis (TB) test prior to attending classes at the college, and failure to obtain the TB test resulted in holds on their student accounts. This aligns with Nelson (2021) who stated that medical documents are typically

required by institutions prior to a student beginning their first semester at the institution. The process of obtaining medical documents and obtaining the required vaccines proved to be a time-consuming process for many participants, and some participants described that this resulted in a hold on their student account.

Barclay (2017) discussed the components of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, including the component of "self" in the theory. Participants described feeling frustrated, confused, and at times defeated when navigating the process of tracking down their medical documents, completing the required TB test within the specified timeline, and obtaining required vaccinations. When participants experienced difficulties with regards to these medical requirements, they aligned with the psychological components of "self" in the Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, which discusses the existence of resiliency. The "self" component of the theory also discusses personal and demographic information including health (Barclay, 2017). Participants experienced a major transition from high school or their community college to the four-year institution. This transition included requirements that they may not have expected, including medical requirements, which required the participants to be resilient.

COVID is discussed later in the findings of this study. However, it is important to note that the height of COVID had an impact on the medical requirements that FGCS had to complete during their process of enrolling in college. Specifically, students who were planning to live in on-campus housing at the institution at which this study took place had to complete a COVID test prior to moving into their residence hall. Their COVID test could be completed at a medical center in their hometown, or students could complete their COVID test at the on-campus medical center once they arrived on campus. There was a specific window of time in which the COVID

test had to be completed prior to a student moving into a residence hall. This was an added responsibility that FGCS had to navigate if they were living in a residence hall.

Organization and Communication of Resources

Numerous participants discussed the organization of resources at both their high school and at the institution of higher education in which they were enrolling in the process of enrolling. Participants expressed frustration with the organization of resources at both the high school level and college level. All participants were FGCS, so they did not have parent(s) with collegiate experience who could guide them through the process of enrolling in college. This resulted in participants relying heavily on resources provided by both their high schools and college, but they felt frustrated because they felt these resources were not organized. Numerous participants discussed that they wished there was a single, comprehensive checklist that could have been provided by their college. They expressed that they experienced multiple, incomplete checklists that were provided to them throughout their process of enrolling, and they felt that they were left to their own devices to make one single, comprehensive checklist for themselves. Barclay (2017) discussed the components of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, including the component of "self" in the theory. This finding of participants working through the lack of a comprehensive enrollment checklist aligns with the psychological components of "self" in the theory, which discusses the existence of resiliency (Barclay, 2017). Participants were left to their devices to complete a comprehensive enrollment checklist based on the information they were provided by different departments on campus. This required the participants to be resilient, ask questions, and at times locate answers themselves.

The CFGSS (2020) found that FGCS were less likely than their non-FGCS peers to seek out support services on college campuses. However, the findings of this study suggests that

FGCS do not know who to contact or how to seek out these resources, at least during the process of enrolling in college. Numerous participants described that they experienced countless times that they would have questions, but their parent(s) would not know how to answer the questions. They would then experience confusion about who to contact with specific questions. Participants described talking to high school administrators, but very few participants knew that they could simply contact their admissions counselor for assistance. In fact, multiple participants described how they wished their admissions counselor would have reached out to them to check in on how they were progressing through the process of enrolling, and they wished their admissions counselor would have provided information about other departments on campus. Multiple participants described positive experiences with their orientation program. They appreciated the social aspects of orientation, but perhaps more importantly, they appreciated the knowledge they obtained during orientation. Some participants described that they were simply guessing which departments to contact prior to orientation, but they felt much more confident about which departments to contact with their questions after attending orientation.

Numerous participants discussed that attending orientation is what made everything click for them. Prior to orientation, they did not know who to contact with questions. However, after attending orientation, they felt much more confident with their knowledge about resources and who to contact with various questions. Attending orientation allowed participants to feel a sense of belonging on the campus, but it also provided them with knowledge that positively impacted their experience with the process of enrolling in college. After orientation, participants felt much more confident about where resources were located, how to access resources, and who to contact in various departments.

Perseverance

A key theme from this study was perseverance. Participants shared countless stories about how they persevered through many challenges during the process of enrolling in college. Some participants discussed that they were not going to let anything stop them from completing the process of enrolling in college. On the contrary, some participants discussed multiple points in their process of enrolling in college when they almost did not continue their journey towards college. Barclay (2017) discussed the components of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, including the component of "self" in the theory. This finding of perseverance aligns with the psychological components of "self" in the theory, which discusses the existence of resiliency (Barclay, 2017). These participants described how they had to weigh out their challenges against the benefits they perceived they would obtain from attending college. Some factors that caused the participants to consider stopping their journey towards college included financial concerns, working part-time or full-time jobs, parental health concerns, lack of securing housing for college, and the height of COVID. However, these participants were resilient, as described in Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, and they continued their journey towards enrolling in college (Barclay, 2017).

Numerous scholars have described common challenges for FGCS including lower graduation rates, engaging in student involvement, understanding faculty expectations, the cost of attendance for college, and the need for a job while attending college (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Unverferth et al., 2012). FGCS have these factors to consider when deciding to pursue college. However, the factors listed above should also be considered when scholars are considering the challenges that FGCS face during the process of enrolling in college. These challenges are deeply personal, and challenges vary from FGCS to FGCS. The challenges

described by participants in this study is not exhaustive, but it paints a picture of the challenges that FGCS experience before they even step foot on campus for their first class. The participants in this study demonstrated that participants have persevered through deeply personal challenges just when trying to fulfill the requirements of the process of enrolling in college.

