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Running head: STRESS IN FIRST-YEAR, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

An Exploration of Stress in the First-Year Experience of First-Generation College Students

by

Mary Kaitlyn Turner

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Science in First-Year Studies

Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my late grandmother, Nell Howard “Maw Maw.” My getting an education was the most important thing to you, and a day does not go by where I don’t think of you and all you taught me. Although I wish you were here to watch me graduate, I feel your spirit guiding me daily. I love you; I miss you, and I hope I have made you proud.

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Abstract

First-generation college students are a growing majority on national college campuses. Though research has been extensive in this area to identify barriers for first-generation college students, an area with minimal research is the effect of stress on the academic success of first-generation college students. This study utilized a narrative, qualitative approach to answer the research questions presented. The data was collected using a focus group model. This study found that the various barriers faced by first-generation college students often lead to high levels of stress. The stress they experience may have an effect on not only the academic performance of first-generation students but also on their mental and physical health. The findings of this study suggest best practices to promote the success of first-generation college students and indicate directions for future research.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As first-generation college students become the new majority on college campuses nationwide, colleges and universities continue to study new and innovative strategies to aid in their success. Currently, first-generation college students make up 56 percent of the student body in the United States (RTI International, 2019). While first-generation students are the majority of the college student population, they still do not persist or graduate at the same rate as continuing-generation college students. After six years of postsecondary education, 56 percent of first-generation college students have not received a degree, versus 40 percent of continuing-generation students.

Extensive research in the field of first-generation college students has been conducted in an effort to understand the reasons first-generation students are not performing at the same level as continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001; Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). Despite the many studies conducted over time on first-generation student success, many of the findings contradict one another. In fact, one would be hard pressed to determine what exactly a first-generation college student is. Definitions differ depending on the source used. Research studies, as well as institutions, federal programs, state programs, and the students themselves, all present different ideas about who is a first-generation college student. The definition used in this study is the one used by federal TRIO programs nationwide, which is that neither parent has graduated from college with a bachelor's degree or higher (Higher Education Act [HEA], 1965). The reason for this use is simple: though a student may have a parent who has completed some college, that parent may be unable to fully understand and explain the application and enrollment

processes to their student as well as inform them of what to expect when they start their first-year of college.

First-generation college students often enter higher education at a disadvantage and, as such, do not achieve the same success as their continuing-generation peers. The United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), publishes statistics regarding the retention, persistence, and graduation (RPG) of first-generation college students in higher education. First-generation college students enroll in higher education at a lower rate, 72 percent, than do college students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree, 93 percent (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Additionally, first-generation college students are more likely to leave postsecondary education (33 percent) compared to students whose parents have bachelor's degrees at (14 percent). Additionally, first-generation college students are less likely to attend doctoral degree programs than their continuing-generation peers, with only four percent of first-generation students enrolling in doctoral degree programs compared to 10 percent of students whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher.

First-generation college students are not only less likely to persist in college and earn advanced degrees, they are also less likely to even attend a four-year university compared to their continuing-generation peers (Skomsvold, 2014). Of all first-generation students enrolling in institutions of higher education for the 2011-2012 academic year, only 25 percent attended a four-year institution, whereas 48 percent attended a two-year institution. First-generation college students are also more likely to be non-traditional students above the age of 24, have dependents, come from households with an unmet financial need, and be from a minority background (Balemian, Feng, & College Board 2013). Additionally, first-generation college students are more likely to need remedial coursework upon entering higher education than their continuing-

generation peers (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). Furthermore, first-generation college students are less likely to use campus support services such as tutoring, career services, and health services (RTI International, 2019).

Given these statistics, it is apparent that first-generation college students face more barriers than non-first-generation college students. Each barrier separately can make adjusting to college difficult; however, when students face multiple barriers, college success becomes a more challenging task. One major barrier faced by first-generation college students is a lack of the “social capital” that continuing-generation students and their parents possess (Field, 2008). Social capital is a term that refers to shared knowledge among a group, which then allows members of the group to succeed (Coleman, 1988). Continuing-generation college students benefit from the shared knowledge of their parents’ college experiences, this allows them to have a smoother transition into college. As a result of this lack of social capital, first-generation college students often lack access to the information needed to take standardized tests, understand college rigor requirements, apply for financial aid, and complete necessary forms for enrollment. Additionally, these students may lack information regarding what to expect in college, which may heighten their culture shock when they first arrive on campus.

Published literature has focused on a wide variety of areas in which first-generation students may face hardships: feelings of belonging, familial support, college preparedness, and pre-college education (Bostdorff, Falduto, & Gates, 2010; Checkoway, 2018; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). All of these areas play a crucial role in success for all college students; however, first-generation college students start their journey lacking in many of these areas. Additionally, first-generation college students are oftentimes part of other underrepresented groups on college campuses, such as low-income students and minority

students (Jenhagir, 2010). These added factors can compound the underlying risk factors for students and create an environment that is not conducive to success. It is natural for students in such a position to feel a heightened anxiety level. College is a stressful time for even the most prepared students with a tremendous amount of support, and many studies indicate that stress is a serious factor for these students' success (Demeuse, 1985; Tuckwiller & Dardick, 2018). However, there is minimal research on stress as it relates to first-generation college students, leaving a gap in the literature.

This lack of research on stress and first-generation college students is troubling. First-generation college students are more likely to hold a part- or full- time job, have dependents, be “non-traditional” students, be former military, come from a low-income household, take remedial coursework, or be from minority backgrounds (Jehhagir, 2010; Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017; RTI International, 2019). The stress of immersing themselves in an unfamiliar environment, compounded by the additional factors that are often present for first-generation college students, may play a factor in their RPG. However, without in-depth research on this subject area, colleges and universities are missing key information needed to inform their efforts to promote the success of first-generation students.

Though first-generation students often times face greater barriers than their continuing-generation peers, there is also evidence to suggest that these students enter college with the tools to be more resilient than their continuing-generation peers (Alvarado, Spataru, & Woodbury, 2017). Additionally, first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds oftentimes can draw from their hardships as motivation to succeed (Hébert, 2018). In fact, in the only study found on first-generation college students and their reactions to stressful situations, their

background was seen as a strength, and students thrived under stressful conditions (Stephens et al., 2015).

