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## Voices of First-Generation Students: An Examination of First- Generation Stories on Collegiate Websites

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Voices of First-Generation Students: An Examination of First-Generation Stories on Collegiate  
Websites

By

Jillian Schemenauer

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Communication Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, MN

May 2020

May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Voices of First-Generation Students: An Examination of First-Generation Stories on Collegiate Websites

Jillian Schemenauer

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Dr. David Engen, Advisor

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Dr. Laura Jacobi

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Dr. Susan Schalge

### **Abstract**

This qualitative research analyzes how four-year, public institutions represent first-generation students on their campuses. More specifically, the research explores the stories of first-generation college students showcased on the websites of these colleges. Twenty-nine institutions that were a part of a recognized list of colleges that have exemplary first-generation programs were utilized for this study. A critical analysis was performed to discuss and evaluate the themes that were discovered from fifty different first-generation student stories. Results indicated that first-generation students' stories presented on collegiate websites shared similar experiences, with emerging themes being: Aspirations, family connections, engagement, and mindset. A summary of the themes, limitations, future research, and a final reflection are discussed.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Purpose of study.....	5
Research question.....	6
Précis of chapters.....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	8
Struggles of First-generation Students.....	8
Identity Struggles and First-generation Students.....	8
Struggling to Understand the Culture of College and First-generation Students.....	11
Family Struggles and the First-generation Students.....	13
Imposter Syndrome Struggles and First-generation Students.....	15
Resources, Finding Mentorship Struggles and First-generation Students.....	16
Struggles with Stress and First-generation Students.....	17
Financial Distress Struggles and First-generation Students.....	18
Strengths of First-generation Students.....	19
Appreciation, Adaptability, and First-generation Students.....	19
Achieving for Others and First-generation Students.....	22
Outreach Programs for First-generation Students.....	23
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	26
Data for Study.....	26
Data Collection.....	27
Method of analysis.....	29
Coding.....	30



Chapter 4: Results.....	33
Four themes connected to RQ 1.....	33
Aspirations.....	33
Family Connections.....	37
Engagement.....	42
Mindset.....	49
Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis.....	55
Four Major Themes.....	55
Aspiration to Give Back.....	55
Family as a Source of Strength.....	58
Lack of Negative Experiences with Engagement.....	60
Mindset.....	63
Limitations.....	65
Future Research.....	67
A Final Reflection.....	69
References.....	73
Appendix A: Codebook.....	88
Appendix B: Subtheme Examples.....	98

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I start this chapter by sharing several stories from my experience as an undergraduate first-generation student. From here, I link these stories to the present study. Finally, I address the purpose of this study and the research question.

### **Three Stories**

One of the most pivotal moments in my life was the first day that my family dropped me off at college. The excitement and nerves that ran through me in that moment were monumental, however, little did I know that I was about to experience a rollercoaster of positive and negative experiences during my time in higher education. There are three main stories that stand out to me throughout my time as a student that will lead into the purpose of this thesis.

Throughout my first year as a student at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I experienced a number of challenges, some I brought upon myself, but others, I seemed helpless to. The classes that I had to take seemed to be a breeze for other individuals, while for me, they were far more difficult than I had anticipated. My first semester seemed to go relatively well, but by the time I returned for my second semester, I faced a number of obstacles that I was unsure of how to manage. I specifically remember taking a political science class, which was my major, on how politics were practiced in different countries throughout the world. While this topic was extremely interesting to me, for the life of me, I could not do well in the class. Every paper that I wrote seemed to be mediocre, every quiz that I took I barely passed, and eventually, just showing up to class was a task. I had no idea who to turn to or who to ask for help. I was intimidated by my professor and I didn't have a clue who my advisor was. Further, I had only befriended one person in that class, who was struggling more than I was. I remember calling my mom after each class session, expressing my worries about passing to her, and each time before we ended the

call, she would say that I would get through it, just like I always did. One specific phone call really stands out to me. I remember calling my mom after my midterm exam and crying to her about how poorly I believe I had done. She consoled me and assured me that everything would be okay. However, a week later when the grades came back, everything was not okay. I received a 60% on the test, when in high school, I was used to receiving nothing less than 85% on any assignment. As the class went on, I learned to barely stay afloat, and ended the class with a 71%, which was a win in my eyes. That semester, my GPA plummeted from a 3.4 to a 2.8.

Following the detrimental second semester of my first year, I begrudgingly began my second year as a college student. While I had the support of my family and friends to help me if I needed it, I had a difficult time staying positive about my future in higher education. However, that semester I began to take classes that were geared more toward both my major and my minor, which brought up my excitement levels. During that first semester, I ended up taking a communication studies course with a professor that first introduced me to the term “first-generation student.” While I don’t remember the context of the material that was being taught, I remember the professor explaining what being a first-generation student entailed, along with some of the common struggles that many first-generation students faced. Finally, everything that I had experienced during my first year of college had started to make sense. As stated previously, although there were aspects of college that I could have controlled, there were also situations I was clueless about. I remember sitting in my classroom and all of a sudden it clicked. I was the first person in my family to attend college, making me a first-generation student. Although I had known that I was the first in my family to attend college, with my mom attending a two-year college, and my dad choosing to work straight out of high school, following that day in class, I now had a name to what I was.

As college continued on for me, there were still several challenges that I encountered, whether was the lack of extracurriculars I involved myself in, to the fact that I hadn't known, or visited, with my advisor until I was a junior in college. Up until that point, I had been the one to scan the college's website to see which classes were required as an undergraduate, as well as the classes that I needed to take for my major and minor. Without the help of an advisor, I had convinced myself that in order to graduate in four years, I needed to take 18 credits for the remainder of my college career, as well as an occasional summer class, in order to graduate on time. However, within the first semester of my junior year, I needed my advisor to sign my academic plan, which resulted in me reaching out to a number of offices, including the office of registrar and office of provost, in order to figure out who my advisor was. Once I found out who my advisor was, a former professor of mine, I felt slightly less uncomfortable meeting with them. While the meeting wasn't as awkward as I thought it would be, following the meeting, I found out that because of the amount of credits I took, I would only need to take nine credits for both semesters my senior year. Since I decided to take it upon myself to choose the amount of credits and classes that I took, I put more stress on myself than I needed to. Without the aid of an advisor, professor, or faculty member, I was completely in the dark about a lot of aspects of college. By the time I reached my senior year of college, I still felt as though I wasn't smart enough to graduate or pursue the dreams that I had at the time, which was to attend law school.

### **My Stories, My Study**

Fortunately, universities across the county are incorporating the stories of first-generation students for future or current first-generation students to view on their websites. To name just a few of these websites, the University of Michigan has a specific site dedicated for first generation students that shares stories, particular programs for first-generation students, as well

as tips on how to pay for school and how to find resources. Another example is the University of Minnesota's "First Gen Proud" website that also shares first-generation students' stories, campus events, facts, resources, and toolkits for students to use. The goal of these websites is to allow other first-generation students to begin to understand their status, as well as college.

After reading through the stories that are presented on different college websites, I've found that a majority of the experiences that are shared by first-generation students coincide with my own experiences in certain ways. Whether the stories discuss family support, to lack of knowledge, or who to find guidance from, I was able to relate my experiences with the narratives of other first-generation students. Following this study, I've reflected on the experiences that I had as an undergraduate student, as well as a graduate student, and believe that I would have benefitted from other first-generation students' experiences in college, prior to attending. I also believe that others of the same status would gain perspective from the narratives of other first-generation students. As a first-generation college student, I would have been able to relate to the experiences from other first-generation students, as well as potentially utilize the information and tips shared in order to help me as a first-generation student. The narratives of first-generation students are important for multiple reasons, but I believe the biggest is to be a voice of hope for other first-generation students. Had I been able to hear, read, or see other first-generation students share their struggles and experiences in higher education, I believe that my time in college may have gone smoother. I may not have had to endure as many challenges, and I may have felt more comfortable within the college community. However, during my undergraduate career, I had no idea where to seek such information.

### **Purpose of study**

Throughout the country, colleges are presenting narratives that first-generation college students share about their experiences in higher education. These institutions are providing first-generation students' narratives as a marketing strategy to potentially garner more response from a particular group of individuals, meaning that they're sharing the stories in order to get more first-generation students to apply to their college.

The purpose of this research is to explore how first-generation students' stories are featured on institutional websites. Further, the study will focus on what the presented stories include and do not include. For example, does a narrative on an institutional website share specific struggles a first-generation student has at home? Assessing what institutions do not highlight on their websites will further explore how colleges represent their first-generation students. Additionally, this study seeks to contribute to a wide array of research regarding first-generation students by exploring how their stories are presented by colleges and universities across the country in order to advertise to other students of first-generation status.

The importance of this research is to discuss and the positive and negative aspects of institutions that are representing first-generation students. Due to the amount of challenges that have been previously explored by a number of researchers, it's essential that the college's that are choosing to present first-generation students' narratives are doing so in a way that will aid other first-generation students. Further, this study is aimed at providing a basis for institutions that do not yet have resources available for first-generation students, such as narratives or tips for them. First-generation students need all the help that they can get upon entering college, and institutions that are featuring narratives of first-generation students should do so in a way that is beneficial to said students. I believe that in order to fully prepare current or future first-

generation students, institutions should be sharing the real and raw challenges and benefits that students experienced in higher education.

Although there are a number of studies done on first-generation college students, I have not found any studies that focus on the narratives of first-generation students that are advertised by colleges. Additionally, there is a gap in literature on how a collegiate institution use narratives of first-generation students to publicize stories as a means to aid current or future first-generation college students. Through the research explored within this study, the analysis of narratives on collegiate websites give way to emerging themes from the experiences of the students' sharing their story.

### **Research Question**

The research question that will be explored by my study is:

RQ: What features of the first-generation college student experience are consistently presented in the stories of first-generation students featured on collegiate websites?

The first-generation college experience will be explored in the following chapter to provide context for the rest of this study. By reviewing previous literature, the challenges that first-generation students face in college, as well as the strengths first-generation students bring with them to college and outreach programs geared toward first-generation students will be explored. This will be done in order to compare existing literature to the results of this study. Finally, through the review of existing literature, there may be common themes that arise that will not occur through the analysis of data, which will be discussed in the findings.

### **Précis of chapters**

Chapter two reviews a wide variety of research on first-generation students. Specifically, challenges and strengths are explored. Also explored are outreach programs for first-generation

students. The goal of this chapter is to search for commonalities of first-generation students' experiences that have been previously researched, group them together, and discuss the importance of previous research to this study.

Chapter three discusses the method used for the study and the reasoning behind the use of that method, which is a critical analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019). The use of a critical thematic analysis is to understand the themes brought forth from stories shared by first-generation students and assess those stories further. Finally, the criteria that needs to be met in order for a narrative to be considered for this study will be explained.

Chapter four provides the analysis and the results from the analysis. Within this chapter, themes are organized and discussed in a comprehensive manner. The themes discussed are in response to the research question that was posed. In-depth discussion of the subthemes and examples from the data will be used as supportive evidence for the themes.

Finally, chapter five will analyze the transcribed data, connect it back to previous research, as well as implement my own thoughts of the results. My intention is to allow readers to further understand how collegiate websites represent first-generation students' stories. In addition to the assessment, implications will be provided and how the impact of the results will aid current and future first-generation students and those that instruct or aid first-generation students. Additionally, the study presents limitations that are discussed, as well as what future research could provide because of this study. Finally, I provide a final reflection regarding the study.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I will explore the following, 1) the struggles of first-generation college students, 2) the strengths of first-generation college students, and 3) outreach programs for first-generation college students. The goal of the literature review is to present previous work discussing first-generation students' experiences in higher education regarding their struggles, strengths, and outreach programs. This will allow readers to understand the complexity of first-generation students' experiences in higher education. Further, the concepts presented in the literature review will later be compared with the themes discovered in the narratives of first-generation students found on collegiate websites.

### **Struggles of First-Generation Students**

The struggles first-generation students may encounter sets them apart from continuing-generation students. The lack of understanding shifts in identity, family experience, amongst other challenges, are obstacles that continuing-generation students may not experience during their time in higher education.

**Identity Struggles and First-generation Students.** Dealing with multiple identities is one of the main struggles that first-generation students cope with, however three main struggles with identity are at play: Negotiating identity, identity struggles at home, and identity struggles at college. The first way that students struggle with their identities is learning to negotiate them in different settings. First-generation students identify in different ways and because of those changes in identity, they change behaviors to appeal to those they are around (Orbe, 2004). Whether a student is at home or at school, they must learn to adjust their identities in order to meet the needs of the environment that they are in (Orbe, 2004; Orbe, 2008). Negotiations are one way that first-generation students deal with their emerging identities, but through those

negotiations, students may be feeling confused. First-generation students must learn to create a separate, distinctive identity upon entering college, due to their normal support system (such as family members) not being a part of their collegiate experience (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005).

A second way that students experience shifts with their identities is at home. As described by Orbe (2004), being a first-generation student is an aspect of a students' identity, meaning that being the first in their family to attend college is an aspect that first-generation students exemplify. This identity can be enacted at home through discussion of the topic, or even the lack of discussion, that further reminds students of their status. For example, one student describes how when he goes home, he is treated differently:

So, now when I go home, my mother is quick to say, "Come to work with me." I would go to work with her, but I would basically sit in a chair and watch her do people's hair. All the women will say, "Oh you are so-so's boy. You are so handsome. You go to college?" ...They talk to you like you are not a regular person any more. They talked to you like you are—not a superstar—but like you came back from outer space or something, "So what was it like there?" (Orbe, 2004, p. 141).

In addition to being treated differently by others within the community, some students feel that they couldn't talk about their experiences at college, due to not feeling supported by family members, or the lack of knowledge that others have regarding college. One student described her experience of going home as, "When you get home, it's like, okay, you are not in this Latina college student identity anymore. You are now back home where your college life doesn't matter...you have to do what everyone tells you...you have to learn to bite your lip" (Orbe, 2004, p. 142). First-generation students experience changes to their identities in order to accommodate to those back home, including family members, friends, and community members.