The participants in this study were all enrolled in college at the time of their interview for this study. A limitation for this study is that the collective group of participants did not include FGCS who did not complete the process of enrolling in college. A missing factor for this study was to know why those individuals stopped their journey towards college. Their reasonings could be the same as listed above or different, but it should be a consideration for future studies.

Support

In relation to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, Barclay (2017) stated that support is, "the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student" (p. 25). Barclay (2017) discussed how support can look different for individuals at different ages and at different chapters of their lives. It is important to note that the support discussed in this study pertains only to the support shown to participants during their process of enrolling in college, which is the transition that was examined in this study. Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory states that support during a transition can come from family, friends, institutions, and communities (Barclay, 2017).

Participants discussed support and lack of support from various individuals and groups of individuals in their lives. These individuals and groups of individuals included: parent(s), grandparent(s), spouses and partners, other family members, friends, coworkers, high school administrators, and academic advisors. As discussed by Spiegler and Bednarek (2013), parent(s) of FGCS can still serve as a support person and can be deeply associated with the benefits of

higher education, despite the fact that they have not attained a college degree themselves. The findings of this study align with Spiegler and Bednarek's (2013) assertion that parent(s) of FGCS are deeply associated with the benefits of higher education. However, this study also found that much of the support from parent(s) of FGCS was more limited to emotional support. Many participants of this study discussed that their parent(s) provided emotional support, but their parent(s) were not able to provide support for the technical aspects of the responsibilities of the process of enrolling in college. The majority of participants expressed having parent(s) who wanted to help them with the process of enrolling in college, but due to their inexperience with college they did not know how to help. Two participants discussed having deceased parents, and two other participants discussed having no contact with their parents. Regardless of the reason or intent, the majority of participants felt that their parent(s) could not help them with the technical aspects of process of enrolling in college.

This lower level of support from parental figures resulted in participants seeking support and guidance from other individuals. Many participants described a person or multiple people besides their parent(s) that served as their main support person or people during their process of enrolling in college. The key to this finding is that these support people tended to have at least a bachelor's degrees, so they knew how to help the FGCS with the process of enrolling in college. These individuals were able to provide both tangible support and emotional support. Tangible support included providing advice to FGCS, answering questions from FGCS, and assisting FGCS with the requirements of the process of enrolling in college. Emotional support was shown through love, care, and a sense of connection. Some specific examples of support individuals with bachelor's degrees included friend's parent(s), spouses, in-laws, high school guidance counselors, high school vice principals, and high school principals. Some participants described

that they did not have support from their parent(s), and they did not have an alternate support person in their life. These participants described self-reliance and the need to figure out each step of the process of enrolling in college without a support person for guidance.

Although multiple participants described their parent(s) having less ability to support them with the technical aspects of the process of enrolling in college, the majority of these same participants described that their parent(s) and extended family members were able to provide emotional support. One participant became emotional when speaking about how she learned during the process of enrolling in college that her dad wanted to go to the same institution in which she was enrolling, but he was not able to attend due to not being able to afford it. Other participants described how their extended families were so proud to have someone in their family going to college. The emotional support described by participants aligns with Gofen (2009) who discussed the importance of family attitude. Gofen (2009) stated that one of the most important needs for FGCS from their parent(s) is a positive attitude towards education. A positive attitude towards education demonstrated a value for education (Gofen, 2009). The emotional support that participants felt from their parent(s) and extended family demonstrated a positive attitude towards education and a value for education.

The findings of this study suggest that FGCS are most successful if they have individuals in their lives who can provide them with support during the process of enrolling in college. Individuals with a college degree, specifically a bachelor's degree, are able to provide FGCS with the most amount of support because they can provide both tangible support and emotional support. Support individuals who do not have a college degree may not be able to provide tangible support with the logistics of the responsibilities of enrolling in college, but these individuals can still provide emotional support through love, care, and a sense of connection.

These various types of support fulfill the love and belonging needs of FGCS as described by Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. When FGCS experience the feeling of mattering, then their esteem needs are fulfilled by as described by Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. This ultimately allowed FGCS to achieve self-actualization during the process of enrolling in college (Maslow, 1965).

Capital

Compared to FGCS, non-FGCS unfortunately tend to lack cultural capital and social capital (Ward et al., 2012). However, if FGCS can obtain college-related cultural capital and social capital, then that can increase their overall support, knowledge of resources, and comfortability with the system of higher education (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Nicols & Islas, 2016). When participants described their parent(s) not having the knowledge or connections to assist them with the process of enrolling in college, they were describing a lack of social capital. When participants described feeling at a disadvantage when comparing themselves to other students whose parent(s) are alumni of the specific institution or already have a career in career field that their child is seeking, they were comparing themselves to other students who may have social capital and cultural capital because of the experiences of their parents. When participants described how much they enjoyed orientation because of the friends they made and the knowledge they gained, they were describing their experience with social capital and cultural capital. Additionally, the participants who got connected with other support individuals with college degrees also provided the participants with social capital. This increased their network of individuals who have college degrees and understood how to navigate the process of enrolling in college. This in turn provided cultural capital and increased their knowledge of the process and knowledge of resources. This positive impact on their experience with navigating the process of

enrolling in college due to the help of a support person with a college degree demonstrates the need for providing specific assistance to FGCS during the process of enrolling in college.