Statement of Problem

First-generation college students have a lower rate of RPG than continuing-generation students. Though programs have been implemented by the federal government, state governments, and individual institutions, universities are still having trouble retaining and graduating first-generation students. While prior research has focused on a multitude of issues, such as college readiness, sense of belonging, and familial support, there is a lack of research on stress, anxiety, and mental health among the first-generation subpopulation. By not examining the impact of these factors on first-generation students, researchers may be missing key elements that affect the RPG of this population.

Background and Need

First-generation college students have been studied extensively (Bostdorff, Falduto, & Gates, 2010; Checkoway, 2018; Choy, 2001; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Despite this, there are still gaps in achievement between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students. Though studies have focused on multiple factors that could contribute to a gap in the retention and graduation rates, one factor often not considered is the role of stress in the academic success of first-generation students in their first-year of college.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the overall experience of first-year, first-generation college students with a focus on stress and what factors may have led to stress in this student population. Additionally, this study hopes to better understand what affect, if any, stress has on the success of first-generation college students.

Research Questions

The research questions investigated in this study were as follows:

- What factors influence the success of first-year, first-generation college students?
- What role, if any, does stress play in the experiences of first-year, first-generation college students?

By seeking answers to these questions, this study hopes to add to the field of higher education research in terms of the first-generation student experience, which in turn, may aid in informing programming geared towards increasing the retention, progression, and graduation rate of first-generation college students.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be utilized throughout this thesis:

Continuing-Generation College Student: Student for whom at least one parent has completed a bachelor's degree or higher.

First-Generation College Student: Student for whom neither parent has completed a bachelor's degree or higher (Higher Education Act, 1965).

First-Year Student: A student who has completed no more than 30 credit hours of postsecondary education (Kennesaw State University, 2020).

Non-Traditional Student: An undergraduate student who is 25 years of age or older at the time of enrollment in post-secondary education (Hittepole, n.d.).

Stress: The feeling that one's mental health, physical health, and overall well-being is threatened, or the perception that it is threatened, because of circumstances that overstretch the one's ability to cope.

Conclusion

Though first-generation college students are often the topic of higher education research (Choy 2001; Jenhagir, 2010; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012), there is still a lack of research regarding the effect of stress on their academic success. Prior research has shown that first-generation students often face more barriers than their continuing-generation peers (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019). However, there is additional research to suggest that the hardships faced by first-generation college students often build stronger and more resilient students (Alvarado, Spataru, & Woodbury, 2017; Hébert, 2018; Stephens et al., 2015). Despite institutional policies and practices based on a large body of research, first-generation students are still not achieving the same levels of success as their continuing-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018).

This study aims to add to the current body of literature by researching how stress affects first-generation college students. This qualitative study used focus groups to gather data from first-generation college students at a four-year institution in order to examine their adjustment to college. The overarching goal of the study was to add critical information to the field of first-year and transition studies by investigating the experiences of first-generation college students and the stress that they encountered. Additionally, the researcher hopes that this research will allow for changes in institutional policies and procedures for serving first-year, first-generation college students.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of stress on first-generation, first-year college students. Research on first-generation students has focused on a wide variety of obstacles faced by this population of students; however, stress has not yet been investigated as a barrier to their success. While stress has been examined as a factor in the success of college students overall, there is a distinct lack of research on the effects of stress on the success of first-generation college students.

This literature review will focus on three areas which are imperative for the design and understanding of the study. First, this literature review will look at the large body of research on first-generation students as a whole. Next, it will explore the factors previously identified as barriers to success for first-generation students. Finally, it will review the effects that stress has on the college student population. This will give a comprehensive understanding of the importance of investigating stress in first-generation, first-year college students.

First-Generation College Student Enrollment and Persistence

As first-generation college students become the new majority across college campuses nationwide (RTI International, 2019), many universities have looked to increase their success. Federal educational outreach programs that target first-generation college students have worked since 1965 to increase the enrollment as well as the retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) of first-generation college students. In addition, many colleges and universities have provided services that target this population of students in order to aid them in successfully completing

two-year and four-year degrees. In order to serve first-generation college students, colleges must know who they are and understand their backgrounds.

One important study on first-generation college students is Choy's 2001 "Students Who Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment." This study, which analyzed the factors that affect first-generation enrollment and degree attainment, used multiple data sets in order to collect a high volume of data from multiple cohorts of students.

Choy (2001) found that students whose parents did not have at least a bachelor's degree were more likely to be minorities and have a lower income. In fact, 51 percent of students whose parents had a high school diploma or less had annual family incomes below \$25,000. Additionally, Choy found that first-generation students were more likely to enroll in a two-year college versus a four-year university, were more likely to enroll only part time (fewer than 12 credit hours) versus full time (12 credit hours or more), and tended to work a full-time job while in college. First-generation students were also less likely to take rigorous course work in high school, making them less academically prepared for college than those students whose parents held bachelor's degrees.

Choy (2001) discovered that first-generation students were more likely to drop out after their first-year of college compared to their continuing-generation peers (23 percent versus 10 percent), and they were also less likely than continuing-generation students to return to any post-secondary institution once they had left. Additionally, first-generation students were less likely to have attained a bachelor's degree than their continuing-generation peers after five years (13 percent versus 33 percent).

Current studies also reflect the same trends in higher education degree attainment for first-generation college students. A longitudinal study conducted by Cataldi, Bennett, and Chen (2018) investigated post-secondary enrollment, persistence, and graduation in first-generation college students, as well as the characteristics of these students. This study focused on a cohort of students who were sophomores in 2002 and followed them through their postsecondary journey. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of student enrollment, retention, progression, and graduation as well as comparisons between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students. This study defined first-generation college students as students whose parents had no postsecondary experience.

The findings of the study indicated that there were several differences in the high school and postsecondary experiences of students in the first-generation and continuing-generation population (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Potential first-generation college students were far less likely to take a rigorous course of study while in high school, with only 16 percent of those students taking a rigorous course of study as compared to 37 percent of students whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher. Additionally, first-generation students were less likely to earn AP credit (18 percent) versus continuing-generation students (44 percent), and first-generation students were less likely to have taken calculus while in high school as compared to their continuing-generation peers (7 percent and 22 percent, respectively).