Another way that first-generation students have to negotiate their identities is in the college setting. First-generation students may feel that they have to shift their personal identities within large group settings, such as college (Orbe, 2008; Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1991). It is further explored how all first-generation students identify by different genders, race, age, and socioeconomic status, but are linked by their first-generation status. Other ways that first-generation college students negotiate their identities is through the disadvantages they experience in higher education and the uncertainty of college, which may involve the students changing their identities to meet the needs of others while at college. One way that students do so is by choosing not to disclose their first-generation status, which is described by one student as:

I don't really tell other people that I'm first generation, it's something I just keep to myself...but for no particular reason. I just don't feel that they need to know. I don't feel a need to share. I don't want pity or praise for that, I want it for me. First-generation college student...that's not how I want to be known. I just want to be known as me, myself (Orbe, 2004, p. 143).

Further, the challenge of choosing when to be open to sharing their experiences in order to connect with others or choosing to keep their lives private, is another obstacle first-generation students may come in contact with (Orbe, 2008). One student shared their feelings on disclosing their first-generation status as something they don't typically do, for the fear of judgment:

I do think about it [being a FGC student] a lot, but I don't just go around and announce it. I do think about it a lot, and I do know and understand the reasons why neither one of my parents could go. But I don't know if others will understand...they may think that my parents don't value what goes on at college (Orbe, 2004, p. 143).

Choosing who and when to disclose one's identity to is seemingly more difficult for first-generation students, for fear of misunderstanding, judgement, or pity. As explained by Longwell-Grice et al. (2016), students have a challenging time negotiating their identities in different contexts, "Interviewees described the negotiations they made at home and at school to reconcile the two different contexts. They reported struggling at school with the values of the institution related to culture and social capital, and at home they saw that adopting the values of the institution could create distance from their families" (p. 37). Through the different changes in identity, the experience of higher education becomes just one of the struggles that first-generation college students experience.

**Struggling to Understand the Culture of College and First-generation Students.** In addition to identity challenges that first-generation college students face, adjusting to the culture within higher education is another struggle that they deal with. Becoming comfortable with the structure and culture of college is a challenge that first-generation students face (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). For instance, a student in the Longwell-Grice et al., study stated, "Um, [pause] and I feel like there's [sic] unwritten rules of a culture and it takes a while to really adapt to them, and I feel like even now I haven't really caught all of 'em. I'm kinda oblivious to some things, you know" (2016, p. 37). As stated by Jehangir (2010), "On campus, first-generation students must try to make sense of the explicit and implicit expectations, rituals, and norms of the higher education culture—a process which can be simultaneously exhilarating, overwhelming, and alienating" (p. 536). Feeling as though they are alienated within the culture of college may be a concern that can last for multiple years while attending school (Stuber, 2011). Moreover, for every one-in-four first-generation students, the feeling of being marginalized within higher education occurs, resulting in having a more difficult time adjusting. Deciding to forgo

involvement in courses, extracurricular activities, and social encounters also lead to the feelings of alienation on campus (Stuber, 2011).

As noted by O'Shea (2015), adjusting to higher education also included the lack of cultural capital. Cultural capital is defined as, "...proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices" (Ashaffenburg & Maas, 1997, p. 573 as cited in O'Shea, 2016, p. 504). Further, not knowing how the institutional system worked and not understanding tasks that were deemed simple, such as enrolling for classes and applying for financial aid can cause first-generation students to have a difficult time acclimating to higher education. It is also explored that due to the lack of knowledge on what to do in college, as well as who to ask for help, first-generation students may feel lonely and out of place (O'Shea, 2016). An example of this is stated as, "There is no one here to guide you. I think that is the biggest thing; you don't know what you are doing right. (Kira)" (O'Shea, 2016, p. 513). Adjusting to college and all that college implies can negatively impact first-generation college students.

Very few first-generation students come to college with the knowledge that continuing-generation college students are equipped with, often because of the lack of help from their parents. As stated by Longwell-Grice et al. (2016), "This absence of experienced-based information compromises first-generation students' ability to ask the questions that yield proper direction for navigating the cultures and bureaucracies of higher education" (p. 35).

One concept that is explored that is of the upmost importance for first-generation students, is to become involved in activities in college, both in classes and outside of classes. However, overall engagement levels are lower than continuing-generation college students (Ward et al., 2012). Additionally, the perception of the college environment as less supportive than for continuing-generation students may result in first-generation students' growth

educationally and socially to be stunted. The college environment is a learning process that first-generation students must first comprehend in order to navigate.

Adding to the notion of navigating life on campus, previously existing boundaries, such as perceived social norms, need to be broken and new boundaries need to be formed in order for first-generation college students to acclimate with their peers on campus (Oikonomidou, 2015). Although first-generation students are generally aware of the roles they play within higher education, such as a student and a peer, expanding their identities beyond being a peer and student is needed to engage in cross-cultural outlets on campus (Oikonomidou, 2015). However, as discussed previously, the very notion of handling multiple identities as a first-generation student is difficult and may lead to said student not involving themselves in activities on campus. Additionally, the belief that a first-generation student may have is that they don't fit within the realms of a college campus (O'Shea, 2015). Lack of knowledge about college and engagement opportunities are just another struggle that first-generation students face.

**Family Struggles and First-generation Students.** Upon leaving the comfort of home and entering higher education, first-generation students may experience difficulties with relating to family members that had never experienced college, as described by one student in the Longwell-Grice et al. study:

So, my mom would be like, "Oh, college students like they think just 'cause they go to college they're smarter and they deserve more money." So, it's kinda like I hope she doesn't think [that way] about me. I mean I know she doesn't because she wants me to be here and she knows it's good, and she wants me to do better than she did. But, I felt, like, that the first year like, "Is my mom gonna think, 'oh, she's a college student'?" (2016, p. 38).

The responsibilities that lie within the lives of first-generation college student are divided between both college and at home with their families; one may interfere with another, resulting in either family difficulties or school difficulties (Phinney & Haas, 2003). The discussion of college while a first-generation college student is at home, may result in the student experiencing feelings of guilt and disappointment (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). According to Longwell-Grice et al. (2016), “Although families may offer encouragement and financial support, their inability to understandably relate to the college experience creates a unique and difficult situation for some students” (p. 41).

While some parents feel that they are supporting their children, they may also be placing unwanted responsibility on the student. As explored by Wang (2014), parents of first-generation college students expected their children to set a good example for others, which may unintentionally add more pressure to the student. A large number of first-generation students struggle with the pressure that they feel from their parents, and don’t want to dissatisfy them, “...first-generation students come as members of groups that, traditionally without access to college, face additional pressures due to their increased marginalized status at home” (Nunez, 2005 as cited in Longwell-Grice et al., 2016, p. 41). Ultimately, a first-generation student may feel as though they need to separate themselves from their family if the pressure becomes too much to handle, putting a strain on the relationship they have with their families. Adding to that notion, first-generation students may feel bound to their parents, due to previous support or financial assistance, making the relationship with their families even more difficult to handle, especially since it may be believed that the students owe their families (London, 1989). Communicating with family members is a further difficulty that first-generation students try to grasp throughout college.

**Imposter Syndrome Struggles and First-generation Students.** The imposter syndrome is another struggle that many first-generation students deal with upon entering higher education. The imposter syndrome, in the case of this study, can be described as, "...a deep-seated insecurity that one is not sufficiently capable of carrying out the task at hand, often making their anxiety of being exposed as intellectual frauds..." (McAllum, 2016, p. 364). Davis (2010) notes that "Suffering from the imposter phenomenon is more serious than the typical vague feelings of not fitting in that many students experience on beginning their college education" (p. 49). Imposter syndrome symptoms may include believing that one doesn't deserve a spot in higher education or that they're taking the place of another, more deserving student, who isn't a first-generation student. One example of the imposter syndrome is described by one student, "After many acceptances from state schools and several rejections and waitlist offers from private schools, I definitely believed that I was not good enough to attend a school like Kenyon" (Ruiz, 2019, para. 4).

Not only do first-generation students feel as though they shouldn't be involved in higher education in general, but they often believe that when they receive praise from a peer or instructor, or receive a good grade in a class, they are undeserving of the affirmation. Some also feel that they shouldn't speak up in class due to their own thoughts that no one would be interested in listening to their ideas (Davis, 2010). Davis (2010) also notes that due to the imposter phenomenon that a first-generation student experiences, that student may be involved in higher education for far longer than an individual that isn't affected by the imposter syndrome, even so much as being enrolled in college for six or seven years before graduating with their bachelor's degree (The Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). The imposter syndrome



is a negative implication that first-generation students experience in droves once they get to college.

**Resources, Finding Mentorship Struggles, and First-generation Students.** While some first-generation students may be positively impacted by the support of family members, peers, and faculty members, there are others who aren't as lucky. Many times, first-generation college students feel as though they are invisible in higher education, be it by their instructors or peers. This feeling is found in an observation by Rendon (1996) who explains that "...first-generation students often found little connection with the classroom curriculum and their own lives, such that they often questioned their place in academia" (as cited by Jehangir, 2010, p. 536). Further, one student from the research by Jehangir (2010) stated, "The only thing that interfered with my learning is that I felt left out from the groups and everybody else. I feel like I don't belong there or here. I guess I don't fit in with them" (p. 536). Thus, there is a need for a positive individual to be involved within a first-generation students' life. A commonality amongst professionals and students alike is the understanding of value that mentorship has on first-generation students (Ortega, 2018). That being said, there is a lack of support for first-generation students upon their entering into higher education, and with that lack of support, the transitions that the students are experiencing is challenging (Plaskett et al., 2018). Additionally, mentorship may not be as easy to seek out for first-generation college students.

Searching for mentorship is one challenge that first-generation students encounter, but once a student finds a mentor, there are still a number of obstacles that a student could experience. For instance, once a student obtains a mentor, they may believe that their mentor will immediately provide them with opportunities, rather than aid them in finding opportunities (Inkelas et al., 2007). Not only that, but students and potential mentors must be able to interact

well with one another, find a way to work together, and commit to a working relationship with one another (Becker & Griffin, 2010). As discussed by Inkelas et al. (2007), negative experiences with a mentor may result in difficulty of social transitions within higher education.

Furthermore, as Friess (2008) explores within her exploration of common struggles that first-generation college students are prone to, the themes that arise in relation to resources are the results of lack of knowledge or lack of time to utilize the resources available in college. First-generation college students are less likely to seek out resources that aren't readily available to them, as well as give up time in order to utilize the resources available due to outside factors, such as work (Friess, 2008). However, even if first-generation students become aware of the programs that are available to them, students often feel as though they are not fully part of the campus culture and don't fit in within the higher education atmosphere (Lowrery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). As first-generation college students arrive to campus, it's crucial for them to be exposed to the resources available to them through factors such as orientation, campus events, and socialization activities. Ward et al. (2012) discusses the need for efforts that allow first-generation college students to become acclimated into the academic aspect of higher education. Institutions of higher education seeking ways to positively incorporate the resources available for nontraditional students should find new means of outreach in order to lessen the difficulty of resource usage for those students.

**Struggles with Stress and First-generation Students.** Stress is a feeling that many individuals experience within higher education, including first-generation college students (Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Symptoms of stress and stress related illnesses, both physical and emotional, are more likely for first-generation college students to experience in comparison to their continuing-generation counterparts (Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). The stress of the

college experience itself is one obstacle that first-generation college students deal with, but the lack of sharing of their stressors with their family members, friends from home, and acquaintances at college are a result of feeling that they are less supported. Stressful encounters for first-generation college students are common amongst said students (Barry et al., 2009; Swanbrow et al., 2017).

Due to the multitude of responsibilities that first-generation college students are tied to, finding ways to cope with stress is harder for those individuals in comparison to traditional college students (Ecklund, 2013). The fear of unknowing of what one is doing within higher education, as well as first-generation students home life, and their diversity are common stressors that first-generation students may be prone to. Again, stress is a concept that many college students take on while attending higher education, but first-generation students have to deal with the stress of college, amongst other challenges occurring within their lives making college in itself more difficult (Swanbrow et al., 2017).

**Financial Distress Struggles and First-generation Students.** A common struggle that a number of first-generation college students face is the financial needs that require to be met in order to attend college (Pratt et al., 2019). It is further discussed by Pratt et al. (2019), who discuss how first-generation students have less of their financial needs being met, results in the student taking on one or multiple jobs in order to reach those financial needs. Not only do first-generation college students feel the need to work, but they also have classes to attend, outside activities to adhere to, such as volunteering, and other interactions with family and friends that need to be met, all while working. Thus, “This, then, contributes to FGCS feeling “out of place” in the college environment and may influence their decision to forego completion of their college degree” (Pratt et al., 2019, p. 111). Because of the feeling of being out of place, as well as

attempting to maintain a job or multiple jobs, along with all other aspects of life, first-generation students are 50% more likely to choose to leave college (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Furthermore, the lack of knowledge of how to finance while in higher education may lead to first-generation students withdrawing from higher education all together.

The cost of education, books, and livelihood are just three constraints that may weigh on the minds of first-generation college students (Friess, 2008). First-generation college students are more likely to come from families of a working-class or even a poverty-stricken family, in comparison to continuing-generation college students. The study by Afeli et al. (2018) discusses that 30% of first-generation college students come from a family whose annual income is lower than \$25,000, whereas only 5.9% of continuing-generation college students come from families whose income is lower than \$25,000. In relation to the gap between first-generation and continuing-generation's economic status, first-generation students that come from a working-class family may have an impact on behavior, such as lack of motivation, while attending college. This particularly occurs at a college or program that is rigorous and demanding. Additionally, first-generation college students were more likely to apply for student loans and work outside of their coursework in order to pay for their education (Afeli et al., 2018). The financial demands of college result in first-generation students taking on more than just their studies in order to stay enrolled in school.