Mattering

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs demonstrates the importance of social needs. In order for a student to achieve esteem needs and self-actualization, they must first have their social needs met (Tanjula, 2014). Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory also emphasizes the concept of an individual's feeling of mattering. Mattering is described as, "the beliefs people hold, regardless of whether those beliefs are accurate, that they matter to someone significant" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). FGCS participants in this study described various individuals and programs that contributed to their feeling of mattering at the institution. It can be concluded that this feeling of mattering played a vital role during their process of enrolling at the institution and ultimately attending the institution.

Participants of this study described various individuals, academic programs, school traditions, and orientation programs that helped them achieve the feeling of mattering. Some individuals described specific people they met through their process of enrolling in college who realized they were a FGCS and provided them specific support because they were a FGCS. Some participants described attending summer academic programs and how that made them feel closely connected with their academic major at the institution. Some participants described how much their college community loves their school mascot and how engaging in the traditions with the mascot made them feel like they were part of the college community. Many participants discussed how welcome their orientation program made them feel, and they described how the orientation program helped them obtain both friends and knowledge about the college campus and the remainder of the process of enrolling in college.

The majority of participants seemed taken aback by questions regarding the concept of mattering. Some of these participants initially said they did not have any specific experiences that gave them the feeling of mattering, but most of these participants eventually provided examples once they thought about the question longer. Some participants immediately had examples of when someone or something gave them the feeling of mattering, and they were excited to share the stories of those experiences. An observation is that the majority of participants had smiles on their faces when recalling these incidents when they experienced someone or something that gave them the feeling of mattering. Another observation is that almost all participants remembered and described details of these encounters including the specific names of individuals provided them with the feeling of mattering, exactly where the experience occurred on campus, and the exact activity they were engaging in when the experience happened. The level of detail described speaks to the profound impact that these individuals and experiences had on these FGCS, and it speaks to the importance of college administrators making an effort to facilitate experiences that provide students with the feeling of mattering.

Social Identity

The importance of these moments of mattering for participants can also be linked to psychosocial theory including Erikson's (1968) Stages of Development and Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory. Erikson's (1969) Stages of Development identifies that young adults, including college student experience a transition with various relationships in their lives. The shifts in relationships can include relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners (Azmitia et al., 2018). The findings of this study related to mattering suggest that the shifts in relationships can begin during the process of enrolling in college when friendships are formed

and students become aware of resources at the institution. Additionally, Erikson (1968) stated that one of the factors that can influence these transitions is a social group membership. Comparably, Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory stated that an individual's self-concept is influenced by social group membership. Participants of this study have a social identity of being a FGCS, but when they discussed the concept of mattering, they discussed the development of their social identity at the institution as they developed social capital and cultural capital at the institution.

Tanjula (2014) described that college campuses are designed to help college students meet their basic human needs of the physiological needs and safety needs, as described by Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. However, as demonstrated in the findings of this study, individuals and experiences on college campuses also have the ability to move students into higher levels of needs, including self-actualization. Experiences that foster a sense of mattering and a sense of social belonging provide students with love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and eventually self-actualization. Maslow (1965) described self-actualization as, "experiencing full, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration, and total absorption" (p. 111). It is very possible that FGCS may not experience self-actualization during their process of enrolling in college, but they can be moved in this direction through positive experiences they encounter that foster the feeling of mattering and social belonging.

COVID

Multiple participants discussed how COVID impacted their experience during process of enrolling in college, and COVID ultimately created additional challenges for FGCS. These challenges included: not being able to visit campus, attending orientation online, additional medical requirements, changed family responsibilities, and added financial stress. These

challenges were so significant that some participants considered postponing their enrollment in college. However, all participants of this study ultimately continued their enrollment at the institution at which this study took place.

Xavier discussed that he visited the institution at which this study took place just a couple of weeks prior to the global pandemic arriving in the United States. He discussed that he had a wonderful visit to campus, and he had intentions of going to campus again before he started his first semester. However, he was not able to visit the campus again prior to his first semester due to COVID restrictions. He had to complete orientation and a summer academic program online. The findings of this study indicate that summer academic programs can foster a sense of mattering for FGCS. This participant still felt a sense of mattering from his online summer academic program, but his experience was still greatly impacted.

Multiple participants discussed that they had to attend orientation online due to COVID restrictions. The findings of this study indicated that FGCS benefit the most from attending orientation in person, but these participants did not have a choice to attend orientation in person due to the global pandemic. The participants who attended orientation online did not enjoy their orientation experience, and they were unable to make lasting social connections. Their lack of social connections impacted these FGCS when they transitioned to campus during their first semester when there were still COVID restrictions at their institution.

Participants discussed that the presence of COVID created additional medical requirements during their process of enrolling in college. An example of an additional medical requirement included obtaining a negative COVID test before moving into on-campus housing. Participants were able to obtain a COVID test in their hometown prior to coming to campus, or

they were able to obtain a COVID test at the on-campus medical clinic when they arrived on campus.

Rosa specifically discussed how COVID impacted her senior year of high school, which was the same time frame that she was enrolling in college. Both of Rosa's parents had jobs in which they had to continue attending work outside of their home. However, Rosa had to stay home and complete high school online, and her little brother had to stay home from daycare. Rosa ultimately became her brother's caregiver during the height of COVID. This was not a paid job, but rather this was a responsibility placed on her to help her family during the global pandemic.