The study also revealed that the same trend was evident with enrollment immediately after high school (within three months of graduation) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). First-generation students enrolled at a rate of 58 percent, students whose parents had some college enrolled at a rate of 63 percent, and students whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher enrolled at a rate of 78 percent. Additionally, first-generation college students tended to enroll in

two-year institutions in higher numbers (46 percent) as compared to their continuing-generation peers (26 percent).

The findings of the study also showed that first-generation students were more likely to have withdrawn from college before graduation than students whose parents had some college experience and students whose parents had a bachelor's degree (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Students whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher were also more likely to have stayed on track to graduate (67 percent) versus first-generation college students (48 percent). After six years enrolled in any level of postsecondary education, fewer first-generation students had graduated or remained enrolled (56 percent) compared to students whose parents had some college experience or had a bachelor's degree (63 percent and 74 percent, respectively).

This study complements Choy's (2001) study as it illustrates that the trends in first-generation enrollment, persistence, and graduation are still the same nearly two decades later. Though the gaps between the subpopulations are slowly closing, there are still significant gaps in student achievement. These two studies help us to better understand the differences in preparedness for college, enrollment, retention, and graduation. Additionally, the studies give insight into "who" first-generation students are.

Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) provide greater insight into the complexities of a first-generation college student. Their work highlights the vast differences between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students on a personal level, revealing that first-generation college students, as compared to continuing-generation students, felt less academically prepared, felt they had less study time, worried more about financial aid, and had more concerns about failing out of college. Additionally, many first-generation students had lower expectations and aspirations for themselves, and believed that they would not be able

to achieve as much in comparison with their continuing-generation students. However, first-generation students also believe that they have more at stake and that they have greater motivation for attending college than their continuing-generation peers.

Additionally, Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) offer a glimpse into the causes of the findings in the Choy (2001) study and the Cataldi, Bennett, and Chen (2018) study. For example, one finding in both studies was that first-generation college students were more likely to attend two-year community colleges. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) point out that community colleges are often a more welcoming environment for these students since first-generation students are typically not well prepared academically for the rigors of college. In addition, community colleges are a much less expensive option, which is highly important for students who often come from low-income backgrounds and how have little financial support from their families. Since first-generation students are often working, non-traditional, or need to live at home, they find that community colleges offer a quality education that better suits their needs than does a four-year institution.

When it comes to dealing with the process of enrollment in college (i.e., applications, financial aid, orientations, etc.), first-generation college students lack “social capital.” Social capital is something parents pass on to their child, and it can serve as a roadmap to success in enrolling and completing college. As first-generation students cannot gain this social capital from their parents, they are unable to rely on this previous knowledge to make decisions about college (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). First-generation college students do not have the advantage of this capital, such as knowledge about the college application process or information that provides insight into the college experience, in order to navigate their way through the college experience. This lack of social capital can have a major impact on the success of first-

generation college students. Without this assistance, a first-generation college student may not know what kind of college they want to apply for, how to go about applying for financial aid, or even that they have to attend orientation or pay enrollment fees to hold their slot. This can hinder the enrollment of first-generation students as well as their retention once they begin college and realize that a school is the wrong fit for what they intend to major in or pursue after graduation.

The studies discussed above offer insight into common characteristics of first-generation college students, affording researchers and institutions a better understanding of who these students are, how they are faring in college, and why they have difficulty attaining the same level of success as continuing-generation college students. The next section discusses the specific barriers often faced by first-generation college students.

Barriers to Success

First-generation college students often face additional barriers to success beyond those encountered by continuing-generation college students. These barriers may include a lack of information regarding college life, lack of familial support, lack of financial support and difficulties connecting to the college community and finding their place at college (Bostdorff, Falduto, & Gates, 2010; Checkoway, 2018; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Gibbons, Rhinehart, and Hardin (2019) studied first-generation students' adjustment to college in order to better understand the barriers faced by these students. Through their study, these researchers also gleaned information on the currently available campus services were currently that were most beneficial to first-generation students.

The findings of the study indicate that familial connections can both hinder and help when it comes to college success (Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019). First-generation students reported that although their families pushed them to go to college, often their parents'

lack of knowledge regarding college made the process harder on both the student and parents. Parents were often hesitant to have their student leave home, preferring that they attend a local community college and live at home, regardless of the student's preference of plans. Since their parents had no experience with the college application process, the students had to complete their applications, essays, and financial support documentation by themselves.

Money and financial aid were also reported as huge barriers to initial and continual college enrollment for first-generation students. Participants in the study reported that financial support was often the deciding factor in their choice of college (Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019). Their parents also did not have the financial means to support them while in college; consequently, it was the responsibility of the students to fully support themselves. Many first-generation students were unaware of the complexity of the financial aid process, such as reapplying for scholarships each year. A large, overarching theme of the findings was a general lack of information on the part of the first-generation students regarding the various situations they faced when applying to and enrolling in, college. One student was unaware that orientation was required; another felt overwhelmed by the various application materials and their deadlines, which came as a surprise to both the student and their family. The lack of support, lack of prior knowledge, and financial strain caused these students additional stress. The study states that the students found support to deal with their stress, but it did not go into detail regarding what that support looked like.

Another barrier faced by first-generation college students that may lead to higher levels of stress is achievement guilt. Achievement guilt, as described in a study conducted by Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015), occurs among first-generation college students when they recognize the economic and social/environmental differences between their families/home life

and their life at the university. Students reported feelings of guilt when they surpassed the achievements of others from their homes and neighborhoods. This guilt leads to a conundrum for first-generation students, who are proud of their achievements but simultaneously concerned about how they will be perceived by their family members back home.

Achievement guilt was previously thought to affect minority first-generation college students more so than white first-generation college students since the focus on independence is higher in the white culture whereas minority cultures often focus on interdependence (Covarrubias and Fryberg 2015). A study conducted by Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) found that first-generation Latinx students were more likely than continuing-generation white students to feel this achievement guilt. However, Latinx and white first-generation college students showed no difference in achievement guilt, highlighting that cultural differences do not in fact change the level of guilt felt by first-generation students. Similar to the first-generation Latinx students, white students reported feeling more achievement guilt than their continuing-generation counterparts. The study was replicated with Native American and African American students, and, again, ethnic group was less of a predictor of achievement guilt than was college attendance. This highlights that achievement guilt is a problem faced by all first-generation college students and is not influenced by cultural differences.