### **Strengths of First-Generation Students**

**Appreciation, Adaptability, and First-generation Students.** Though there are many difficulties that first-generation college students are prone to in higher education, the strengths that first-generation college students exhibit in college are admirable. Not only do first-generation students experience college in different ways, but they bring in a new perspective to

the campus culture that continuing-generation college students are unaware of, and institutions are recognizing that, “Some of the most successful campuses are changing the way they approach these students. Instead of viewing their background as a liability to graduating, these colleges consider first-generation students—and the perspectives they bring—an asset to campus” (Lynch, 2018, p. 25). In accordance to the idea that first-generation students bring new perspectives, they also may value higher education more than their continuing-generation counterparts, “...engagement in the educational process holds greater value for first-generation students than it does for other students” (Ward et al., 2012, p. 52).

One strength that first-generation students seem to exemplify is aspirational capital, which explores how first-generation students continue on through higher education, despite lacking knowledge of how collegiate institutions work (Yosso, 2005; O’Shea, 2015). The concept of aspirational capital was brought forth by Yosso (2005), “Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77). Aspirational capital is further supported in a study of college women done by O’Shea (2015):

Despite struggling at the beginning, the women determinedly persistent to succeed and seemed rich in what Yosso (2005) terms as aspirational capital, demonstrated by their ability to persist despite little understanding of university practices. Instead, the women allowed themselves to “dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances often without the objective means to attain these goals” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). This aspiration for education can be regarded as a catalyst not only for the individual students but also their families and community (p. 513).

First-generation students may carry aspirational capital with their families in mind, meaning that students are considering both their own dreams of obtaining a degree, and well as their parent's dreams, while attending college. This is supported by interviews done by Klein and Carmo (2019) in their study, "...nearly all interviewee respondents highlighted the importance of higher education in achieving personal fulfilment for themselves and/or their families" (p. 265). The aspirational capital that first-generation students exemplify connects well with the persistence that students exhibit.

Through the persistence that first-generation students characterize, they are able to carry on through obstacles presented in higher education. Further, first-generation students have the ability to adapt to differing environments, as well as the drive to persevere through the obstacles that arise in those environments (Havlik et al., 2017). As noted by Havlik et al. (2017), although first-generation students often times did not acquire the results of something that they wanted, such as a good grade on a paper, being able to move on and continue to do the best that they could, was a strength of their determination. With the challenges of college, first-generation students may revert back to their knowledge and growth of previous challenges that they've overcome and relate them to the challenges that they are experiencing as a scholar (Havlik et al., 2017). One student within the study by Havlik et al. (2017) stated, "Being a first-generation college student...I think we've been conditioned to like take these challenges and grow from it because we've had them our whole lives. It's a way of adapting and surviving in our environment" (p. 14).

In some instances, a student must learn to modify their environment in order to achieve their goal (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). For instance, if a student feels that the classes they are taking aren't meeting their educational needs, that student may choose to change their path of

education and assimilate to the new program. By previously building problem-solving skills, college is a process that first-generation students learn to acclimate to (Falcon, 2015). By adjusting to the collegiate environment and learning to persevere through challenges, first-generation college students can succeed in academia.

**Achieving for Others and First-generation Students.** Another strength that first-generation college students boast is the motivation they acquire through knowing that they are pursuing their education not only for themselves, but for others as well. By being the first in a family to attend college, the drive to work hard and overcome obstacles is perceived as positive in the minds of some first-generation students (Havlik et al., 2017). In the study done by Havlik et al. (2017) several students expressed their reasoning for persevering through college, “I really wanted to do something big...for my family, my friends, and the city that I came from and the neighborhood” (p. 13). In addition to first-generation students persisting through college for a bigger purpose, another individual in the study by Havlik et al. (2017) stated, “Because I am a first gen, I try even harder to step outside of my comfort zone...I always go about situations...with the mindset of knowing that those who came before me never got the chance to experience these things, so I’m doing this for them” (p. 13). Further examining the motivation of first-generation college students in relation to their families, Wang and Nuru (2017) stated, “...participants described these events (successful turning points in college) as particularly meaningful as it marked the first step towards establishing a new educational tradition for their families” (p. 163).

Additionally, gratitude to family members is common among first-generation college students. As noted by Garrison and Gardner (2012), first-generation college students are less likely to take their experiences in college for granted, since it was a concept that may have

previously been explored, but not practiced by other family members. First-generation college students feel that they appreciate being in college more than continuing-generation students, due to them pursuing a degree for a number of people, including themselves (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

### **Outreach Programs for First-generation Students**

The exploration of previous literature discusses both the strengths and challenges of first-generation students, but the purpose of this paper is to also explore what collegiate institutions are doing in order to help address and diminish those obstacles, as well as cultivate the strengths that first-generation students exemplify. Some of the programs that are being put in place by institutions include living-learning programs and summer bridge programs. In addition to the comprehensive programs that institutions are introducing, colleges are also trying to reach out to first-generation students through a variety of less inclusive efforts. Examples of this outreach is through websites dedicated to profiling and aiding first-generation students. The importance of exploring outreach programs geared toward first-generation students is to explore the efforts that are put forth by institutions, and how those efforts are impacting students.

One program that first-generation students can be involved in is a living-learning program, which allows students of the same status to live in the same residence halls, participate in activities geared for them, as well as receive tips that may help them engage with faculty and staff, as well as social transitions in college (Kurotschi Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Brown Leonard, 2007). Since the transition into higher education involves a number of difficulties for first-generation students, allowing them to live together and receive valuable information regarding college, may positively impact their experience. Further, in a study by Inkelas and Weisman (2003), the authors found that students who were a part of the living and learning community had



a smoother transition in college than their first-generation counterparts that lived in residence halls and were not a part of the living and learning program. Moreover, Inkelas and Weisman (2003) stated, “Among Transition Program students, discussing academic issues with faculty members was the only key living-learning environmental measure that significantly influenced their preference for challenging academic pursuits” (p. 349).

Amongst those that utilize living learning communities are institutions such as the University of California-Los Angeles, The University of Kentucky, and the University of Texas-Dallas. Upon exploring different institutions living and learning programs, the University of Kentucky poses different learning outcomes for students that participate in what the institution calls “1G LLC,” or the First Generation Living Learning Community, and offer a particular dorm for first-generation students to reside in. Further, the program requires students to participate in certain courses and provides the opportunity to engage in events such as study groups, workshops and seminars, as well as potential free or reduce cost trips (UK Campus Housing, n.d.). While there are a number of institutions that provide first-generation students with the opportunity to live in a shared space with other students of the same status, there are also other programs that aim at helping first-generation students, without the students living together.

Programs geared toward aiding first-generation college students may positively impact the students’ experience in higher education. Whether the programs are aimed at providing counseling, tutoring, or giving students the means to better manage stress or gain motivation. These programs may give first-generation students the tools to endure what college has to offer. In a study conducted by Wibrowski, Matthews, and Kitsantas (2017), the researchers found that programs, such as the Skills Learning Support Program, allowed first-generation students to grow as scholars and individuals, “The findings of this study suggest that the present support

program had a positive impact on students' academic self-regulation development, motivational beliefs, and academic outcomes" (p. 327). Moreover, students involved with the program improved their GPAs and were able to apply their knowledge successfully within their lives, despite enduring challenges that are presented with being a first-generation student.

An additional example of a program that boasted positive results is GenOne, which is a 2-month summer bridge program, whose aim is to help first-generation students in different areas before they begin college. This program was implemented at a particular institution and then studied by Swanbrow et al. (2017):

...we used data from focus groups and interviews with students involved in GenOne—a pseudonym for an academic enrichment program for first-generation college students—to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions first-generation students have of their own mental well-being needs during the transition to college, as well as components of the enrichment program they found beneficial to their well-being (p. 1166).

The program that was utilized by Swanbrow et al. (2017) was further explained, "GenOne allowed students to (a) feel cared for, (b) develop a sense of belonging within both GenOne and the broader university community, (c) prevent stressful situations from becoming overwhelming, (d) remediate distress that materialized, and (e) become resilient when faced with obstacles" (p. 1171). By providing the necessary means to aid first-generation students, those students were more confident in their abilities to attend and continue building their knowledge in higher education. These are a few examples of the kinds of unique programs that are being implemented at collegiate institutions to better aid first-generation students.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

My research examines the narratives of first-generation college students posted on college websites. More specifically, I examine the personal stories of first-generation students appearing with increasing regularity on the college websites across the country. Many public and private colleges today feature some aspect of first-generation students' experiences in higher education. Often, these stories are part of something like a Center for First-Generation Students (for example, the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota and the University of Memphis). These stories typically present the website viewer a personal story that touches on the educational journey of a student at that specific university. The personal nature of these stories is significant because, as Pavlenko (2008) explains, personal stories give insight on how an individual gains knowledge and experience that are significant to their lives. In other words, personal stories teach lessons about life and about being a student. It can be assumed that colleges and universities feature these personal stories of first-generation students both to advertise or market to potential new first-generation students and highlight the way the institution currently helps first-generation students succeed in college.

### **Data for Study**

The stories analyzed in this study are taken from public four-year colleges and universities recognized by the Center for First-Generation Student Success as being leaders in campus programming of first-generation students. The Center for First-Generation Student Success is a respected national organization describing itself as "... the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students" (2019). As part of their work, the Center for First-Generation Student Success recently (2019) identified 80 American colleges and

universities doing exemplarity work with first-generation students on their campuses. These 80 colleges became the potential sources of information to include within my study.

### **Data Collection**

A purposeful sampling method was used to find a total of 50 narratives featured by the colleges and universities discussed above (exemplary institutions identified by the Center for First-generation Student Success). Purposeful sampling, as described by Patton (2002) is:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study, in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (as cited in Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hogwood, 2015, p. 534).

Purposeful sampling, as explained by Palinkas et al. (2015), was used to find institutions and stories that fit certain criteria. For instance, I was unable to choose random institutions because they may not have first-generation stories. Further, my purpose was to find specific first-generation narratives, meaning that alumni and faculty members of the institution were excluded for this study. Additionally, the data that was collected from the use of purposeful sampling allowed me to engage and interpret the stories better.

The first step I took was to eliminate all community colleges and private colleges from the list of institutions. The emphasis in this study is on 4-year comprehensive universities. That led to a list of 60 institutions. I then went through and discovered which of those colleges and universities featured specific kinds of stories. Of those 60 institutions, 29 had the kinds of stories I wanted to analyze in this study.

The stories in this study needed to meet specific standards. Those standards are as follows:

1. Stories selected had to be at least 200 words long. The purpose here is to analyze complex stories and it was believed that stories under 200 words long were unlikely to be complex and nuanced enough to warrant analysis. Sometimes websites feature things that are more statements than stories.
2. Stories had to be published within the past four years. The study is focusing on current methods institutions are using to discuss the first-generation college experience.
3. Stories needed to have some aspect of a first-generation student sharing their experiences. For instance, the story needed to either have multiple quotations from the student or it was written by the student themselves.
4. The story must be about a student rather than an alumni or faculty member that works for the university. The data should be current and relevant to first-generation college students that are currently experiencing college or about to enter college as a first-generation college student.
5. The stories selected had to privilege first-generation students, meaning that the dominant topic of interest would be the first-generation experience in higher education. For example, a story featuring an international first-generation student's experience was not analyzed due to other potential challenges that the student may face, such as a language or cultural barrier.
6. No more than two stories from each institution will be analyzed, in order to collect a number of stories from a variety of colleges. The process of picking two student profiles from each school was that they had to meet all of the criteria as mentioned previously,

and following that, I started with the first story and from there picked every fourth story. By doing so, I stayed consistent with the profiles that I was picking in order to collect viable data.

### **Method of analysis**

Following data collection, I conduct a *critical thematic analysis* of the stories shared on public institutions' websites. The use of critical thematic analysis is to understand the meaning and themes that are presented in the stories shared by first-generation students, and to explore how the themes could be positively utilized by institutions. Critical thematic analysis, as noted by Lawless and Chen (2019), can be used to explore similar experiences within the data, and start to comprehend how certain themes can be related to larger topics. As stated by Lawless and Chen (2019) in relation to critical thematic analysis:

As critical intercultural communication scholars, we aim to operationalize a critically informed thematic analysis: one that searches for patterned results using Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, and also seeks to understand individual and shared experiences of participants while being acutely aware of economic, social, historical, and political contexts, social and hegemonic structures, institutional power, and ideological impact. Moreover, we argue that recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness must be examined with reference to cultural identity positioning, thus asking, "Who said this, and why does it matter?" (p. 96).

In conducting a critical thematic analysis, I will first look at the emerging themes and then explore what these themes indicate about how colleges are representing first-generation students. In what ways do the narratives represent the complexity of the first-generation student experience? In what ways might they fail to represent this intricacy? My analysis will be

informed by both the research on first-generation students I summarized in chapter two as well as additional research in the final chapter.

### **Coding**

In order to code the data, I followed the standards set by Braun and Clarke (2006), which are to familiarize yourself with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review the themes, define and name the themes, and produce the report. By coding the narratives of first-generation students, each sentence of the story will be examined. Through the use of Owen's (1984) thematic interpretation, a theme will arise from recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the repetition of the codes, in order to formulate how many times a code occurs before it becomes a theme. In this study, a code will have to occur frequently in order to become a category, and the amount of times a category occurs before becoming a theme may differ in each theme based on the number of times a code is referenced to in a story. Additionally, I utilized a mixture of a priori and NVivo coding to find the themes. Based on my knowledge of previous research, I had an idea of what type of themes may emerge, such as family issues or engagement challenges, and looked for those types of themes. However, I was also open to new themes emerging from the data. The coding process included several steps:

For the first step, I saved all of the collected stories in a Word document, and then printed off all of the stories in order to have a physical copy to read.

For the second step, I read through the 50 stories between seven and ten times. I did this in order to begin to comprehend all that the stories included.

Following the initial read through of the stories, for the third step, I marked broad descriptive codes with post-it notes, with the name of the codes written on them. While marking,

I found 21 repetitive and reoccurring codes, which will be discussed in future chapters. In order to be included within the 21 codes, the sentences needed to provide in-depth information regarding a specific area of a students' life, such as discussion of program, campus resources, as well as a students' goals. I then made a table indicating the codes, the number of times each code was referenced, their definitions, and examples to further explain why each code was indicated as such. The table is provided in Appendix A.