Erica discussed that her dad lost his job during COVID, which created changes in Erica's family. She had significant concerns about the cost of attending college, and she highly considered taking a year to work full-time and save money prior to attending college. Erica ultimately decided to go straight to college after high school. However, she felt immense financial stress due to her dad losing his job during COVID, and she felt pressured to successfully obtain scholarships. Erica is an example of a FGCS who could have greatly benefited from a financial waiver for the new student enrollment deposit, on-campus housing application, on-campus housing deposit, and the cost of attending orientation. This waiver is a recommendation for policy, and it would greatly impact FGCS and students with financial need.

Conceptual Framework

The guiding concept for this study was support. Ishitani (2003) and Seay et al. (2008) found that FGCS are at risk for attrition once they are at the institution, and Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) found that FGCS are more successful when they have a support system.

Therefore, it can be inferred that it is vital for a FGCS to have a support system during the formal processes of enrolling in college.

In relation to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, Barclay (2017) simply stated that support is, "the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student" (p. 25). Support can be in the form of parent(s) or other family members, and support can also be outside of the family unit. A support system can include friends, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, mentors, university support staff, student affairs staff, academic advisors, and other adults (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory also emphasized the concept of an individual's feeling of mattering. Barclay (2017) described mattering as, "the beliefs people hold, regardless of whether those beliefs are accurate, that they matter to someone significant" (p. 24). FGCS have many challenges during the admission process, formal processes of enrolling in college, and throughout college. Various forms of support can assist FGCS through those challenges and assist students in their belief that they matter, which can be tied to esteem needs described by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Barclay, 2017; Tanjula, 2014). In order for a FGCS to reach self-actualization, which can be interpreted as success in the formal processes of enrolling in college, a FGCS must first achieve these esteem needs (Tanjula, 2014).

Tanjula (2014) described the importance of support as a human need when describing human needs for love, respect, and a sense of belonging as demonstrated by Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. These human needs are not guaranteed, just like support for FGCS during the formal processes of enrolling in college is not guaranteed. Campus departments such as housing and dining provide FGCS with their most basic physiological needs. Campus departments such as campus safety provide students with safety needs. However, the top three

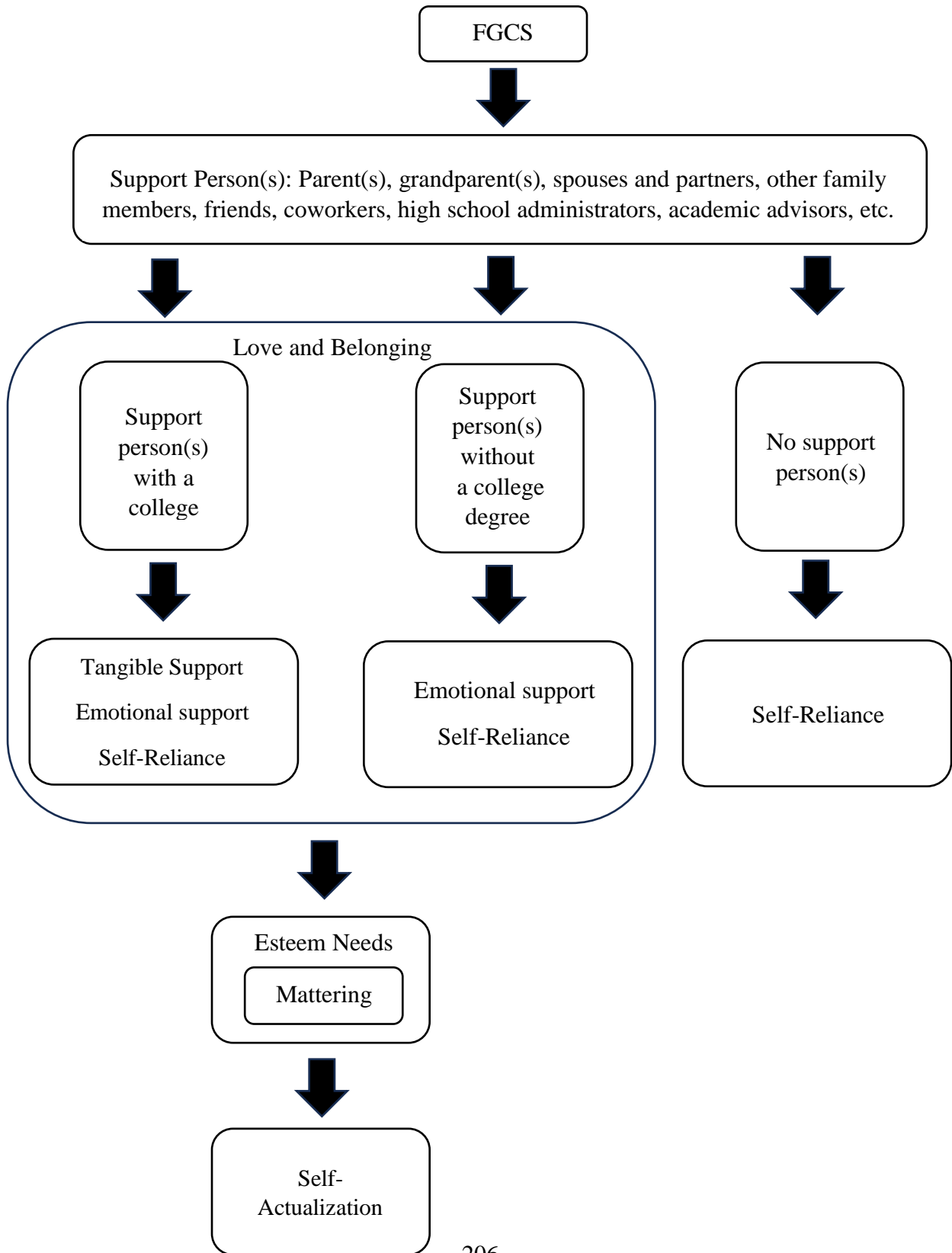
layers of the pyramid are less guaranteed on a college campus. In order for a student to achieve esteem needs and self-actualization, which could be understood as success in the formal processes of enrolling in college, FGCS must first experience love and belonging (Tanjula, 2014).