Achievement guilt can be a significant barrier for first-generation college students. This guilt makes students more susceptible to dropping out of college or leaving a four-year university to attend a technical or community college so that they may be closer to their families and help with financial struggles. The struggles of their families, financial or otherwise, can be an additional cause of stress for students living away from home because they are unable to help from their college or university. Given the financial barriers and lack of familial support

highlighted in Gibbons, Rhinehart, and Hardin (2019), a picture begins to emerge revealing how these barriers may cause stress which, in turn, could lead to lower retention and graduation rates among first-generation students.

Stress and College Success

College is a time of change for all students as they adapt and adjust to the newfound workload and responsibilities. The changes they face can often cause stress in college students. Seminal research on college students and stress, conducted by Ross, Niebling, and Heckart (1999) examined the stressors faced by college students and how these stressors affect their success. Grades, as revealed by the study, are not the only stressful component of a student's first-year of college. College is a time of change for all students as they adjust to the rigor of college course work, grow accustomed to living in residence halls, learn to manage their time, and deal with financial needs on their own. Through their study, the researchers sought to determine which factors cause the most stress for college students.

Ross, Niebling, and Heckart (1999) found that the top contributors to stress among college students were the following: "change in sleeping habits (89%), vacations/breaks (82%), change in eating habits (74%), new responsibilities (73%), and increased class workload (73%)." Additional stressors included financial difficulties and changes in social activities, both of which were reported among 71 percent of students. The study points out that grades caused some stress for students, however, it was not among the top contributors of stress. Intrapersonal issues were the top stressors among the 100 participants in the study.

Many of the stressors highlighted in the study conducted by Ross, Niebling, and Heckart (1999) are similar to barriers identified by Gibbons, Rhinehart, and Hardin (2019). However,

these barriers have not typically been identified as “stressors” in the research on first-generation college students but rather simply as barriers to success.

There is not much published research that targets first-generation college students and the effect of stress on their academic success. Stephens et al. (2015) conducted a study to determine whether stress was more of a help than a hindrance for first-generation college students. Their social psychology study investigated how the social class of students could serve as a source of strength and allow for academic improvement. The study focused on first-year college students, both continuing-generation and first-generation, and how the difference-education method could refocus their background and challenges to be a source of strength instead of stress. During the difference-education section of the study, students listened to a panel of their peers speak about their first-year experience and transition. The participants were able to hear stories of how other first-generation students framed their background as a strength, allowing the participants to start to frame their own experiences the same way. The students were then interviewed in their second year of college to determine if this intervention resulted in academic growth.

The researchers found that students who had participated in the difference-education method were able to frame their background as a strength and were able to speak more openly about their background than students in the control group (Stephens et al., 2015). Additionally, first-generation college students in the test group seemed to thrive during this method and were far more likely to frame their background as a strength as opposed to first-generation students in the control group. Not only did this contribute to more positive academic outcomes for first-generation college students, but there was a physiological difference in these students’ response to stress.

Though this study did not specifically investigate which stressors directly affect first-generation college students, it showed that with proper intervention education professionals can help students channel their stress into success. Stress, in this case, was a motivator for first-generation college student. However, unless education professionals know how students are handling their stressors, they cannot help the students to refocus their stress.

Beyond this study, little research has been published on the stress experienced by first-generation college students, resulting in a lack of understanding regarding how stress affects this subpopulation. However, it has been well established in the literature that first-generation students face significant barriers in their first-year of college that may lead to higher levels of stress than are experienced by continuing-generation students.

Summary

Historically, first-generation college students have faced lower enrollment, retention, and graduation rates than their continuing-generation peers (Choy, 2001). These differences persist still today (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018) despite programs and initiatives aimed at fostering first-generation college student success. Some significant barriers faced by first-generation students are lack of familial support, insufficient financial support, and a lack of understanding of the college application and registration process (Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019).

These barriers, in conjunction with achievement guilt (Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015), may cause additional stress for first-generation college students. This stress may compound the stress already known to be present in the lives of most college students (Ross, Niebling, & Heckart, 1999). As first-generation students lack social capital to aid them in understanding what to expect from college, they may be unprepared to face the stressors presented by their barriers. However, the lack of research in this area means very little information is available to guide the

efforts of institutions and higher education professions in helping first-generation students to combat this stress. Although some research has suggested that stress can be refocused to motivate students and aid in their academic success (Stephens et al., 2015), there is a noticeable gap in the research regarding the stressors faced by first-generation college students and the impact of those stressors. Until more research is conducted, there will be little knowledge available to guide the development of programs to help first-generation students combat their stress.

This study expands on the current research on first-generation college student success. By investigating first-generation college students' adjustment to college and the stress they experience, best practices for working with these students in their first-year to heighten retention and graduation rates can be developed. This study is only a first step; much more research will need to be conducted to truly gain a clear picture of the experiences of first-generation students

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Introduction

First-generation college students are a growing population in four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. (RTI International, 2019). This subpopulation of students comes with unique barriers to success, and they have been studied frequently to determine which barriers lead to lower retention and graduation rates (Choy, 2001; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Institutions and pre-college programs have worked diligently to reduce many of these barriers and increase the success of first-generation college students. Mentoring programs, learning communities, student success centers, and many additional resources have been made available for the first-generation population. While these have been successful in increasing enrollment and graduation of first-generation students, there are still achievement gaps between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students. One area that has not been frequently studied is the students' stress level and how it affects their overall college experience.

The purpose of this study was to investigate first-generation college students' experiences and to better understand the barriers they face when attending college. This study specifically examined the influence of stress and the strategies students used to combat stress during their time at college. This research sought to fill a gap in the current literature surrounding first-generation college students and their stress levels while attending college. The research questions that guided the development of this study were:

- What factors influence the success of first-year, first-generation college students?

- What role, if any, does stress play in the experiences of first-year, first-generation college students?

Research Design

This research study was a qualitative study, which is defined as a research study that uses non-numerical methods to collect data (Babbie, 2014). During qualitative research, a researcher aims to understand how participants in a study perceive the situation or phenomenon being investigated (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research methodology was chosen so that the researcher could gather the personal recollections of first-generation college students and make inferences based on their responses in order to best answer the research questions. Through this narrative approach, the researcher was able to identify themes and issues that emerged from the participants responses to the research questions. The qualitative research method chosen was the focus group, which permitted the researcher to compile qualitative data from multiple subjects at the same time. Each focus group lasted approximately 30 minutes and allowed participants to answer the questions freely and to build on the responses of other participants. The data collection took place over a six-month period. Interviews were conducted at the host institution and were tape recorded for transcription. All transcribing was completed by the researcher.