For the fourth step, I tied connecting codes together into ten different categories. The ten categories included goals, accomplishments, internal challenges, external challenges, positive mindset, relationships, academic discovery, involvement, advice, and finances. Again, I made a table indicating categories, the codes that made up the category, as well as the definition of each category to further explain how specific codes connect to one another in order to become a category. In some instances, a code was significant enough to be made into a category on its own. The table is provided in Appendix A.

For the fifth step, I used different colored highlighters to narrow down the ten categories into four major themes, based on how particular categories tied together. For instance, if a sentence was highlighted in pink, that indicated student engagement, or if a sentence was highlighted in purple, its signified family connections. I then made a table to show how categories connected to one another to form a theme. The table is provided in Appendix A.

For the sixth step, I presented the four major themes in a table that distinguished the subtheme and the number of times each subtheme was referenced across a particular number of stories. The table is provided in Appendix A.



For the final step, I presented each theme in their own table that distinguished the subtheme and the comments that students made in relation to the respective subtheme. The table is provided in Appendix B.

In the next chapter, I discuss the results, and in the following chapter I critically analyze the themes that occurred from the research. Again, the purpose of this study is to go one step further than a thematic analysis, as explained by Lawless and Chen (2019) “...we contend that the next step to thematic analysis is to consider how the patterned results are connected to larger social ideologies, linking frequency and forcefulness to the influence of dominant social discourses” (pp. 95-96). Thus, four-year public institutions that represent first-generation college students on their websites will be assessed. Further, from those stories, I will explore what the major themes are, from the narratives that are being shared by first-generation students and examine whether those themes coincide with previous research.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Within this chapter, I discuss the results of this study. By coding and categorizing the transcribed data, I found four major themes that relate to the research question. The research question is, once again: What features of the first-generation college student experience are consistently presented in the stories of first-generation students featured on collegiate websites?

As detailed in chapter three, the analysis of stories moved from individual codes (21) to categories (10) to themes (4). In Appendix A I provide the reader definitions and examples of codes and categories. In this chapter present the results, I will explore only the major themes that emerged from the coding process.

### **Four themes connected to RQ 1**

#### **Aspirations**

The first theme was *aspirations*. The theme of aspiration appeared from students sharing their goals regarding their futures. The goals discussed ranged from broad ambitions, such as continuing on with education, to students specifically stating the job and position they wanted to obtain, and why. The most interesting dimensions of aspirations were the two notably different types of aspirations discovered in the narratives. From the major theme, the two subthemes of aspiration were aspirations to give back and aspirations for individual achievement.

The first subtheme of aspiration that was repetitive within the transcribed data was the aspiration to give back. The aspiration to give back emerged from stories of students that discussed how they wanted to positively impact those within their lives or their community. This could be by pursuing different educational opportunities, wanting to go into a field of work for a specific purpose, or volunteer opportunities. Of the 50 narratives that were used for this study, 22 (44%) suggested the ambition to give back. There was a total of 35 references to the subtheme of

aspiration to give back across the 22 narratives. From the narratives, it was clear that the aspiration to give back was important to the students that shared their goals for a multitude of reasons. Something to note was that there were several times where a student shared their goal of their future career, as well as goals that coincided with their personal lives. For instance, individuals chose a specific major or career path due to an individual or community that impacted their decision. One example of this was, “Gaby’s goal as a bilingual teacher is to support families like hers” (University of Nebraska-Omaha, n.d.). Another such example is explained as, “A career that I will find rewarding must be one that benefits people long term.’ Chris is contemplating a career in medical equipment sales or pursuing a doctorate” (Uhlmann, 2018). Further, as for goals that students have regarding their general personal lives, there were several examples of students wanting to be a role model for others. One such example is stated as, “I want to inspire the next generations of my family to go to college too—to set a standard that a high school education only is not enough; to communicate to them that my people are not here only to work at hourly labor, but to have meaningful employment and make an impact” (Stafford, 2018). There were also individuals that shared their desire to specialize in a particular major due to wanting to impact others:

I decided to study Psychology (pre-med) in hopes that one day I will be able to provide therapeutic resources to children suffering from negative home life. Understanding that curiosity is the foundation for many breakthrough treatments known to save lives today, I appreciate that psychology encourages me to work from a point of wonder and not a set of rigid frameworks (Calderon, 2019).

The second subtheme of aspiration found in the narratives was ambition for individual achievement. This aspiration indicated that a student wanted to achieve a specific goal for

themselves, such as going on to a graduate program, medical school, or law school. Further, this aspiration also demonstrates students' goal of securing a specific career. Of the 50 narratives, 23 (46%) share their ambition for individual achievement. There was a total of 29 references to this subtheme across the 23 stories. This subtheme emphasizes what a student wants to accomplish on their own. The theme of aspiration for individual achievement is characterized by a lack of discussion about any kind of larger purpose. For example, one student stated, "In five years, I see myself in a Ph.D. program for higher education" (Nguyen, 2017). This kind of statement, of which there were many across the stories, is presenting a personal aspiration. It clearly states what the student wants to do. This kind of statement differs, however, from a student that says, "Gaby's goal as a bilingual teacher is to support families like hers." In the former example, the student is emphasizing what was coded as an aspiration for individual achievement. In the latter example, the student is emphasizing the desire to "give back." The implications of this difference will be later explored.

As stated above, there were students that shared their goal of attending graduate school, but there were also students who shared their desire to attend medical school, such as one student from the University of Texas at Austin, "I'm pre-med, so medical school's definitely in my future" (Fitzpatrick, 2018). In addition to students expressing their goals of pursuing their education further, some also indicated their goals for a career, as well as pursuing another degree, "Chris is contemplating a career in medical equipment sales or pursuing a doctorate" (Uhlmann, 2018).

Below are five examples of aspirations for individual achievement, as well as aspiration to give back. See Appendix B for all of the data that was collected for this theme.

Table 1

*Aspirations*

Subtheme	Comments
Ambition for individual achievement	She will take up residence in the Far East, either Japan or Korea, for a year or two break before graduate school in Public Health
Ambition for individual achievement	Chris is a first-generation college graduate who is pondering a career in sales, or pursuit of an advanced degree.
Ambition for individual achievement	“...I am now a fifth year and applying for graduate programs...”
Ambition for individual achievement	He plans to complete his bachelor’s degree from the Lindner College of Business.
Ambition for individual achievement	“To get a degree in what I am passionate about, make new friends, and grow as an individual.”
Ambition to give back	“...I’d like to make a difference in my career in a way that Rachel changed my sister’s life.”
Ambition to give back	Garrett wants to create a clearer path for potential first-generation college student.
Ambition to give back	She hopes to reach students and their families before high school, when financial planning, academic advising and other assistance can have the most impact.

Ambition to give back

Go on to make changes in policy and within the government to help those like me. Those who need more help to get a good point in life.

Ambition to give back

Looking toward graduation this spring, Jivani now has his sights on law school. "I am interested in coming up with solutions to big social issues in our nation," said Jivani. "I want to make sure people from underrepresented groups have the same access to health care, education, jobs, and a good quality of life."

### **Family Connections**

The second theme that emerged from RQ 1 was *family connections*. The theme of family connections arose through the various stories that students shared in connection to their family, such as the support they received, the challenges of being the first in their family to attend college, as well as family members emphasizing the importance of college. Throughout the analysis of the stories that were shared and transcribed, there were three subthemes that emerged: family as a source of strength, family as a source of struggle, and pressure to attend college.

The first subtheme of family connections was family as a source of strength. This subtheme included the love and support that first-generation students received from their family members. In addition to the love and support a student shared, the discussion of family members expressing the importance of college and their encouragement to attend was also discussed. Of the 50 stories that were assessed 23 (46%) expressed positive interactions or relationships between the student and their family members. There was a total of 37 references to this subtheme across the 23 narratives. These positive expressions ranged from sharing information about family members, to the support that they receive from their family, as well as students

wanting to achieve to make their family proud. One example of the general discussion of family is:

Gaby grew up around children in a large yet tightknit extended family—her mother is the oldest of nine siblings. “As the second-oldest cousin, I loved caring for and playing with my younger cousins.” Family is the driving force behind Gaby’s academic success and journey to college. During the last academic year, Gaby lived with her two sisters...”

(University of Nebraska-Omaha, 2019).

In addition to the positive discussion of family, narratives often discussed the support they received from family. One example of such support is stated as, “My mother and grandmother, who passed away in 2015, were always really proud of my achieving so many things, going to college, and studying overseas. My entire family, including 15 cousins, has always been very encouraging” (University of Michigan, 2016.). Finally, another topic that first-generation students shared was in relation to how they want to succeed in college in order to make their family members proud. This is indicated by a student, “At the end of the day, I just want to make my family proud,” Sandra said. “Truly, I’m doing it for them, not for me. I want my siblings to follow in my footsteps and graduate” (Elson, 2019). In addition to the previous comment, another student discussed how their graduation day wasn’t just about celebrating their accomplishments, but to recognize their family as well, “This day isn’t just about me; it’s about my family. Celebrating with them, hearing my name when I walk across the stage at my business school graduation, it’s going to be great” (Irwin, 2018).

The second subtheme that was found was family as a source of struggle, where first-generation students shared how their parents lacked knowledge and experience that one would have from attending college. This, then, made some aspects of college more difficult for the

students. Of the 50 narratives, 31 (62%) indicate family as a source of struggle. There was a total of 36 references to family difficulties across the 31 stories. A majority of the challenges that were shared included the lack of knowledge and experience that family members had when it comes to higher education. One example of lack of knowledge from family is stated as, “As a first-generation student, my family lacked the resources to help me move through the higher education system” (Nguyen, 2017). Another student stated, “Personally, I found it fruitless to ask my parents for collegiate assistance” (Brown, 2019.). Additionally, first-generation students discussed how their families may have struggled monetary wise, resulting in family members having to work multiple jobs, or students taking on financial responsibility. One student shares the difficulties they endured with both family, college, and finances:

It is challenging to balance finances, support my family, and excel in school while being a student leader. I find the common denominator between my family and my professors is the lack of understanding through the mind of a First Gen student. They feel as if hardships are just excuses—not even considering my experience with the “imposter syndrome (Flores Da, 2018).

Through the trials and tribulations that first-generation students discussed within their stories, it was apparent that they experienced challenging relationships or interactions with family. Something worth noting is that although some students expressed the challenges that they endured in regard to family members, such as the lack of family knowledge, they also shared a positive outcome regarding their family, such as the support they received, despite the challenges. However, of the 50 narratives, only five (10%) shared how their struggles with their family was overcome or provided a positive outcome to the challenge. One example of such is stated as, “Despite her father’s absence in her life, Stevenson considers herself to be a family-



oriented individual, as she has a large extended family she often spends time with while not in school” (Knoll, 2018).

A third and final subtheme found was the pressure that first-generation students felt from family members to attend college. This subtheme coincided with the challenges that students faced in relation to their family members at some points, but there were other times where students would discuss the push in a positive manner, which is why it’s separated from the family as a source of struggle concept. While this concept wasn’t addressed as much as family as a source of strength or family as a source of struggle, it’s important to note that there was a distinction between the pressure to go to college and family as a source of struggle. Of the 50 narratives, nine (18%) discussed the pressure or the push that students received to go on to higher education. Each of the nine stories referred to the concept. As stated previously, students discussed how family members either encouraged them to attend college or pressured them to attend college. One example of a positive push from family was stated as, “...but my family has always pushed me to go to college. They are like my own personal cheerleading squad and it’s pretty cool. I never would have found such a sense of pride in myself without the support of these people whom I call family” (Smith, n.d.). On the other hand, some first-generation students described the pressure they felt from family members to attend college, “I knew I had the burden of figuring out how to get to where I wanted to be all on my own. Knowing that, combined with the high expectations that my family had for me, the pressure was on” (Campbell, 2019). There were indications of both positive and negative pressure to attend college, but within the stories, the negative occurred more often, appearing in six of the 50 narratives (12%).

In the table below are five examples of family as a source of strength, five examples of family limitation and two examples of pressure to go to college. For all of the data on family connections, please see Appendix B.

Table 2

*Family Connections*

Subtheme	Comments
Family as source of strength	“My mother raised me as a single parent with a GED. Both she and my grandmother were very protective of me. They gave me a great environment. I never had experiences outside of Detroit, but they gave me opportunities to engage with the arts, music, and writing and more.”
Family as a source of strength	“My mother and grandmother, who passed away in 2015, were always really proud of my achieving so many things, going to college, and studying overseas. My entire family, including 15 cousins, has always been very encouraging,” she says.

Family as a source of strength	“As refugees of the Vietnam War, my parents have always encouraged and influenced me to seek out as much knowledge as I could from this country that has offered me so many opportunities like having access to an education system. Being the oldest of 4 children, I always felt like it was my duty to pave the way...”
Family as a source of strength	“I reminded myself just how much I wanted to do if for my brothers, but also for my parents and grandparents who sacrificed a lot for me to have this life.”
Family as a source of strength	“As an only child, I have always received an abundant amount of love, support, and guidance.”
Family struggle	“...both because I did not want to hurt my parents’ feelings and I knew they could not relate...”
Family struggle	...as the daughter of parents who had to compensate for their lack of degrees.
Family struggle	“My family was just proud that I broke the “cycle.” The “cycle” consisted of five generations of women, including my mother, that had a child before the age of 20 and thus did not graduate high school. As you can see, I had a lot of family pressure on my shoulders.”
Family struggle	As a child of a single parent working two jobs in a low-income household...

Family struggle	“My sister Krysalynn was born premature and was very sick for quite a long period of time. She was on a feeding tube and was cared for by a physician’s assistant named Rachel,” Chris said
Pressure to go to college	“My family also pushed me to get a degree so I could be successful in what I care about.”
Pressure to go to college	Despite her experience, she made it clear to her two daughters, Stacey and her younger sister, Karybe Jean-Gilles, that higher education was necessary.

### **Engagement**

The third theme that arose from RQ 1 was *engagement*. The theme of engagement occurred due to first-generation students sharing their involvement with different programs, influential courses, volunteer opportunities, faculty members, and research that aided the student in their academic discovery. Two subthemes became apparent through the analysis of stories, the importance of engagement and the discussion of a student’s major.