The findings of this study demonstrate that FGCS need support as they navigate challenges during the process of enrolling in college. Participants of this study described receiving support from parent(s), grandparent(s), spouses and partners, other family members, friends, coworkers, high school administrators, and academic advisors. FGCS who received support from individuals with a college degree received both tangible support and emotional support. Tangible support included providing advice to FGCS, answering questions from FGCS, and assisting FGCS with the requirements of the process of enrolling in college. Emotional support included providing love, care, and a sense of connection for FGCS as they completed the process of enrolling in college. Support person(s) without a college degree were able to provide emotional support to participants. All FGCS demonstrated self-reliance and perseverance as they navigated through the process of enrolling in college.

The findings of this study further emphasize that support and mattering are important for FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. Within Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, support can be tied to the level of love and belonging, and mattering can be tied to the level of esteem needs. If a FGCS is both supported and experiences the feeling of mattering, then they are more likely to experience self-actualization. As FGCS experience move through these levels of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, they experience self-actualization. FGCS who do not experience support may have a more difficult time with the love and belonging level of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. Therefore, those FGCS will also have a more difficult time with their esteem needs and ultimately self-actualization. This concept is demonstrated on Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Support



Implications for Practice

At the core of many challenges for participants was the fact that they could not turn to their parent(s) for assistance when they had questions or did not know how to navigate a portion of the process of enrolling in college. This resulted in participants turning to other individuals for assistance including: grandparent(s), a spouse or partner, other family members, friends, coworkers, and other people they knew who had college degrees. However, FGCS are not guaranteed to have these individuals in their lives to provide guidance and support. However, all FGCS would have the opportunity for guidance and support from the institution in which they are enrolling, and many FGCS, depending on their age and status, may have high school administrators that could provide guidance and support. Both high schools and institutions of higher education need to do more to guide FGCS through the process of enrolling in college.

Numerous participants discussed a lack of guidance, resources, and support from their high school administrators. Multiple participants discussed that their high schools never brought college representatives to their high schools. Participants described their high schools being focused on students taking the ACT test and applying to college, but then their high schools did not provide any guidance once the students were actually admitted into college. Participants expressed wanting more from their high school administrators. Recommendations on how high school administrators should better support FGCS include: arranging for college representatives to visit high schools, providing information on the standard ways of contacting a college, providing guidance on the FAFSA paperwork, providing information about local scholarships in which FGCS could apply, providing resources to the parents of FGCS, and providing other general information related to the common requirements included in the process of enrolling in college.

Additionally, institutions of higher education need to provide resources for all students, especially FGCS, about the requirements of the process of enrolling in college. As mentioned above, multiple participants discussed the organization of resources and how they felt they had to create their own single, comprehensive list of all the requirements they needed to complete during the process of enrolling in college. It would greatly benefit students if institutions created, updated, and maintained a checklist of this nature for incoming students. Non-FGCS may have parent(s) guiding them to the next steps, but FGCS are often left to their own devices to piece together multiple checklists, emails, and other forms of notification from institutions. In general, institutions need to make FGCS a priority during the process of enrolling in college to help elevate their challenges.

Institutions should immediately reach out to FGCS when they are admitted to the institution to connect them with their admissions counselor to ask questions or ask for referrals to other departments when needed. Additionally, institutions should consider ongoing checkpoint meetings with FGCS during the process of enrolling. Checkpoint meetings should include an employee from the institution, such as an admissions counselor or an employee from the orientation office, sitting down with the FGCS to make sure they are accomplishing all requirements of the formal processes of enrolling at the institution. This meeting should include answering questions, providing contact information for various departments, and reviewing a comprehensive enrollment checklist that is provided by the institution.

Institutions should prioritize maintaining a list of FGCS and communicating that list to key departments on campus who should know when a student is a FGCS. This would allow these departments to provide intentional support to FGCS and better guide FGCS with the resources in the department. This would also give these departments an opportunity to initiate contact with

FGCS to offer support. These departments include but are not limited to the offices that oversee the following: admissions, financial aid, billing, housing, orientation, and medical requirements.

Institutions should consider matching FGCS with a peer mentor. This peer mentorship should be facilitated by the office that plans and organizes orientation programs. The peer mentors should include students who are already fully enrolled in at the institution and therefore have a better understanding of the enrollment requirements. The peer mentors should serve as an additional resource for FGCS as they navigate the formal processes of enrolling. These mentors should be equipped with a comprehensive enrollment checklist from the institution, a list of resources that FGCS may need, and a list of answers to frequently asked questions.