Setting

This study was conducted at a large, suburban, public four-year university in the Southeastern United States. The enrollment for 2019 at this university was 38,000, making it the third largest university in the state, and one of the top 50 public universities in the country in terms of enrollment. The student population of this university is predominantly white (54.9 percent), with an African American population of 21.4 percent and a Hispanic population of 9.6 percent (Kennesaw State University, 2019). The majority of the student population is female

(51.3 percent), and only 19 percent of students are non-traditional. The first-year retention rate is 78.6 percent, the four-year graduation rate is 17.6 percent, and the six-year graduation rate is 43.3 percent. There was no available data on first-generation student enrollment, retention, or graduation rate publicly available for 2019.

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited via flyers posted at two of the college's campuses. In total, there were 13 participants. The sample was a purposeful sample; that is, only first-generation college students currently enrolled at the university were recruited. Their demographics were as follows: 11 females, two males; eight white, four African-American, and one Hispanic; 11 under the age of 25, two were above the age of 25; two were first-year students, two were sophomores, three were juniors, and six were seniors. The participants were split into three focus groups: Group A (four participants), Group B (three participants), and Group C (six participants). The demographics of the participants reflect those of the general student population at the university, with the exception of gender ratio.

Materials

The focus group questions were created by the researcher under the guidance of her Thesis Committee Chair, Dr. Jennifer Wells. The questions were designed to obtain an overall understanding of each student's experience during their first-year at college, as well as to investigate how stress affects first-generation college students. All focus groups were asked the same questions, in the same order, in order to increase reliability and validity. Focus group questions can be found in Appendix A. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the host institution.

Data Analysis

The focus group questions were transcribed and categorized in terms of research questions and emerging themes. Each focus group question was matched to a specific research question. Once organized, the data was analyzed to identify the emerging themes within the research. Those themes were then coded and analyzed based on the research questions guiding the study. This allowed the researcher to form a narrative, which illustrated the participants' experiences in their first-year of college.

Limitations

While this study was originally intended to focus solely on first-year college students, the study was opened to non-first-year students to allow for more robust data to be gathered. Specifically, students who had advanced beyond their first-year of college were able to reflect on their first-year experiences and provide more thoughtful feedback on the stressors they faced at that time, how they dealt with them, and the impact of the stressors, as evidenced through the outcome of their experiences.

Another limitation of the study is the researcher's status as a first-generation college student and graduate who works in a TRIO Upward Bound program, which serves potential first-generation college students daily. These factors greatly influenced the researcher's decision to study first-generation students and potentially introduces a bias into the study, especially in regards to data analysis and interpretation.

CHAPTER 4

Results

This qualitative research study used focus groups to build a narrative drawn from first-generation college students' perspectives of their first-year experience. Specifically, this research study focused on how stress affected the experiences of first-generation college students. This chapter presents the data gathered in this study. The data is organized around the two research questions that drove this study. The emerging themes associated with each research questions as well as direct quotations from participants are presented.

Research Question 1: What factors influence the success of first-year, first-generation college students?

This research study, while actively investigating to understand stress in first-generation college students, also wanted to better understand what other factors lead to success in first-generation college students. This was so the researcher could better identify all barriers, as well as see if or how those barriers may have increased the stress of students overall. In the focus groups, students were asked questions related to their reasons for attending college, their support network, the struggles they faced in their first-year of college, how their families and friends have responded to their enrollment in college, and details about their transition. In their responses, participants frequently mentioned stress when speaking about their transition to college. The following paragraphs explore the emerging themes that were revealed in the focus groups, as they relate to each of the research questions: (1) making a better life, (2) finding balance, and (3) lack of preparation.

Making a Better Life. While speaking to the students about their transition to college, the researcher wanted to better understand what motivations the students had for attending college

overall. This information provided an additional context for understanding the students' experiences. Many of the students indicated that their main reasoning for attending college was to make a better life for themselves as compared to the lives of their parents. This strong, intrinsic motivation was a driving force for all students to succeed and continue their education. The students all stated that their families supported their enrollment in college since many parents hoped that their children would achieve more than they themselves had. Some students felt college was out of reach because their parents had never attended and because they had little information about the process. Below are a student's comments about college being out of reach for first-generation college students:

Originally, I had no intentions of going to college, not because I didn't want to go but because I never thought it was a possibility for me. I came from a low-income and first-generation family and did not think college was accessible for someone like me although I dreamed of going.

For other participants, college was a way to change the lives that they had already established for themselves. The non-traditional students in the study already had careers and established lives before starting college. However, the lives they were living were not the lives they had envisioned for themselves. One student talked about the reason he left the corporate world and went back to college so that he could get a degree in Education:

I wanted to teach. I had spent almost 13 years in the corporate work environment, and I wanted to do something that made me feel good about myself. While I worked for a corporation, I was working to hit projections so district and regional managers could say that they did a great job. I had enough of that life, and I truly wanted to do something that made me feel good and that made a difference.

Many of the participants stated that their families were highly supportive of the change they were making in their lives. Many parents and families were incredibly proud that the student was the first in the family to go to college. However, for other participants, their siblings and extended family members were less outwardly excited. One participant stated that, “Sometimes I feel like my sister is jealous because college is not the path she chose.” Another claimed there were times when family members expressed animosity towards them: “The first Thanksgiving [after I started college], one of my cousins made a snide comment, something like, ‘Oh, she thinks she’s better than us now.’ She didn’t mean for me to hear, but I did. That still bothers me a lot.”

Finding Balance. As presented in the literature, first-generation college students are more likely to work, have families, and commute to college. These demands make balancing school and home responsibilities more challenge for first-generation students than for traditional, continuing-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). The data from the current study supported this finding in the published research; specifically, one theme that emerged in this study was participants’ struggle to balance the demands of schoolwork, career, and their personal/professional lives. Some participants indicated that procrastination played a big role during their first-year of college, which may have caused them to get behind in their school work. For others, the demand of a family and jobs made their adjustment to school much harder than they anticipated. Still others indicated that families and friends were supportive of them starting college yet still had expectations of the students it harder to meet the demands of college. One student’s comment highlights this:

My biggest challenge is finding balance between schoolwork, a job and my social life. At times I feel completely overwhelmed and tired. I live on my own and I have no family financial support, forcing me to work as much as I can a week to pay bills.