The first subtheme was the importance of engagement. In the stories, students expressed various activities that they were involved in, from first-generation programs to reaching out to professors. Of the 50 stories, the importance of engagement was found in 34 (68%). There was a total of 107 references to the importance of engagement across the 34 narratives. A number of students expressed involvement with specific programs and how those programs aided in their development as a student and individual. Further, some students indicated that their involvement led to the discovery of their major. One example is stated as:

Sandra has also been involved with the Student Organization of Social Work (SOSW), which was a key component to her success as a student in the program. “I always told

myself I wanted to be involved in school, so I found the student organization of social work and that helped me find other peers and get to know more about the program,” Sandra said. “I joined my first year and then the second year, I decided I wanted to try for a leadership role. So, I ran for president and was elected for a year.” The WSU social work program and the SOSW have strengthened the relationship she has to the field. “I think being a leader for the SOSW has helped me be able to advocate for other students who may not always feel comfortable,” Sanchez said (Elson, 2019).

Not only do some students indicate that their time within an organization has helped shape them into the people they currently are, but there are other students who specifically draw attention to programs geared for first-generation students. One such example is stated as:

The FIRST program at Clemson University sponsored a summer course that helped prepare her for success in her coursework. “The program allowed me to see that other first-generation students were at Clemson, too,” Garrett said. “I’m still connected with students from the summer preview program, and we have been able to use what we learned that week throughout our Clemson experience” (Land, 2018).

Additional stories that were shared talk about specific programs that the colleges they attend have implemented, such as Cardinal First, and TRIO (Flowers, 2018; Rosetta, 2018). Other students also address their involvement with living-learning communities and the benefits that come with that type of program, “The academic coaching provided through the program coordinators, the Living Learning Community that the students engage in, the financial literacy assistance, and even the peer mentoring that was implemented have all been strategically designed to contribute to student success” (Brown, 2019.).

Included in the subtheme of importance of engagement, students shared the relationships they formed with faculty members. The relationships with faculty members that students shared indicated how those relationships positively benefitted them and aided them in their college experience. Of the 50 stories, 19 (38%) shared the supportive relationships that they have with particular faculty members. In some instances, students shared that the faculty as a whole was supportive of their aspirations, “Faculty and staff also helped her navigate the process that was new to her and her family. ‘It was exactly what I was looking for,’ she said. ‘It feels like a small community where everyone gets along. Everyone is really helpful’” (Murray, 2019). Often times, students expressed their relationships with a particular faculty member that had impacted them, such as this particular student:

...associate professor Scott Baugh in the English Department has stood out among the faculty and staff members he has interacted with during his time at Texas Tech. “He’s helped me foster my passion for film and media,” Tejada said. “When I started my first year here at Texas Tech, I took his introduction to film studies class. He just made everything super easy to understand and just so fascinating. He has a way of teaching that really opens it up not just for people studying film, but for everybody. I went to his office hours to get some help on an essay, and he really took the time to help me out and sort of explained everything to me. From there, it just spawned this whole passion that I now have with film media studies. As my mentor, he’s been tremendous. He helped me set up my research into what it is now (Castro-Crist, 2019).

The second subtheme that occurred was the discussion of a student’s major and involvement with their program. Of the 50 stories, 31 (62%) discussed their major. There was a total of 34 references to a student’s major across the 31 stories. Choosing a major is a

monumental choice in a student’s life, and by indicating what a student wants to major in, that gives some indication as to what they want to do as a career. Further, students that shared their major typically discuss how the decision has been influential to their experience in higher education. For instance:

When researching what college majors were right for her, engineering seemed like the perfect fit because it would blend her love for math with a practical application of making the world a better place. Initially, she pursued civil engineering as her degree emphasis, where she was excited about the prospect of designing and building structures like bridges, roads, and more. But after taking a few courses in the subject, she realized that electrical engineering would be a better fit. “I realized I liked the practical aspects of electrical engineering,” she said. “I could apply the theories directly into the field and I like how it all seamlessly works together” (Murray, 2019).

While this particular student shared the type of research and influence, they experienced in order to discover their major, other students simply stated their major, with little-to-no background information. However, even with just the statement of a student’s major, it establishes the student’s involvement within their college, as well as their program. One example is, “A natural resources management major in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources” (Castro-Crist, 2019). See the table below for five examples of the importance of engagement, five examples of the importance of engagement with faculty members, and five examples of students discussing their major. For the rest of the data on engagement, please see Appendix B.

Table 3

*Engagement*

Subtheme

Comments

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Importance of engagement	<p>“In 2014, I studied Language and Cultures with the Japan Center for Michigan Universities in Hikone, Japan,” she says. “And again, I studied abroad in 2015 with an Environmental History program through CGIS,” CGIS is the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts’ Center for Global and Intercultural Study.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>At U-M, Drew tapped two major support networks, the First-Generation College Students @ Michigan and the Blavin Scholars’ comprehensive program of mentoring, academic and personal counseling, social and volunteering opportunities.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>But as he became involved in Latino groups on campus...</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>In addition, she also became involved in campus leadership opportunities, including the Peer Mentor Program in the First Generation Freshman Office and Student Leadership Retreats.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>...including the Environmental Club, Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), and Seminole State Volunteers campus organizations (SSV).</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Jivani says the support he has received from the Honors College has kept him on course to graduate in May 2018. “The advisors have been so helpful with scheduling my classes and they’ve worked with me, so I could stay on track to finish my degree program in three years,” said Jivani.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“My admission adviser told me about a program called Cardinal First and said to meet with Julie Carballo who is the director of first generation student programs...”</p>



Importance of engagement	Instead, the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) team at Texas Tech, including the First Generation Transition & Mentoring Programs, helped facilitate a positive transition and experience for Kildow.
Importance of engagement	“My admission adviser told me about a program called Cardinal First and said to meet with Julie Carballo who is the director of first generation student programs...”
Importance of engagement	“After that she kept me up to date with all the meetings and they were very informative for first gen students and even transfer students.”
Discuss major	Before her time as a social work major, Stevenson initially intended to become a psychologist and open her own private practice, However, her interest quickly shifted after someone mentioned that she should look into social work for her degree. Taking their advice, Stevenson dug deeper and quickly found she was interested in the field. Although she wasn’t entirely confident in her decision and took some psychology courses just to be sure of her choice, she ultimately decided psychology was not for her. But, she chose to study social work in tandem with other closely-related field: sociology.
Discuss major	Brazenwood is set to graduate this spring in natural resources management, with an academic resume stacked with research and leadership experience.
Discuss major	Palin, now a senior at FSU, was always interested in the medical field and she began her college career as a biochemical major on the pre-medical route. However, throughout her time at FSU, she found herself excelling in and more drawn to her math classes. So, she decided to change her major to chemical and biomedical engineering.

Discuss major

Infuriated and disappointed by the lack of institutional psychological support for children in low socioeconomic communities, I decided to study Psychology (pre-med) in hopes that one day I will be able to provide therapeutic resources to children suffering from a negative home life.

Discuss major

When he won a scholarship and began his first year at the university, everybody thought he would go on to be an engineer. But as he became involved in Latino groups on campus, his interests to politics. I thought, "Wow, this is college, so let me get a little understanding of what it really has to offer." I love engineering, but when I realized how much my identity and my background meant to me, I changed my major to Mexican-American Studies."

### **Mindset**

The final theme that arose from RQ 1 was *mindset*. Although this theme was the one with the least amount of references, the information that was presented was valuable. The theme of mindset arose from students sharing what they took away from attending college, as well as what they would like to share with others about their experiences. Three subthemes emerged: Advice, pride, and positive mindset. Throughout this theme, the one commonality that all references had, was that they were all positive. From the advice that students shared about their own experiences, to the encouragement they received from others, first-generation students seemed to have a positive outlook on the experiences they had in higher education.

The first subtheme was advice. Of the 50 narratives, 15 (30%) indicated advice to share with other first-generation students. There was a total of 18 references to advice across the 15 stories. The importance of advice, as indicated within the narratives, is to share experiences with others, especially experiences that were challenging for the student sharing the advice. One example of this is stated as, "There is no perfect college student and there is no definite path for

life. Your goals can remain the same while the journey there will be full of the most unexpected things, but it all comes down to your faith in yourself to overcome and your willingness to utilize the numerous resources to you” (Bailey, 2019). There were several students that chose to try to ensure other first-generation students that each person’s college experience is unique and different, and to try new things, “Do not be afraid to branch out. Explore new interests, take classes that are not related to you major, and do not be afraid of change! Attend school events, be involved in clubs, and ask for help when you need it. And most importantly, have fun because before you know it, it will be graduation” (Perez, 2019). However, other students share advice about support, “Continue to work hard because there’s no telling what you can accomplish. There will always be people on the sidelines rooting and supporting you through your endeavors” (Garcia, 2018). The advice that first-generation students shared on their collegiate websites was geared towards positively impacting potential future or current first-generation students.

The second subtheme that occurred throughout the theme of mindset was the pride that first-generation students felt towards their experience in higher education. Of the 50 narratives, seven (14%) of first-generation students shared some aspect of pride. There was a total of seven references across the seven stories. The pride that first-generation students shared was in relation to the challenges that they overcame, the characteristics they have grown into, and being a first-generation student. One example of a student expressing their pride of overcoming challenges was shared as:

I feel that I have more resilience toward obstacles thrown my way. I am part of this community where determination and support is strong. I feel motivated to prove that I will succeed. Although it might get difficult at times, I am ready to work hard and

explore new possibilities as we work for more first-gen students to have the opportunity to attend higher education (Perez, 2019).

While overcoming challenges was one component of pride that first-generation students shared, another concept that students shared in relation to pride was the advantages that they chose to take as a student, “I never thought that I would be the bright, independent, powerful, and courageous woman I am today” (Scruggs, 2019). Finally, some students chose to share how being a first-generation student brings them a sense of pride:

Although I attribute my success to both my Hofstra journey and my support system, there are some things that I would have done differently. I can now clearly see the advantages that I have in the workforce as a first-generation student. I had to go the extra mile to get where I want to be, which goes hand-in-hand with the work ethic that I learned as the daughter of parents who had to compensate for their lack of degrees. The transferable skills that I have acquired as a result of my upbringing will carry me through all my future endeavors (Iaria, 2019).

The final subtheme that occurred was the positive mindset that students shared within their stories. Of the 50 narratives, ten (20%) included a positive outlook to their experiences. Positive mindset was referenced ten times throughout the ten stories. Some students shared how they chose to look on the bright side of a potential negative situation, “They could have easily been my default, but something inside of me said, “Go for it.” The opportunity presented a choice: succumb or believe beyond what I could see. Would I believe in myself and in God or believe in what society and my bank account said?” (Harrell, 2019). Other students chose to focus on how their particular major allows them to benefit the world, “Understanding that curiosity is the foundation for many breakthrough treatments known to save lives today. I

appreciate that psychology encourages me to work from a point of wonder and not a set of rigid frameworks” (Calderon, 2019). Finally, another occurrence was the drive that students found in themselves to persevere, “Palin’s diverse experiences at FSU have given her the confidence to know what she wants to do with her future and begin the next chapter in her life. ‘I want to be able to impact at least one persons’ quality of life for the better’ Palin said” (Buis, 2017). See the table below for five examples of advice, five examples of pride, and five examples of positive mindset. For the rest of the data on mindset, please see the Appendix.

Table 4

*Mindset*

Subtheme	Comments
Pride	“I never thought I’d be the bright, independent, powerful, and courageous woman I am today.”
Pride	Jivani said it’s an effort he is extremely proud of because he is a first-generation Roadrunner himself.
Pride	“It has allowed me to discover my purpose in life and overall, it has made me a better person.”
Pride	“Now, as a senior in college, I can gladly say that I took advantage of any opportunity that I was interested in instead of waiting for someone else to make me do it.”
Pride	“I’m healthier, happier and ready to take on my next challenge. I broke the “cycle,” I’m in control of my life, and I am excited to say, in my senior year, that I’m ready for the next chapter!”

Advice	When asked what she wants first-generation students entering college to know, Campbell said, "There are resources available here. You might have a hard time finding them, but you can do it. Don't stop looking for them. There are people here, who want to help."
Advice	"My advice to all my other fellow first-gen students is to trust your process and believe in yourself, self-doubt is the biggest killer of all dreams. Dream big and dream fearlessly. Find resources and network with others because they will be the ones to help you reach that finish line. Lastly, when you're going through rough times, always think about the people who are cheering you on because you're doing exactly what they didn't have the chance to do."
Advice	"My first piece of advice is to help first-generation students build a network," she said. "Second, it is important that faculty realize most first-generation student have not had opportunities to travel the world," Garrett said.
Advice	"My advice for any other first-generation college student is: don't be afraid to not know something," Palin said. "Ask questions, be curious and change your major a million times. Do whatever it takes until you have found your calling."
Advice	"I encourage all first-generation students to approach their college experience with this attitude and find ways to connect with other first-generation students that share your thoughts and feeling."
Positive mindset	"I try to be as nice to myself as I am to others and try to be patient with my journey."
Positive mindset	Thanks to his drive and determination, he is well on his way to making that dream a reality.

Positive mindset

“I am now extremely motivated and give myself no other option but to succeed. I definitely think the opportunities I’ve come across and the experience I’ve had at SSC has helped transform me into the person I am today.”

Positive mindset

“Now, as a senior in college, I can gladly say that I took advantage of any opportunity that I was interested in instead of waiting for someone else to make me do it.”

Positive mindset

“Coming out of high school, I believed U-M would be best for me, would challenge me a lot. As I approach alumna status, I know I was right.”

In the following chapter, I critically analyze the themes that emerged. My analysis is based on research about the first-generation experience, as well as my own experiences as a first-generation student.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In this final chapter I will explore four significant findings that emerged from the data and discuss why they are important by connecting them with existing literature. In addition, I link my own experiences as a first-generation student to the results. Finally, I will discuss the limitations, give suggestions for future research endeavors, and reflect on the study.