The aspect that seemed to impact the participants of this study the most was the cost of attending college. Participants talked at length about how they had to navigate learning to pay for college through scholarships, loans, grants, and work study programs. Their starting point for navigating the cost of attendance was always completing the FAFSA, but many participants expressed their frustration and confusion with FAFSA. However, one participant discussed how their community provided a FAFSA workshop for students and parents, and one participant discussed how their high school walked each high school senior through the FAFSA step-by-step. Both of these participants discussed how beneficial these programs were and how they wish all FGCS could be provided with a similar resource. Therefore, it is my recommendation that FAFSA workshops should be created for FGCS. These workshops should be planned by the local community, high schools, or institutions of higher education. Providing this type of workshop would specifically benefit FGCS because of their focus and concern for completing the FAFSA when navigating the cost of attending college.

The institution at which this study took place has an administrator whose various job responsibilities includes supporting FGCS. This administrator has many different job responsibilities, and supporting FGCS is just one of those many responsibilities. Unfortunately, none of the participants of this study mentioned being aware of this administrator or the assistance that they could provide to FGCS. I recommend that institutions have administrator(s) whose job responsibilities are fully dedicated to assisting FGCS. Similarly, I recommend that high schools consider developing a role in which an administrator's job responsibilities are fully dedicated to college preparation, college applications, and assisting high school students with the formal processes of enrolling in college.

Recommendations for Future Research

Various information shared by participants in this study lends towards additional research that needs to be conducted involving FGCS. First, all participants discussed the financial aspects of attending college and their various experiences navigating FAFSA, scholarships, loans, grants, and work study programs. Future studies should explore more of the experiences of FGCS navigating financial aspects of enrolling in college and all throughout college. FGCS participants in this study described their experiences during the process of enrolling in college, but there is more to be discovered about the experiences of FGCS with financial aspects all throughout college. Future studies should also explore how a FGCS family's financial status impacts how they navigate various experiences related to college. Financial status can impact a FGCS ability to go to college out of state, live on campus, live off campus but not with their family, involvement in extracurricular activities, the need for having a job, and more.

Second, future studies should explore various institutions and institution types to determine how they are or are not supporting FGCS during the process of enrolling in college

and all throughout college. The CFGSS designates college campuses as First-Gen Forward because of various resources on their campuses that are meant to support FGCS. Future studies should take a deeper look into these institution's resources and the experiences of FGCS at those institutions. For example, the institution at which this study took place does not provide any of the resources that this study suggested for practitioners including: checkpoint meetings with FGCS, a comprehensive enrollment checklist, communicating a list of FGCS for various departments on campus, peer mentors for FGCS, and FAFSA workshops. Future research should look at other institutions to see if these types of resources are already being provided to FGCS, and if so, then how are those resources impacting the experiences of FGCS during their process of enrolling at that institution.

Lastly, a limitation of this study is that all 18 participants were currently enrolled at the institution at the time of their interview for the study. However, future research should attempt to identify individuals who were admitted to the institution but never fully enrolled at the institution. Future studies should dig deeper into why the admitted FGCS did not complete the process of enrolling in college. Future research should attempt to pinpoint the specific points during the formal processes of enrolling in college when FGCS decided to postpone or completely stop their process of enrolling in college and decided to no longer attend college. These points could include but are not limited to: completing the FAFSA, completing housing requirements, completing medical requirements, attending orientation, completing financial requirements, and more. It is possible that there could have been personal experiences that prevented the admitted FGCS from completing the process of enrolling in college. However, research should be done in this area to determine if these admitted FGCS did not fully enroll because they needed more support from their high school, institution of higher education, or

other individuals in their lives in order to successfully complete the formal processes of enrolling in college.

Recommendations for Policy

As discussed, the aspect of enrolling in college that seemed to impact the participants of this study the most was the cost of attending college. Participants talked at length about how they had to navigate learning to pay for college through scholarships, loans, grants, and work study programs. Participants also discussed the various financial requirements that they had to pay out-of-pocket prior to obtaining funding from these various sources. Some examples of their out-of-pocket expenses included: new student enrollment deposit, on-campus housing application, on-campus housing deposit, and the cost of attending orientation. At the institution at which this study took place, the new student enrollment deposit is \$250, the on-campus housing application is \$100, the on-campus housing deposit is \$200, the cost of a student attending orientation is \$150, and the cost of a parent or guardian attending orientation is \$75 per person. This is a total of approximately \$775, and that does not include the cost of transportation or lodging while attending orientation.

These out-of-pocket expenses are a financial burden for FGCS. These out-of-pocket costs can make the difference of a FGCS having the opportunity to live on campus, attend orientation in person, or have a parent or guardian attend orientation. The findings of this study indicate that it is beneficial for FGCS to attend orientation in person rather than online, and it is also beneficial for the parents of FGCS to attend orientation.

Administrators of higher education should implement a financial waiver for FGCS and other students with financial need that can assist them during the process of enrolling in college. Depending on funding and need, this waiver could cover all or partial amounts of the cost of the

new student enrollment deposit, the on-campus housing application, the on-campus housing deposit, and the cost of attending orientation. As demonstrated by this study, FGCS have financial need, and these various out-of-pocket costs create a financial burden for FGCS. This waiver would alleviate the financial burden on FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. This waiver would also allow FGCS to have greater access to living on campus, attend orientation in person, and bring a parent or guardian to orientation.