For non-traditional students, the balancing act including spouses and children, all of whom mean additional responsibilities. The non-traditional participants stated that they often had to make sacrifices, make the tough decisions about what to miss out on in their family lives and what to skip in their schoolwork. Those non-traditional participants who worked and had working spouses often felt completely overwhelmed: “As a parent to four children and a husband to a working spouse, it is difficult to make it happen. Finding time to study is difficult, as is the time spent away from family.”

The academic workload faced by all students was a balancing act of its own. Students noted the burden of juggling multiple assignments, completing readings for their classes, and working on presentations and other projects. One student stated that she often felt like she was “drowning in all the coursework.” However, a few students stated that while it took some getting used to, they often found their stride later in the semester: “At first it was hard to juggle, but eventually I think I just got used to it. I put all my assignments in my phone so I could keep up better and just tried to work on my time management.”

Lack of Preparation. As research has shown, first-generation college students lack social capital, the benefit of information handed down by parents and siblings that have attended college before them (Field, 2008). For many, the lack of social capital mean that they were not well prepared when that started college, and this lack of preparation caused them to feel they were lagging behind their peers. Though a few participants stated that they were able to get help from a friend, most of them navigated the experience of applying to and entering college on their

own. These factors contributed to the stress experienced by the first-generation students.

Additionally, several participants commented that they also felt that the courses they took in high school did not adequately prepare them for the workload and rigors of college.

The adjustment from high school to college was brought up multiple times. The participants felt as if they had not been prepared for the responsibilities that college brings, and they spoke about the challenges of learning to be on time for class, completing course work on time, and ensuring they had everything they needed to be successful. Participants often commented on how different this was from their high school experience during which parents and teachers often held them accountable: “High school does not prepare you for the independency you receive during college. If you did not feel like going to class, you could skip... It took some serious adjusting and self-control.”

Others commented on the lack of information available to them about the process surrounding the college experience: college applications, financial aid applications, college entrance exams, and gather the other necessary information and documentation needed to enroll in college. Since their parents lacked the knowledge that comes with experiencing college first-hand and were therefore unable to provide guidance to the students, most participants were often left on their own to figure it out: “My parents weren’t able to help me, they were excited that I went, but they pretty much said I was on my own. It made the whole process more stressful than it probably had to be.”

Research Question 2: What role, if any, does stress play in the experiences of first-year, first-generation college students?

The participants identified multiple areas in which stress played a major factor in their college experience. Based on their responses, it seems that stress permeates most of their

reflections of their first-year of college. For many, the stress was manageable, but for others, it caused severe disruptions in their lives. Even for questions that were not directly related to stress and anxiety, students identified stressful components that made the challenges they faced even more difficult. Many students identified the increased workload as a component of stress. For those students, it was again a lack of preparation about what to expect that seemed to cause the added stress. Many expressed not knowing that there would be so many assignments due at the same time, or how time-consuming each assignment would be. For others, stress was due to the added responsibilities of home and work in addition to the pressure of schoolwork.

Sources of Stress. All of the participants identified areas in which stress had affected their college experience. The sources of this stress, however, differed for many of the participants. Some participants stated that the stress was mild and not difficult to cope with once they were able to identify the source and make adjustments. Participants often spoke of the multiple layers of responsibility that they had. Many had jobs and families in addition to school work; these multiple responsibilities caused much more stress than they anticipated. Additionally, learning how to balance multiple classes and the expectations each had was an additional stressor.

For those participants with children and spouses, adjusting to the added responsibilities of classes not only caused them stress but also put stress on their families. These participants noted that while their families were happy about their choice to return to school but were also ready for their lives to get back to normal. One participant summed this up in her comment: “The most stressful part of it is everything that I am missing, and the stress I am putting on my family to pick up the pieces of what I am not able to do because I am so busy.”

For the traditional students who participated in this study, finding balance was a major issue. All of the participants were balancing work and school; the majority were also low income

and had very little financial support from their families. Some were able to complete coursework while working, while others described trying to work on assignments after long shifts:

I work overnight at a manufacturing company, so sometimes I only can get a few hours of sleep before I have to wake up and work on my assignments. I go to class tired a lot, and I sometimes worry that I'm going to fall behind.

For students living away from home for the first time, being away from their families added additional stress on top of the burden of balancing work and school. For a few participants, college was the first time they had lived away from their families. Living away from home also meant getting used to living with roommates; a few participants identified this as a source of stress in their lives as well. "It's so hard to live with other people. The first few months were really stressful for me because there were so many distractions. I had a hard time focusing on my studies." Another participant in the focus group added, "Getting used to everyone's personalities was the hardest part. I always felt like I was walking on eggshells."

Impact on Success. The various sources of stress affected the participants' success in different ways. For one participant, the stress mainly affected their ability to study and take exams: "I have always struggled with test anxiety. I have better test preparation skills now, but when I sit down to take a test, I get very anxious and nervous." Another student echoed this, stating: "Sometimes when I sit down to take a test, everything I've studied just goes out of my head. I've done really bad on a few tests because of it."

For other participants, the impact of stress was revealed through more serious situations that warranted professional help. One student spoke about a time when stress played a major role in their time at college: "Stress and anxiety have actually landed me in the hospital twice as a student. It just becomes so much that my body shuts down." The student elaborated that this

caused a decline in their ability to complete assignments or to even focus on studying and classwork.

For the majority of participants, however, there was not a severe disruption in their ability to succeed in their coursework. One participant stated, “I don’t think [stress has] really had an impact on me as a student. It’s just something I deal with, but I don’t think it’s made a big difference.”

Dealing with Stress. All students who participated in the study stated that going to college had been stressful for them. Some students had also been able to find ways to combat the stress they were experiencing in both healthy and unhealthy ways. Others, however, just learned to “cope” or continue doing the best they could despite the stress. One participant noted, “I think it’s just a part of my daily routine now, being stressed is just kind of part of my personality I guess.”