### **Four Major Themes**

#### **Aspiration to Give Back**

Throughout the data that emerged from first-generation students' experiences on collegiate websites, a multitude of students shared their aspirations. As discussed previously, two subthemes emerged from the data, aspiration for individual achievement and aspiration to give back. The aspiration to give back was indicated in 43% of the narratives. A few examples of first-generation students sharing their aspirations to give back in one way or another are stated as, "Looking toward graduation this spring, Jivani now has his sights on law school. 'I want to make sure people from underrepresented groups have the same access to health care, education, jobs, and a good quality of life'" (Soria, 2017). With this example, the student wants to pursue a particular career in order to positively impact those that of a marginalized group. Another example of students' ambition to give back can be seen from students that share their desire to be a role model to others, "I want to inspire the next generations of my family to go to college, too—to set a standard that a high school education only is not enough; to communicate to them that my people are not here only to work at hourly labor, but to have meaningful employment and make an impact" (Stafford, 2019).

The aspiration to give back found in the stories is important for several reasons. One of those reasons relates back to aspirational capital, which was coined by Yosso (2005). The study



done by Yosso (2005) focuses on cultural wealth as “...an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). The author then links cultural wealth to the different types of capital that emerge from it, such as social capital, familial capital, aspirations capital, amongst others. While Yosso’s (2005) research focuses on communities of color, the concepts that are addressed in the study, such as aspirational capital or the goals one has despite the challenges they face, can be linked to the experiences that first-generation students have in college, of all demographics. The term aspirational capital is described as, “...the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances” (Yosso, 2005, p.78). Based on the data in this study, it’s clear that first-generation students express their ambitions, despite their circumstances and obstacles they endure in college.

In connection to aspirational capital, first-generation students indicate their cultural wealth throughout the data, as a means to help others, “This aspiration for education can be regarded as a form of cultural wealth, acting as a catalyst not only for the individual students, but also their families and community” (O’Shea, 2015, p. 513). Additionally, first-generation students that shared their stories also expressed their desire to help other first-generation students. One example of such is stated as, “...wants to create a clearer path for potential first-generation college students” (Land, 2018). By wanting to positively impact other first-generation students, these individuals are allowing themselves to be open about their own experiences. Through sharing both their strengths and weaknesses with others, they are attempting to help first-generations become well-equipped to handle a variety of situations. Institutions that are

showcasing first-generation students' aspirations to help others can be seen as a positive tool to help potential first-generation or other current first-generation students pursue their own dreams.

However, while the topic of aspirations as a means to give back is positive, the data collected for this study suggests that first-generation students who share their goals don't talk of the difficulties they've endured or will encounter on their journey to achieve their dreams. One thing that previous literature touches on frequently are the number of challenges that first-generation students encounter in different aspects of their life, and as mentioned by Yosso (2005), there are a number of things out of individuals control in terms of accomplishing their dreams. For instance, the stories that were assessed expressed a variety of goals, such as to obtain a certain degree or pursue a specific career in order to help others. Yet, statistics and previous literature indicate that first-generation students are less likely to obtain their degree in six years than continuing-generation students, are at a higher risk of failing their classes, and ultimately college than continuing-generation students, as well as face a number of challenges (The Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). The challenges that first-generation students face in college, such as lack of resources and mentorship, family struggles, the imposter syndrome, amongst others are further discussed in chapter two. This leads me to believe that in order for other first-generation students to get a correct understanding of all that someone of their status experiences, challenges that arise when trying to accomplish one's goal, should be mentioned.

As a first-generation student myself, I found the subtheme of aspiration to give back intriguing. Based on my own experiences, I have had similar goals as those who shared their ambition to help others, both within the community, as well as my family. However, I was unsure of how to achieve those goals, and ultimately there were times when I didn't understand

why I was still in college. Had I been able to read stories that expressed similar feelings and experiences, like the ones used for this study, I may have had a different experience. Just as first-generation students within the stories analyzed for this study expressed, my hope is to be able to educate and aid in the development of a variety of students, and touch on subjects that will acknowledge underrepresented groups.

### **Family as a Source of Strength**

A second important subtheme in the stories was family as a source of strength. Analysis of the stories shared by first-generation students indicated that of the 50 stories, 46% were related to family as a source of strength. The stories that were shared by students in connection to family as a source of strength ranged from particular experiences, to the vast support that they received from family members. One example of such is stated as, “They’ve become instrumental in helping me prepare for graduate school and in my research, which is based around film and media studies” (Castro-Crist, 2019). It can be assumed that through the support the student received from their parents, that support became instrumental in their decision to continue on with their education. Another example of family as a source of strength is, “My mom has worked so hard for my brother and me and at multiple jobs so that we can graduate without debt, and now we have a future where we can live a good life that’s enough—comfortable—and something I can sustain. But for me, one of the best things about getting me college degree will be giving my mom the incredible pride I know she will have” (Stafford, 2019).

The aspect of family as a source of strength is a positive concept to discuss, particularly on collegiate websites that are representing first-generation students. However, what I found was that there was only one instance where a student discussed a negative relationship with their family. What I mean by the discussion of a negative relationship is that this particular student

bluntly stated that she has no type of support or relationship with their family. While there were several instances where students discussed the challenges that they encountered in terms of their family, such as lacking the knowledge to help them with obstacles in college, many times those struggles were followed by how loved and supported they were by their family members. One such example is stated as, “Yet, despite not having the knowledge to provide me with much advice or assistance, my parents supported me in everything I set out to do” (Rosetta, 2018). It’s important that first-generation students are expressing the support they receive from family during challenging times, however, the stories tend to overlook the obstacles that students face in relation to their family. There is a variety of evidence that suggests that students face challenges in connection to college and their families, such as the study by Longwell-Grice et al.’s (2016). The study explores different groups of first-generation students and the challenges they endure in college, such as relationships with family members. Some students indicate challenges with family members lacking the knowledge and experience of college (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). These stories represent struggles, but they don’t get down to the really touch realities that some first-generation students experience, such as lack of support or strained relationships.

I believe it’s important and effective that institutions are displaying stories that discuss the positive interactions that first-generation students encounter with their family members. Nevertheless, these institutions should also be representing first-generation students who aren’t receiving the love and support from family members or have challenges regarding their families. Previous research establishes that some first-generation students do face challenges at home, whether it be the lack of knowledge family members have, the pressure to go and do well in college, as well as lack of family support (London, 1996; Wang, 2014; Longwell-Grice, 2016). I believe that rather than having students discuss their challenges and then linking those challenges

to a positive outcome, first-generation students should feel that they can fully explain the challenges that they've encountered regarding family members. When students share the raw and instrumental experiences that they've had in college, it'll allow other first-generation students to understand the difficulties and potentially learn from other's experiences.

Students that disclosed their positive and supportive relationships directly tie back to my own experiences with my family. It was interesting to read about experiences that other first-generation students encountered with their family members and found that I had similar experiences. I have been fortunate enough to receive support, aid, and love throughout my entire collegiate experience. However, although I've received an abundance of positivity, I was left with many questions that my family could not answer. Both of my parents, as well as many other family members, lacked the experience and knowledge that only individuals that attend college understand. While the stories being shared are exemplifying important encounters with family members, they are lacking the challenging experiences that some first-generation students experience.

### **Lack of Negative Experiences with Engagement**

The third theme that was discovered from the stories was *engagement*. From the stories, engagement included students interacting with faculty members, as well as involving themselves with extracurriculars. With the discovery of the theme, two subthemes arose, the importance of engagement being the most prominent, with 68% of the 50 stories indicating a student's engagement in college, be it in an organization or with a faculty member. Previous literature supports the stories shared by first-generation students in regard to the programs that they're involved with on campus. The numerous examples that first-generation students shared on collegiate websites boasted the positives that engagement in college exemplified. One example

of such an experience with a program is stated as, “The University Leadership Network definitely helped me sharpen my professional skills while also helping me develop a small community within this large university” (Fitzpatrick, 2018). This ties in well to the research explored by Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004), which describes how first-generation students that are involved with extracurricular activities reaped benefits from said programs:

...first-generation students tended to derive significantly stronger positive benefits from these involvements than did other students. For example, extracurricular involvement had significant positive effects on critical thinking, degree plans, internal locus of attribution for academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks for first-generation students (p. 272).

While the theme of engagement was mostly based on the importance of engagement, one thing that stuck out to me was the lack of information regarding the difficulty in becoming involved with both faculty and extracurriculars. The lack of challenges regarding engagement as displayed by institutions opposes previous research. While it is true that there is strong research making a case for the benefits of engagement, research also indicates that first-generation students often struggle with that engagement. One example is noted by Ward et al. (2012), “For many first-generation students, lacking college-related cultural capital as they do, these aspects of college life are not well understood, and for that reason their levels of engagement and integration may be different than those of their better-prepared peers” (p. 49). Compared to previous literature, the narratives that are assessed within this research suggest that first-generation students have an easy time becoming involved on campus. The stories are framed as though engaging with an organization or faculty member is as easy as signing up for said

organization, or simply walking into a faculty members office. There are even times where students indicate that they've become who they are today because of their relationship with a faculty member, suggesting that relationships with faculty members are trouble-free:

Two of the most influential people in my life have been my grandfather, Randy, and Dr. Bennett," Chris said. "I wouldn't be the student I am today without having met Dr. Bennett. He took me under his wing and taught me how to be a good student. He showed me that being a professor involves more than teaching. It's about making an impact on people's lives that lasts long after graduation (Uhlmann, 2018).

While it should be noted that first-generation students are more likely to find success in higher education if they have someone that will aid them academically and emotionally (Hébert, 2018), it's also important for collegiate institutions to allow first-generation students to discuss the challenges they may have encountered upon engaging with faculty members or becoming involved in extracurriculars. One such example of a student disclosing their difficulty in approaching faculty is presented by Means and Pyne (2017):

For others, the task of approaching office hours remained daunting. Kaitlin, who had even spent her junior year deeply immersed in a research project with a team of professors and peers, explained:

I felt like office hours are more a time for you to get help that you need, than something like wasting their time. Not that I don't think any of my professors wouldn't want to talk to me, I just never felt like I knew what to talk to them about...I know I'm supposed to have that relationship—I just don't know how to go about it (p. 918).

Based on my own experiences, I didn't understand the positive outcomes that becoming involved in college could have. In addition to the lack of understanding, I felt that I didn't belong in organizations or that others should have the opportunity to be involved within an organization over me, thus displaying signifiers of the imposter syndrome. Another aspect of engagement that I rarely experienced was interacting with faculty members, which is displayed in a positive manner through the stories shared on institutional websites. Had I read the stories that were used for the purpose of this study, or other first-generation student stories on different collegiate websites, I may have had the mindset that engagement in college was hassle-free and easy. Unfortunately, it seems that many other first-generation students, myself included, had a far more difficult time becoming involved than these narratives express.

### **Mindset**

The final theme that was discovered was mindset. The theme emerged from students discussing their thoughts on their experiences, as well as sharing guidance for other first-generation students to read. Three subthemes became prevalent within this the theme: pride, positive outlook, and advice. From the theme of mindset, it was clear that the students who shared their accomplishments, advice, and enthusiasm did so as a means to portray their institution positively, which relates it to the idea of growth mindset.

What is seen in these narratives can be made sense of in part through the concept of growth mindset. Growth mindset, as indicated by Yeager and Dweck (2012), is "...the belief that ability can be grown by exerting effort, seeking help from others, and revising strategies in the face of challenge," (as cited in Broda, Yun, Schneider, Yeager, Walton, & Diemer, 2018). The idea of growth mindset was established by a number of students, based on their narratives. For



instance, several students comment on their determination and perseverance to overcome the challenges that they've encountered in higher education. One such example is:

I feel that I have more resilience toward obstacles thrown my way. I am part of this community where determination and support is strong. I feel motivated to prove that I will succeed. Although it might get difficult at times, I am ready to work hard and explore new possibilities as we work for more first-gen students to have the opportunity to attend higher education (Perez, 2019).

Examples of the growth mindset in connection to the positive outlook that students exhibit connects to previous research by referring to perseverance and overcoming obstacles (Yasso, 2005; O'Shea, 2015; Broda et al., 2018). Within the study by Broda et al., (2018) the researchers focus on how marginalized students that were assigned to a growth mindset intervention, received better grades from one semester to another. Among the marginalized students were those of first-generation status. While the study by Broda et al. utilizes an intervention to further aid in the development of minority students, the research in this study indicates that first-generation students are growing based on their own experiences.

Pride is also displayed by first-generation students throughout their stories. Within the stories, first-generation students discussed how they overcame obstacles, as well as how college has led to new opportunities, which leads to how one must have a positive outlook in order to view higher education and challenges with such willingness. Again, this ties back into the growth mindset. The pride that first-generation students feel towards their accomplishments and status as a first-generation student can be tied to the appreciation that the students have towards higher education (Ward et al., 2012). One example of the pride that first-generation students shared are stated as, "I'm healthier, happier and ready to take on my next challenge. I broke the "cycle,"

I'm in control of my life, and I am excited to say, in my senior year, that I'm ready for the next chapter" (Scruggs, 2019). This example ties into research brought forth by Ward et al. (2012), which states, "These students are more invested in their education because they shoulder the burden of achievement, which can be a source of great pride" (p. 39). Further supporting the sense of pride that first-generation students describe, is brought forth by Próspero and Vohra-Gupta (2007), "...there are also certain aspects of attending college that are intrinsically based such as taking pleasure in learning new topics, appreciating the challenges of academic activities, and taking pride in academic accomplishments" (p. 972). The pride that first-generation students shared on collegiate websites is important and displays that others of the same status are allowed to find joy in their accomplishments.

Following the analysis of narratives that boast positivity, I believe that it's important for other first-generation students to understand that even though there are obstacles encountered in college, there are first-generation students that overcome them, continue on with their education, graduate, and secure the careers they pursued. Had I been able to read stories that showcased such positivity, I may have perceived college differently. However, as much as I admire the positivity that these institutions are showcasing, I believe that providing first-generation students with more realistic and negative encounters would also benefit those students.