Conclusion

This purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. FGCS who participated in this study described some challenges that were expected to emerge from this study based on the findings of Baumhardt and Reilly (n.d.), Graham et al. (2018), and Nelson (2021). These challenges that were more expected included: financial requirements, securing housing, attending orientation, and completing medical requirements (Baumhardt & Reilly, n.d.; Graham et al., 2018; Nelson, 2021). However, the finding that seemed to have the greatest impact on all participants of this study was their need for various forms of financial aid. This study found that various forms of financial aid greatly impacted the FGCS participant's abilities to attend college. Participants talked at length about their experience with FAFSA, and they talked at length about how they had to navigate learning to pay for college through scholarships, loans, grants, and work study programs. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators released a report in 2013 that found that financial aid information contained in a variety of financial aid offers were overwhelming and confusing to students and their families (JBL Associates, 2013). A separate study by Taylor and Bicak (2019) found that across the United States, many students are not familiar with basic financial aid terms and phrases including: FAFSA, entrance counseling, and exit counseling. The

findings of this study support these findings from JBL Associates (2013) and Taylor and Bicak (2019). Multiple participants expressed how the financial aid office at their institution guided them through their lack of understanding the financial information.

Some less expected findings included family dynamics, the organization of resources, and communication with the institution. The findings of this study highlight the need for support for FGCS during the process of enrolling in college. Some FGCS obtain support from individuals in their lives, other than their parent(s), who have college degrees. However, not all FGCS have individuals in their lives who have college degrees. Support for all FGCS should start with high school administrators and college administrators (CFGSS, 2020). This study demonstrated that participants sought more support from these administrators, and this study demonstrated participants who felt the feeling of mattering when these entities provided support. This finding provides support Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory (Barclay, 2017). More support from these entities has the ability to foster confidence and reassurance within FGCS. This was demonstrated by how confident and reassured many participants felt after attending orientation programs where they were connected with new friends and new knowledge of how to navigate the campus and navigate the remainder of the process of enrolling in college. This finding also supports how important it is for FGCS to receive support from various people in their lives. Previous research from the CFGSS (2020), Kojaku and Nunez (1998), and Reid and Moore (2008) indicated the importance of support from high school administrators and the institutions of higher education. Findings from this study also demonstrated the support that participants felt from parents, grandparents, spouses and partners, other family members, friends, coworkers, and other individuals with college degrees. The need for FGCS to experience support

from these individuals provides support for Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory (Barclay, 2017).

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Table 2*Race Among College Students in 2015-2016 (CFGSS, 2020).*

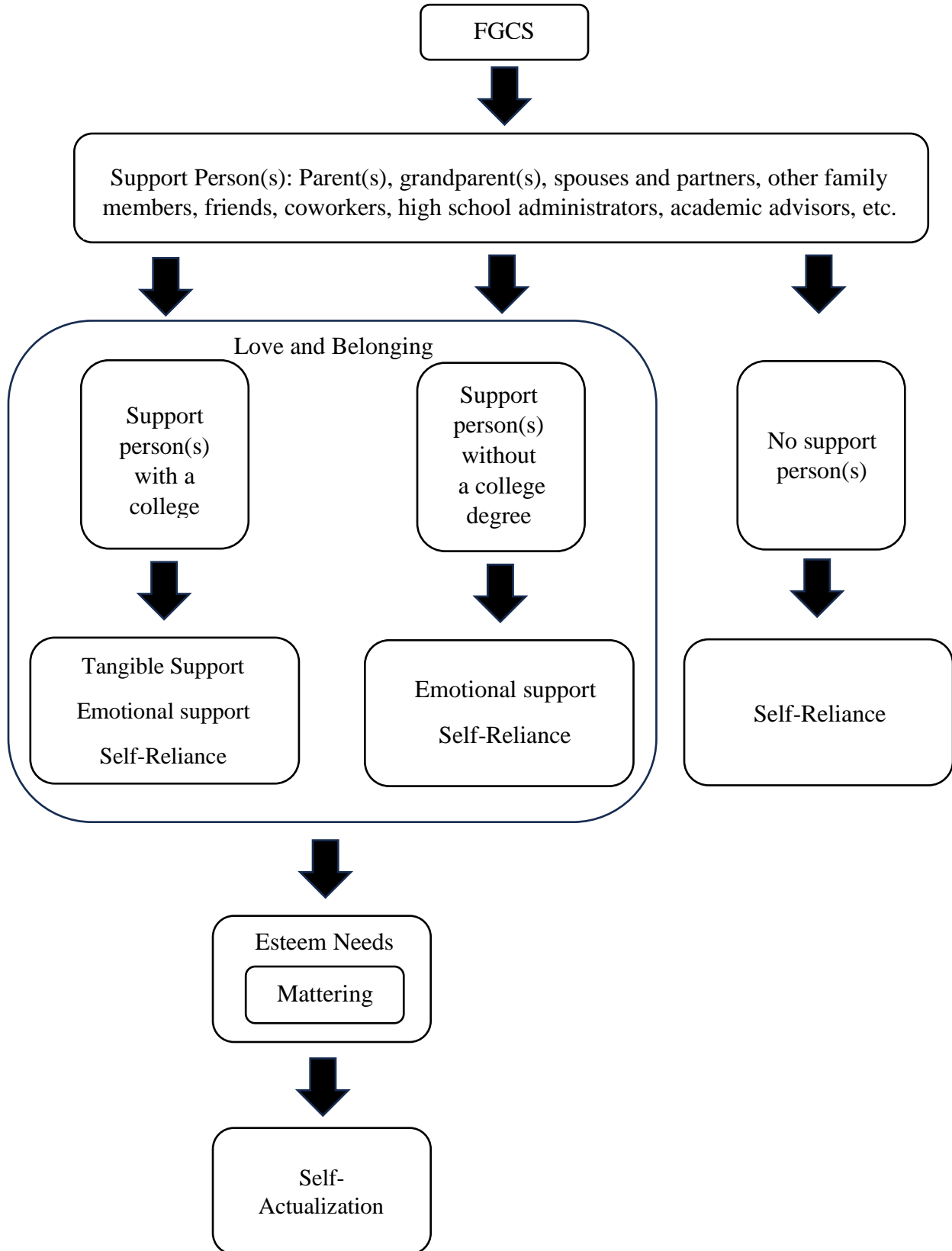
Race	FGCS	Non-FGCS
White	46%	61%
Black	18%	12%
Hispanic/Latinx	25%	14%
Asian	6%	8%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	0.5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.4%