Some participants stated that having a support system helped to alleviate stress; being able to talk to others about it and feel less alone was helpful: “Anytime I feel stressed out I call my best friend. We’re in the same program, so she gets how hard it is. Having someone who has been where I am to talk to has really helped.” For others, even though their families may not understand exactly how they feel, having their support was critical in helping to cope with the stress.

Coping with stress seemed to be a tremendous issue, especially for the participants it affected most severely. One participant stated, “Stress and anxiety has caused me to have many emotional breakdowns. There have been many times where I just cry when I’m in my car to help relieve my stress.” Students recognized the strain this balancing act had on their mental health:

Finding balance is another reason why I get so stressed because I overload myself with work. I am learning how to make time for self-care because mental health is very important to me and it is difficult to maintain while in college.

Another participant stated that they found the only way to deal with stress was to meditate. A few participants said they dealt with stress in more unhealthy ways, such as drinking, smoking cigarettes, or participating in other risk-taking behaviors. Unfortunately, no participants stated that they used on campus resources, such as the counseling center, to deal with their stress.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Introduction

First-generation college students currently make up 56% of the national undergraduate population (RTI International, 2019). While first-generation enrollment has increased, first-generation students still lag behind their continuing-generation counterparts in terms of retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; RTI International, 2019). Studies have previously focused on understanding the barriers facing first-generation college students such as familial support (McCulloh, 2020), sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), and college preparedness (Balemian, Feng, & College Board, 2013). Additionally, although some research has been conducted on stress and its effect on college students' success (Hubbard et al., 2018; Ross, Niebling, & Heckart, 1999), minimal research has been performed to investigate how stress affects first-generation college students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of first-generation college students in order to better understand what role, if any, stress played in their first-year experience as well as their experience in college overall. The researcher collected data using focus groups with questions designed by the researcher and thesis committee chair. All data was transcribed and analyzed to find emerging themes. The section below will discuss the findings of the research, the limitations of the study, the implications of the findings, and the recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What factors influence the success of first-year, first-generation college students? The first research question posed in this study sought to gather data on the

overall experiences of first-year, first-generation college students. By asking the students to reflect on their first-year and the barriers they encountered during that period, the researcher was able to identify the factors that caused the stress.

For most of the students, finding a balance between the demands of college and their personal responsibilities was crucial for their success. This task was harder for some than others, and it was especially difficult for the non-traditional students who had the added demands of careers and families. These students noted that while their families were supportive and a primary reason for the students' decision to go to college, the additional responsibilities caused more stress.

Although only a few participants had families and careers, all of the participants worked while in college; some even worked full-time night jobs to support themselves. The participants reported being overwhelmed, tired, and feeling as if they had too much on their plate. However, without family financial support, the participants had no choice but to work while in college. This is consistent with previous studies that focused on the characteristics and demographics of first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). First-generation college students often find themselves balancing more than their continuing-generation peers due to the strain their socioeconomic status puts on their studies. As research has shown, this can lead to lower retention and graduation rates among many first-generation students who leave school to work or who only take part-time classes in order to accommodate busy schedules, whether those schedules are busy with work or with other outside responsibilities such as families (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012; Balemian, Feng, & College Board, 2013).

Many of the participants felt as if they had not been adequately prepared for their college experience. Participants often had no one close to them who understood the process of applying for college or what the college experience would be like. For these students, this was an additional barrier since they had to adjust quickly to the rigorous and at times overwhelming requirements of college course work. For some, the lack of knowledge about the application process delayed their entry since they were unaware of the numerous steps in the college application process, such as taking important entrance exams or completing financial aid paperwork. Though the participants were able to successfully navigate the process, it is possible – even likely – that many first-generation students were unable to enroll successfully because they did not understand the requirements.

One motivating factor that was consistent among all participants was the drive for better life than their families had. This desire seemed to keep them going when they encountered the various barriers they faced. This strong, intrinsic, motivation for the participants may have been the reason many stayed in college even when they had moments of doubt. This motivating factor is unique to first-generation college students and is supported by research (Alvarado, Spatariu, & Woodbury, 2017; Hébert, 2017).

Research Question 2: What role, if any, does stress play in the experiences of first-year, first-generation college students? This research question was developed to better understand how stress affects first-year, first-generation college student success. There is little research on this topic; therefore, this question seeks to fill a gap in the existing body of research. While college students often face stress related to similar issues, first-generation college students may be at higher risk due to their lack of information on the college experience gained by social capital. It was evident in the participants' responses to the focus group questions that stress was

a major factor in their experience as first-generation college students. Even for those questions not designed to illicit a response about stress, participants indicated that stress was a component of their experience. Most notably, when speaking about finding a balance, students noted that trying to work and raise a family added additional stressors onto them as students. Many participants felt overwhelmed by the large volume of work that needed to be completed in their classes, and some had not known that their college experience would be so different from their high school experience.

The degree of stress experienced by each participant varied; however, all indicated that there had been components of their experience that had been stressful. A few participants experienced such severe stress and anxiety that they required medical attention in order to better cope. For others, the stress manifested while taking tests, which they felt caused them to perform poorly. However, for the majority of participants, their stress was manageable, especially after the first semester. Once the students were able to plan and balance their lives, the stress was not as severe.

Each participant had different ways of handling the stress that they encountered. Some practiced meditation and exercise to help with manage stress. Others, however, coped with their stress in less healthy ways such as a higher intake of alcohol or other substances. None of the participants reported using campus health services, such as the counseling center or wellness center, to aid in their stress. Unfortunately, data show that first-generation college students are less likely to access campus support services than continuing-generation college students (RTI International, 2019); this finding was reflected in the responses of the participants in the current study.

Stress, as research has shown, is common among college students (Ross, Niebling, & Heckart, 1999; Hubbard et al., 2018). However, while stress may be typical for most – if not all – all college students, the findings of this study reveal that first-generation college students are more likely to face additional barriers that they face. As the students do not have parents who can share the knowledge needed about these barriers, and how they may affect the students, the students are unprepared for the areas that cause them stress.

Stress can affect multiple facets of a student's life, including academics (Budu et al., 2019), mental wellbeing (Schönfeld et al., 2019), and even physical health (Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, & Miller, 2007). The participants in this study reported that stress had an effect on their level of academic success and, in a few instances, resulted in severe stress responses that required medical attention. In addition, the students who used substances such as alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs to cope with stress could be at a higher risk for more serious health risks in the future (Schulte & Hser, 2014).