### **Limitations**

First of all, the study examined only 29 institutions. This limited the research from going more in-depth with how first-generation students were framed on collegiate websites. Although there were a variety of institutions that were studied, I did utilize institutions that were recognized for their positive first-generation student programs, rather than attempt to assess a large number of random institutions across the country. By using the institutions that were

already being rewarded for their first-generation student programs, I didn't have to find a specific number of colleges, and student stories to generate through, but rather followed strict guidelines to analyze the colleges that have already been acknowledged. Again, nevertheless, this is a limitation due to the small amount of colleges that were analyzed. Had I decided to broaden my scope to just a list of all the public, four-year institutions, this project may have posed different results.

Another limitation was the sample of stories in this study. This research included stories of first-generation students that had to meet specific criteria, however this prevented the stories of students who were nontraditional in other ways, such as an international first-generation student, from being a part of the study. While I wanted to ensure that the stories that I analyzed solely focused on the experience of a first-generation student, it would have been interesting to incorporate the experiences of other nontraditional first-generation students within the study. However, the research then may have yielded different results. Additionally, by not utilizing alumni or faculty members of an institution that had been the first in their family to attend college, the scope of this research was narrowed.

Another limitation of the study was the sampling method. While there were criteria set for choosing which stories to assess, such as only using two stories from each institution, and choosing the first story, followed by the fourth story that was displayed on an institution's website, there were several times that the first and third story didn't meet the guidelines set. For instance, a story not having at least 200 words, or a story that was posted over four years ago. By not being able to utilize the first and fourth story each time, the process of finding and assessing the stories was inconsistent. While there were other guidelines that needed to be followed prior

to choosing which stories to assess, had I made choosing the first and fourth story every time a part of the criteria, the results would have been significantly different.

### **Future Research**

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, one recommendation for future research is to find a means to assess more institutions. By broadening the number of institutions to be analyzed, more in-depth knowledge could be created. Further, the assessment of institutions shouldn't just be focused on four-year, public institutions, but could incorporate community colleges, and private institutions. By also acknowledging first-generation students that attend two-year or private institutions, the experiences of said students may differ than those that were analyzed in this study. Future research could then compare and contrast the representation or stories shared by first-generation students that are shared by the different institutions. This is important for future studies in order to further understand how different institutions are framing the experiences of first-generation students, as well as what can be done in order to continuously benefit those students.

Another suggestion for future research is to study first-generation students who are nontraditional in other senses, such as international first-generation students. By assessing individuals that are not only first-generation students, but come from other countries, their experiences may differ from those that are the first in their family to go to college from the United States. By acknowledging international first-generation students, this type of research, again, could be compared to this study. It would be interesting to see what may be similar or different between an international first-generation student, as a first-generation student that lives in the United States. Further, how international first-generation students disclose their

experiences in higher education, and how those stories are shared on institutional websites could be compared to those of this study.

A final suggestion for future research is to assess stories that have been shared by alumni or faculty members of first-generation students. It may be important to acknowledge how alumni experienced a specific institution, and if they give insight to how their previous college could improve on their methods to help first-generation students. Further, by assessing first-generation faculty members, they may be sharing both their stories of college, as well as what they're doing in order to aid in the development of first-generation students. By capitalizing on the experiences of individuals who had experienced specific institutions, at different time periods, future research can address the differences of those experiences, to the stories being shared by current first-generation students that attend the same institution. It's important to utilize individuals who are advocating for first-generation students, based on their own first-generation status. Further, it would be interesting to acknowledge where those alumnus or faculty members are at in their lives during the time that they're sharing their stories. By this, I mean it'd be intriguing to read about the current lives of previous first-generation students. Future research could examine if alumnus and faculty members achieved what they set out to, whether they experience challenges in the workforce that they did as a student, amongst other things.

Overall, future research may incorporate a variety of different aspects, some that could be compared to the results of this study, and some that could be discussed on its own. The results of future research could provide readers with more information regarding how collegiate institutions represent first-generation students, and how those institutions could further help first-generation students during their time in higher education.

### **A Final Reflection**

I want to end this thesis in an unconventional way by sharing my overall reflection on this research, given my role as a first-generation college student. Throughout the assessment of the various stories, as well as my own experiences as a first-generation college student, I found myself connecting to some of the stories that were being shared. However, there were also instances where I separated my experiences from the ones being shared on institutional websites. There were a number of positive aspects to the stories that were shared on collegiate websites, but I also found that there were concepts that weren't being discussed that may be beneficial for first-generation students to read. As a first-generation college student, myself, prior to attending college, I would have wanted to read and be aware of both the beneficial aspects of college, as well as the challenges that I may encounter during my time as a student.

There are two major positive aspects that I found from the different stories used for this project. One positive quality is allowing the student to voice their experiences. From my assessment, students often shared their involvement with family, their goals, their participation with activities and faculty members, as well as their outlook on higher education. These websites are presented in a way that showcases the first-generation student in a positive manner, meaning that they are often times pairing the narrative with a photo of the student, and potentially some background information, such as where the student is originally from. Personally, I feel more comfortable reading stories of first-generation students when I am able to see who they are, as well as some brief background information. This is a way for me to figure out if my own background relates to that of another student, as well as connect to their experiences on a more personal level.

The second positive quality that I found to be beneficial about the stories was that they focused on positive qualities about college. For instance, I found it interesting that a number of first-generation college students focused on how they aspired to give back in some way. There were various examples of students that shared why they chose a particular major or want to go into a certain career, in order to give back to those that mean the most to them, such as their family members or their community. For me, I was able to connect to these stories the most. Had I been able to share my own experience as a first-generation student on a collegiate website, I feel that I also would have discussed my aspiration to help others within my narrative. Further, I believe that the stories being shared highlight first-generation students who have particular goals, that pursue a particular degree, and achieve milestones, in order to allow potential or current first-generation students to observe that they too, can achieve what they set out to accomplish.

All that being said, there were three major aspects from the narratives being displayed by institutions, that I found to be problematic. The first negative aspect that I found was that there were restrictions on what a student shared. While I understand that there is a limit to what the stories being shared by first-generation students can do, there are instances where I feel as though a student isn't sharing enough of their experience. It's almost as if the stories being shared are too positive. Often times a student may begin to discuss a particular situation but doesn't provide the context of the situation or how they found themselves to be in that situation. For instance, some stories choose to focus on how a student ended up being where they are at, but don't discuss how a student got there. The narratives don't share the errors and accomplishments that lead a student to the position they are in at the time they discuss their experiences. I don't believe that the stories that are being shared on collegiate websites provide

enough depth to allow future or current first-generation students to understand the complexity of particular experiences.

A second negative quality to the stories is that there is a lack of challenging experiences that first-generation students seemingly encountered in college. As mentioned previously, within the 50 stories that were assessed for this study, there were limited challenges brought forth. Further, from these challenges, many students discussed a positive outcome from those challenges, but provided little to no measures on how to overcome the obstacles that they experienced. For instance, there are several occurrences of a student sharing that their family members lack the experience to help them with certain questions pertaining to college, but they have showed the student ample amounts of love and support. Another instance that this occurred was through the discussion of engagement. Not once did a student discuss how difficult it may have been to become involved in campus activities or engage with a faculty member. Personally, I found it extremely challenging to become involved on campus and engage with faculty members, and that isn't showcased at all through the narratives. I wish that the student would further delve into the challenge that they face, discuss the steps of how they overcame the challenge, and then explain the outcome of overcoming the challenge.

Finally, a third negative quality to the stories was that the narratives didn't seem to properly advise future or current first-generation students. Many of these stories seemed to discuss how great college was, and all of the benefits of college, but didn't address how first-generation students obtained that mindset. Rather than discuss how important it is to become involved or to rise from the challenges, I personally would have benefitted from stories that dug deep into both the importance of certain aspects of college, as well as how there would likely be



challenges encountered. All of the stories that were assessed had a positive spin to them, when college isn't always going to be easy or fun.

Overall, this study presented me with information that I was previously unaware of and can build off of for future research. Though there are problems that were discovered on institutional websites that showcase first-generation college students and their stories, I believe that the positive qualities were also apparent and that the institutions used for this study are on the right path to further helping first-generation students.

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### Appendix A: Codebook

Codes-21	Definition	Examples
Goals (34 references)	Student discusses a specific objective that they want to meet.	<p>“Go on to make changes in policy and within the government to help those like me. Those who need more help to get to a good point in life.”</p> <p>“Garrett wants to create a clearer path for potential first-generation college students.”</p>
Persevere (16 references)	Student indicates or discusses the work they continue to do even when faced with a challenge.	<p>“To be a First Gen means to pioneer the journey of higher education for my family. It means to persevere and exert resilience when I feel defeated. It means to achieve excellence in hopes that I can inspire my younger siblings to achieve great heights.”</p> <p>“I had to go the extra mile to get where I want to be, which goes hand-in-hand with the work ethic that I learned as the daughter of parents who had to compensate for their lack of degrees.”</p>
Achievement (35 references)	Student discusses a goal that they had previously set and successfully finished.	<p>“I’ve learned how to express my voice in a way that can impact others...”</p> <p>“To top it off, I not only made the Dean's List my first semester back in school but I earned a 4.0 grade point average!”</p>
Gratification (14 references)	Student discusses the feeling of fulfillment upon receiving opportunities or knowledge gained from experiences.	<p>“First-gen students are very determined,” said Juarez, who will be interning at PricewaterhouseCoopers in</p>

		<p>January. “We don’t take our education for granted are grateful to have the opportunities that our parents didn’t have.”</p> <p>“Receiving the Sally Casanova Scholarship has changed my life the most. Through this scholarship, I’ll have the opportunity to attend conferences, visit Ph.D. programs, and participate in a summer research institute.”</p>
Obstacle (Internal challenge) (15 references)	<p>Student discusses something that prevents them from reaching their desired objective. In the instance of internal struggles, it may be a feeling or behavior that prevents a student from obtaining a specific goal.</p>	<p>“The challenges she encountered on campus made her feel isolated...”</p> <p>“Jivani said he didn’t know how to study or meet new people when he got to college...”</p>
Obstacle (External challenge) (26 references)	<p>Student discusses something that prevents them from reaching their desired objective. In the case of external struggles, this could be an outside factor that disrupts the student’s life.</p>	<p>“She said the initial process of filling out paperwork and enrollment forms, especially in regard to financial aid and scholarships, was a challenge for Kildow and her parents...”</p> <p>“Yet there she was, 100 miles away from home, guiding herself through the unknowns of college life, the admissions process, and how to pay for tuition.”</p>
Imposter syndrome (6 references)	<p>Student indicates or discusses feeling as though they don’t deserve the opportunities they are presented with in higher education.</p>	<p>“Although my new normal was nothing shy of exciting, there was a slight feeling of insecurity, as if I did not belong here.”</p> <p>“I did not feel as if I belonged at Richmond.”</p>
Discussion of background (17)	<p>Student discusses how their lives, up</p>	<p>“But a long history of family</p>

references)	until that point, may have negatively impacted the way they feel towards college. For instance, they may not have received the support they needed to apply or go to college.	struggles led Justyce to make the difficult decision to move out of the home she grew up in, so she could focus on her studies.”  “Growing up in a low-socioeconomic household, I understand how adversities such as poverty and poor health can shape the realities of many low-income people of color, especially in terms of psychological well-being.”
Influenced to attend college (11 references)	Students indicates that someone within their life has negatively pressured them to attend college.	“My family also pushed me to get a degree so I could be successful in what I care about.”  “I didn’t really have any idea for what I wanted to do with my life at this point, but my family has always pushed me to go to college.”
Discussion of faculty (20 references)	Student discusses some type of relationship with a faculty member.	“I wouldn’t be the student I am today without having met Dr. Bennett. He took me under his wing and taught me how to be a good student.”  “Professor Kapiszewski is among the most knowledgeable and hard-working people I’ve ever met.”
Positive qualities of college (18 references)	Student discusses redeeming aspects of college.	“What drew her to Florida State University was the challenging academic curriculum, exuberant school spirit and some distance from her hometown of Daytona Beach, Florida, which would help her facilitate the transition to adulthood.”