Table 3*Demographics and Characteristics of Participants*

Name	Year in School	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	Major
Abi	Junior	25	White	Female	Pre-Vet Animal Sciences
Ashley	Freshman	18	White	Female	Chemistry
Billy	Junior	22	Biracial	Male	Aviation Management
Carrie	Junior	20	German	Female	Public Relations
Chris	Sophomore	20	White	Male	Aerospace Engineering
Erica	Freshman	19	White	Female	Architecture
George	Junior	21	White	Male	Mechanical Engineering
Kelsey	Senior	22	Black	Female	Computer Science
Kimberly	Freshman	18	White	Female	Biomedical Sciences
Lafoy	Junior	31	White	Male	Accounting
Liz	Senior	22	White	Female	Professional Flight
Luna	Sophomore	20	Persian	Female	Organismal Biology
Nathan	Sophomore	20	White	Male	Computer Science
Paige	Senior	19	White	Female	Nutrition
Rosa	Junior	21	Biracial	Female	Law & Justice
Sarah	Freshman	19	White	Female	Nursing
Tara	Freshman	19	White	Female	Fine Arts
Xavier	Senior	21	Black	Male	Electrical Engineering

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Support



Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. What year are you currently in college?
2. When did you enroll in college? (e.g. fall of 2022)
3. What were the formal processes that you were required to complete in order to get enrolled in college?
4. What did you find challenging about these formal processes of enrolling in college?
5. Is there anyone or anything that you feel created some of these challenges?
6. Who or what do you think could have alleviated some of these challenges?
7. What was your experience like with the FAFSA requirements?
8. What was your experience like with other financial requirements? (e.g. financial aid or paying the tuition, fees, or housing)
9. What was your experience like with orientation?
10. Did you/do you live on-campus?
 - a. What was your experience like with on-campus housing requirements?
11. What was your experience like with required medical documentations?
12. Were there any times during the formal processes of enrolling in college when you thought about quitting and no longer enrolling?
 - a. Tell me about what caused you to have those feelings?
 - b. What motivated you to continue your journey to formally enrolling in college?
13. When did you realize that you are a FGCS?
14. Did anyone offer specific support to you because you are a FGCS? If so, who?

15. Who or what provided the most support to you during the formal processes of enrolling in college?
16. Did anyone or anything at the institution make you feel special or like you mattered?
 - a. How did those gestures or items make you feel?
 - b. Do you have more examples of when someone or something made you feel special or like you mattered when enrolling in college?
17. Who or what do you think could have provided more support to you during the formal processes of enrolling in college?
18. Are there any other specific stories related your formal processes of enrolling in college that you would like to share?

Appendix B

Letter to Student Affairs Colleagues

May 25, 2023

Dear Colleague:

My name is Allison Moran, and I am a Ph.D. student in the Administration of Higher Education program at Auburn University. I am currently conducting research on the experiences of first generation college students (FGCS). Specifically, I am seeking to understand the challenges that FGCS face during the formal processes of enrolling in college.

I have selected [REDACTED] as the site for this study. I am seeking to identify FGCS who can participate in this study. Specifically, participants would participate in a one-hour confidential interview on Zoom.

Do you have any FGCS that you would recommend for this study? If so, can you please send me their name and email?

Thank you in advance for your assistance with identifying FGCS for this study.

Sincerely,

Allison Moran
Doctoral Candidate
ajm0083@auburn.edu

Supervised by faculty advisor Dr. Jill Salisbury-Glennon

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Student:

My name is Allison Moran, and I am a Ph.D. student in the Administration of Higher Education program at Auburn University. I am currently conducting research on the experiences of first generation college students (FGCS). Specifically, I am seeking to understand the challenges that FGCS face during the formal processes of enrolling in college.

I have selected [REDACTED] as the site for this study, and [insert student affairs colleague name] recommended you as a FGCS who could potentially participate in the study.

Would you be willing to engage in a one-hour confidential interview on Zoom? If you agree to participate, then I can provide you with more details about the study and interview process.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Allison Moran
Doctoral Candidate
ajm0083@auburn.edu

Supervised by faculty advisor Dr. Jill Salisbury-Glennon