Prior research has established that that the barriers faced by students may have a negative effect on their academic success; however, none of the existing research has investigated stress as a factor in the low retention, progression, and graduation rates among first-generation college students. Therefore, researching stress as an underlying factor affecting the success of first-generation college students may result in findings that can inform future interventions to foster the academic success of these students.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations that may have influenced or biased the findings. First, though this research was intended to investigate first-year, first-generation college students, the majority of the participants were not in their first-year of college. Due to difficulties in recruiting

first-year students, the researcher made the decision to open that study to all first-generation students. Those participants not in their first-year were asked to reflect on their first-year in college when responding to the focus group questions. The inclusion of participants who had advanced beyond their first-year of college may have affected the results since participants' responses relied on their memories of their first-year and not their currently lived experiences.

A second limitation of this study was the participants. Though the participants were a diverse group reflective of the overall student population, the number of participants was not large enough to offer generalizability for the public. Additionally, the participants were all from the same institution. Consequently, the experiences of the first-generation students at this university may not be representative of the experiences of first-generation students at other institutions.

Another limitation of this research study was the methodology used. This study utilized only qualitative data. A mixed methods approach would have allowed for quantifiable data that may have offered invited different interpretations or understandings of the qualitative data gathered. Thus, a mixed methods approach might have led to more robust data and more meaningful findings.

A fourth and final limitation of this research study is that, given the many factors that can influence the success of first-generation, first-year college students, it is difficult to isolate the degree to which one individual factor, such as stress, affects student success.

Implications of Research

This study highlights the unique stressors faced by first-generation college students during their first-year of college. While the barriers that first-generation college student's face have been well documented (Balemian, Feng, & College Board, 2013; Covarrubias & Fryberg,

2015; Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019), this research study sought to explore how these barriers cause stress for these students., which in turn is detrimental to their academic success. One finding of this study was that participants did not use campus resources to help cope with their stress. This indicates that perhaps there is not enough information available to students regarding the campus services available to them, or possibly that the first-generation students are not aware that the services provided are applicable for them.

Going forward, it is recommended that campus services such as counseling centers and wellness centers use targeted advertising or have targeted events to aid first-generation college students with their transition. The campus services offered must be thoroughly researched and designed to specifically meet the needs of first-generation students in the areas in which they face the most stress. Non-traditional first-generation students, for example, would need different services than a traditional first-generation student living on campus. Services would should be accessible for students who commute or work long hours, as many first-generation students do (Balemian, Feng, & College Board, 2013).

Research has shown that helping first-generation students refocus their background, understand their motivation, and learn to use stress as a strength has been helpful in increasing positive academic outcomes (Stephens et al., 2015). By implementing a program that targets first-generation students and uses methods that have been proven to increase their resilience, universities may begin to see higher retention, graduation, and progression rates among this population of students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study highlights the need for further research on the impact of stress on first-generation, first-year students and their academic success. While it is obvious that stress is a

factor in the success of first-year, first-generation students, future research should take a deeper look at how stress is affecting the success rate of these students. These research studies should include an increased sample size and should recruit participants from multiple colleges and universities to allow for greater generalizability of the findings and to deepen the understanding on this subject for a wider audience. Future studies should also consider using a mixed methods approach, which would allow for more robust data to be gathered. Researchers could further investigate the severity of stress students are under as well as use quantitative measures for success such as GPA and progression towards graduation.

Additionally, an exploration of why first-generation students may not use campus resources to help cope with their stress would be valuable. This information would be critical in order for institutions to design and implement programs and initiatives on college campuses that are effective increasing first-generation student success. Finally, to better understand if this stress is directly related to the low retention and graduation rates, researchers should investigate how the stress affected the student population in students who are no longer enrolled in college by including students who have left without graduating in future research.

Conclusion

First-generation college students are a subpopulation of the student body that has now become the majority of students on U.S. college campuses (RTI International, 2019). Research in the past has focused on understanding the barriers facing these students as well as the impact of these barriers on first-generation student success. This current research study has sought to fill a gap in the literature by examining how stress affects the first-year college experiences of first-generation students.

The findings of this study revealed that stress played a major role in the participants' experiences. Although all college students may experience stress for similar reasons, first-generation college students do not benefit from prior knowledge that would have made them prepared to cope with this stress. Stress was identified by all participants as something that they experienced during their first-year of college with varying levels of intensity. For some, it was a minor annoyance while for others stress was a severe disruption to their studies and may have negatively affected their success. The barriers often faced by first-generation college students, such as a lack of financial support, working part or full-time to support oneself while in college, raising a family, and a lack of preparedness for the rigors of college, seemed to cause stress in the participants in the study. While they had strong intrinsic motivation to help push them to complete college, the barriers still seemed to cause significant stress in their lives. While some students were able to find healthy outlets for their stress, such as exercise, talking to friends and family, or meditation, others turned to behaviors such as alcohol and substance use to cope. Participants did not report using campus resources to cope with stress.

Going forward, research should continue to focus on the impact of stress on the academic success of first-year, first-generation college students and expand the understanding of this issue. By widening the range of participants, further research can help develop best practices to be implemented by colleges and universities to help first-generation college students succeed. This is an area of research that is still largely undeveloped, and researchers should look to add to this literature and expand upon our understanding. First-generation college students often have a strong motivation to succeed. It is unfortunate that they often face multiple barriers that make their success much more difficult. By expanding on this study, and expanding the knowledge

base, institutions may be able to aid first-generation college students in their quest for a better life.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Introductory Questions

Why did you decide to go to College?

What made you decide to attend Kennesaw State?

How does your family feel about you starting college? Parents? Siblings?

How do you describe your college experience to your friends and family?

How well prepared did you feel before coming to college?

Social Belonging/Transition

What have you enjoyed most about College thus far?

What have been your biggest challenges?

What do you wish you would have known before starting college?

How would you describe your social network?

How would you describe your relationship with your professors and instructors?

What has been the most helpful in your transition to college??

Stress and Anxiety

What causes you stress and anxiety?

Please describe the role of stress and anxiety in your experiences as a student?

How do you manage stress and anxiety?

Conclusion/Summary Questions

Can you describe what you wish you had more support in as you transition to your second year?

What advice would you give other first-year, first-generation students?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences that I have not asked?