		<p>“FSU has a very supportive and friendly student body. Every day, I am surrounded by influential and intelligent young individuals I am lucky enough to call my friends and push me to pursue my dreams.”</p>
Discuss family (41 codes)	Student establishes some type of familial relationship, whether it be positive or negative.	<p>“Pierre said she owes much of her success to her mother, Nicole, who moved to the Unites States from Haiti.”</p> <p>“My family, definitely, is my biggest inspiration, my biggest motivation.”</p>
Relate to other first-generation students (13 references)	Student indicates how their own experience with college may relate to other first-generation college students.	<p>“The event was a success, said Carla, who smiles when she spots a student still wearing the shirt. ‘It’s like there’s an immediate connection, I can relate with them (first-generation students).”</p> <p>“I find support from my fellow first-generation peers and friends as we can relate to the same struggles.”</p>
Support system (41 references)	Student indicates that they have received assistance from others either emotionally, physically, or financially.	<p>“I know they couldn’t help me as much, but they were as supportive as they could be and were there for me.”</p> <p>“With love and support from my family and the help of mentors on campus and in the community, I have gained skills and knowledge that constantly push me to persist and become the best version of myself.”</p>
Discussion of program (major) (36 references)	Student establishes how they came to declare their major.	<p>“Infuriated and disappointed by the lack of institutional</p>

		<p>psychological support for children in low socioeconomic communities, I decided to study Psychology (pre-med) in hopes that one day I will be able to provide therapeutic resources to children suffering from a negative home life.”</p> <p>“The UTSA marketing and finance major especially appreciates the smaller class sizes he experiences as an Honors College student and was particularly engaged by courses, such as Introduction to Finance and Principles of Investments, taught by UTSA business lecturer Ronald Sweet.”</p>
Campus resources (19 codes)	Student discusses how there is either a lack of campus resources for first-generation college students, or how campus resources positively impacted their college experience.	<p>“Once they begin college, CARE students receive tutoring and computer lab assistance, advising, life-coaching, financial aid support and post-graduation prep.”</p> <p>“They offer a lot of services that are very helpful for first-generation students, like tutoring sessions and computer labs.”</p>
Participation (38 references)	Student discusses becoming involved with extracurriculars or faculty members.	<p>“While at UTSA, the undergraduate has also developed his service leadership skills by becoming a mentor for area middle and high school students by volunteering with community organizations like Habitat for Humanity and the San Antonio Food Bank.”</p> <p>“In addition, Palin does</p>

		philanthropy work through her sorority, Zeta Tau Alpha, raising money for breast cancer education and awareness.”
Discussion of first-generation program (20 references)	Student discusses a specific program geared for first-generation college students.	<p>“She joined and became vice-president of First to Go and Graduate (F2G&amp;G), a student organization which has 64 members.”</p> <p>“Although such challenges exist, the Student Success Center has created the First Wave Program to establish a community specifically for first-generation students.”</p>
Guidance (20 references)	Student provides recommendations for future students.	<p>“My advice for any other first-generation student is: don’t be afraid to not know something,” Palin said. “Ask questions, be curious and change your major a million times. Do whatever it takes until you have found your calling.”</p> <p>“Do not be afraid to try new things or ask for help. Do not take this time for granted. Take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. You never know where this crazy world called college could take you, even as a first-generation student. Who knows how many people will impact you and in return how many people you will impact as well.”</p>
Monetary issues (18 references)	Student discusses financial issues.	<p>“Money was a major issue along with many other things.”</p> <p>“During this time, we had just been evicted and I had felt</p>

		guilty for using my money towards a college application.”
Work life (8 references)	Student establishes why they have a job, the number of hours they spend working, and how it influenced their college experience.	<p>“With college tuition and expenses on the rise, Carla works part-time on campus and relies heavily on scholarship support.”</p> <p>“Jivani works two-part time jobs and is developing his skills as a marketing intern for a finance company this semester.”</p>

Categories	Definition
Ambitions (34 references) *	Codes include: Goals. Students describes their hope to achieve a specific goal for themselves, or for others. This code was significant enough to become a category.
Accomplishments (65 references)	Codes include: Perseverance, achievements, and gratification. These codes indicate the resilience that students showcase through their stories in order to reach a certain milestone that they’ve previously set.
Internal challenges (38 references)	Codes include: Obstacles, Imposter Syndrome, and discussion of background. These codes exhibit the struggles that students share in regard to factors that have influenced their behaviors and mindset.
External challenges (37 references)	Codes include: Obstacles and influence to attend college. These codes exhibit the struggles students discuss regarding outside factors that they have no control over, as well as the pressure they felt to attend college.
Positive mindset (18 references) *	Codes include: Positive qualities of college. Student indicates or shares their positive thinking and attitude regarding college or their personal lives. This code was significant enough to become a category.
Relationships (126 references)	Codes include: Discussion of family, relation to other first-generation students, influence to attend college, support system, and discussion of faculty. These codes

	exhibit the positive and negative associations that students have with their family, faculty, peers, community, etc. Student also shares the support they receive from different people, as well as encouragement to go on to college.
Academic discovery (55 references)	Codes include: Discussion of program (major) and campus resources. These codes exhibit how a student came to establish their major, their future in regard to school, as well as influential people and the help those people provide to the student throughout college. Student also shares the resources available to them that helped them throughout college.
Involvement (72 references)	Codes include: Participation, and discussion of first-generation program. The codes exhibit the activities that students are involved with, as well as particular first-generation student programs that students share throughout the stories.
Advice (20 references) *	Codes include: Guidance. This code indicates a student providing recommendations for future or current first-generation students. The code was significant enough to become a category.
Finances (26 references)	Codes include: Monetary issues and work life. These codes exhibit a student discussing their financial status, issues regarding finances, as well as their work lives.

Category	Code	Code	Code	Code	Code
Ambitions	Goals				
Accomplishments	Persevere	Achievement	Gratification		
Internal challenges	Obstacle	Imposter syndrome	Discussion of background		
External challenges	Obstacle	Influenced to attend college			
Positive mindset	Positive qualities of college				
Relationships	Discuss family	Relate to other first-	Influenced to attend	Support	Discussion of



		generation students	college	system	faculty
Academic discovery	Discussion of program (major)	Campus resources			
Involvement	Participation	Discussion of first-generation program			
Advice	Guidance				
Finances	Monetary issues	Work life			

Theme	Category	Category	Category
Aspiration	Ambition	Accomplishment	
Family Connections	External challenges	Relationship	Finances
Engagement	Academic discovery	Internal challenges	Involvement
Mindset	Advice	Positive mindset	

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
Aspiration	Aspiration to give back (35 references across 22 stories)	Aspiration for individual achievement (29 references across 23 stories)	
Family Connections	Family as a source of strength (37 references across 23 narratives)	Family as a source of struggle (36 references across 31 stories)	Pressure to attend college (9 references across 9 stories)
Engagement	Importance of engagement (107 references across 34 narratives)	Discussion of student's major (34 references across 31 stories)	
Mindset	Advice (18 references)	Pride (7 references across)	Positive mindset (10)

	across 15 stories)	7 stories)	references across 10 stories)
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\*= There were enough codes dealing with goals that it became a category in itself. For instance, Goals became the category of ambitions because it more clearly communicated both specific goals (e.g., graduate school) and more general goals (e.g., a general goal).

## Appendix B: Subtheme Examples

Appendix B indicates where all of the material that was collected from the stories lies in terms of subthemes. The importance of this information is to indicate how material was included in one subtheme rather than another.

Table 1

### *Aspirations*

Subtheme	Comments
Ambition for individual achievement	She will take up residence in the Far East, either Japan or Korea, for a year or two break before graduate school in Public Health
Ambition to give back	She hopes to complete a dual Ph.D. in women's studies and English so she can impact future generations as a professor.
Ambition for individual achievement	"...I am now a fifth year and applying for graduate programs..."
Ambition to give back	Looking toward graduation this spring, Jivani now has his sights on law school. "I am interested in coming up with solutions to big social issues in our nation," said Jivani. "I want to make sure people from underrepresented groups have the same access to health care, education, jobs, and a good quality of life."

Ambition for individual achievement	Chris is a first-generation college graduate who is pondering a career in sales, or pursuit of an advanced degree.
Ambition to give back	"...I'd like to make a difference in my career in a way that Rachel changed my sister's life."
Ambition to give back	"A career that I will find rewarding must be one that benefits people long term."
Ambition for individual achievement	Chris is contemplating a career in medical equipment sales or pursuing a doctorate.
Ambition for individual achievement	It was enlightening and has caused me to seriously consider looking into pursuing a doctorate.
Ambition regarding previous accomplishment	Garrett remains grateful for the generous scholarship she was offered there, but she had her heart set on reaching Clemson.
Ambition to give back	Garrett wants to create a clearer path for potential first-generation college student.
Ambition to give back	She hopes to reach students and their families before high school, when financial planning, academic advising and other assistance can have the most impact.
Ambition to give back	Before attending law school, she plans to work for a year and continue her advocacy.
Ambition for individual achievement	Stevenson initially intended to become a psychologist and open her own private practice.
Ambition for individual achievement	...he is considering graduate school, and a successful career is within his grasp.

Ambition to give back	Go on to make changes in policy and within the government to help those like me. Those who need more help to get a good point in life.
Ambition for individual achievement	“To get a degree in what I am passionate about, make new friends, and grow as an individual.”
Ambition to give back	“I hope I can work in a hospital setting and inspire others to do what they are passionate about.”
Ambition for individual achievement	Senior psychology major Justyce Pinkney plans to earn a Ph.D.
Ambition to give back	She hopes to one day run a facility that serves as a haven for at-risk youth, providing them food, education, mentorship and resources necessary to help them set a new course in life, as she has done herself.
Ambition to give back	She strives to be a role model for younger students in her major and reassures them with guidance and advice.
Ambition to give back	“I want to be able to impact at least one person’s quality of life for the better,”
Ambition for individual achievement	After graduation, Palin plans to further her education by pursuing a master’s degree in biomedical engineering, focusing on bioinstrumentation.
Ambition to give back	The project aspires to serve as a crucial tool for academics working in the field, as well as policymakers, civil society organizers, business people, and others.

Ambition to give back	She is considering going to law school to work on immigration policy and advocacy for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.
Previous accomplishment	For his graduate program, Robinson chose Georgetown's Master of Science in Foreign Service graduate program, seeking to be a diplomat.
Previous accomplishment	"I made donation pages and donation cards and set goals."
Ambition to give back	"I hope to stand today as one of those people, a voice saying, "You can do it."
Ambition for individual achievement	"I had my major and career plans set and I wasn't going to let anything steer me from that path."
Ambition to give back	"I decided to study Psychology (pre-med) in hopes that one day I will be able to provide therapeutic resources to children suffering from a negative home life. Understanding that curiosity is the foundation for many breakthrough treatments known to save lives today, I appreciate that psychology encourages me to work from a point of wonder and not a set of rigid frameworks."
Ambition for individual achievement	"Thanks to this scholarship, my Ph.D. dream is becoming more real."
Ambition for individual achievement	"In five years, I see myself in a Ph.D. program for higher education."
Ambition to give back	"I could do a lot more by working to define policy-making for urban and rural school districts and things like that."

Ambition for individual achievement	Her aspirations are to apply to medical school.
Ambition to give back	“I would love to go to medical school. I have the desire to keep giving back to my community, so I would love to be able to work at a clinic in a low-income area. I want to explore the world and the country, so I hope to go to NYU medical school and pursue a residency in Los Angeles after that. I also want to make sure that I have time for hobbies and interests that keep me sane.”
Ambition for individual achievement	...she doesn't plan on slowing down once that important milestone is checked off her to-do list.
Ambition for individual achievement	She said she plans on getting her research published as soon as possible to get a head start on what she intends to pursue in graduate school and beyond.
Ambition for individual achievement	Kildow's aspirations now include doctoral work.
Ambition for individual achievement	He said he hopes the next step is getting published, followed by graduate school, where he hopes to study film and media.
Ambition for individual achievement	“I'm actually an aspiring film maker.”
Ambition to give back	“I am ready to work hard and explore new possibilities as we work for more first-gen students to have the opportunity to attend higher education.”
Ambition for individual achievement	He plans to complete his bachelor's degree from the Lindner College of Business.
Ambition to give back	“...it's my goal to help support the progress of young African American men.”
Ambition for individual achievement	Amador has dreamed of becoming an educator.

Ambition to give back	Gaby's goal as a bilingual teacher is to support families like hers.
Ambition to give back	As a teacher, I want to help parents like mine to feel comfortable.
Ambition for individual achievement	"...live the dream of being a Division 1 football player."
Ambition to give back	"I had been on an academic pathway at McGavock to becoming a lawyer, but after that, I knew nursing was where I had to be."
Ambition to give back	On track to graduate from UTC in December 2019, Rodas said she'll head back to Nashville, where her dream job would be to practice nursing at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. She also wants to connect with young people in middle and high school. "I want to inspire underprivileged students, to show them you can get a degree, you can afford to go to college, and you can have a better life after that," she said.
Ambition to give back	"I want to inspire the next generations of my family to go to college, too—to set a standard that a high school education only is not enough; to communicate to them that my people are not here only to work at hourly labor, but to have meaningful employment and make an impact."
Ambition for individual achievement	...began having thoughts of pursuing a graduate degree.



Ambition to give back

After she found her voice, she decided she wanted to help nonprofits express themselves. She wants to give back to the community by using the communication skills she learned inside and outside of the classroom as a public relations major at UT Austin.

Ambition to give back

Alvarez said, "I want to pay it forward for other future first generation students by helping nonprofits and resources find and develop their voice."

Ambition to give back

"I want to make sure I make my family proud and can be an example for others with a similar background."

Ambition for individual achievement

.... she's preparing for a career in emergency medicine.

Ambition to give back

"I'm pre-med, so medical school's definitely in my future. I'm actually planning to take eight to 10 months to go to a Spanish-speaking country to become fluent in the language simply because I love it—it's gorgeous. If I find clinical opportunities, I'll definitely try to work in a clinic there. Then I'll go to medical school."

Ambition to give back

"I think the opportunity to practice or volunteer abroad would be the icing on the cake for me."

Ambition to give back

"I would love to take that knowledge to other countries that need it. That's always been on my mind."

Ambition for individual achievement

She hopes to one day continue her education, possibly at the Brandcenter.

Ambition for individual achievement	...toward a degree in social work.
Ambition to give back	“One day I hope to give back and make a difference for our future generations,” she said.
Ambition for individual achievement	After graduating the year after next, Vargas hopes to work for the Pasco School District, which is where she grew up going to school. She aims to become a math teacher working with middle school students or with second-grade students—possibly in a bilingual program.
Ambition for individual achievement	...she could pursue a world-class education in engineering based on her love for math, practical application and logical thinking.
Ambition to give back	...the ultimate goal of her college degree is to get a fulfilling job that will allow her to make a difference in the world and make her family proud.
Ambition for individual achievement	And after working for a few years, she hopes to pursue a master’s electrical engineering—hopefully from WSU Tri-Cities.
Ambition to give back	After graduating in a few semesters, Castillo said she would like to stay local and give back to the Tri-Cities through a career in engineering.
Ambition to give back	“When I go back and think about why I chose social work, and a lot of my classmates, is that we have the desire and drive to help people,” Sanchez said. “I think that’s why I’m so determined to be a social worker.”

Table 2

*Family Connections*

Subtheme	Comments
Family as source of strength	“My mother raised me as a single parent with a GED. Both she and my grandmother were very protective of me. They gave me a great environment. I never had experiences outside of Detroit, but they gave me opportunities to engage with the arts, music, and writing and more.”
Family as a source of strength	“My mother and grandmother, who passed away in 2015, were always really proud of my achieving so many things, going to college, and studying overseas. My entire family, including 15 cousins, has always been very encouraging,” she says.
Family struggle to family as a source of strength	“My family and I are Oglala Sioux and from Minneapolis who resided in Saint Paul. My mom had attempted to go to school but later dropped out because of the birth of my sister and me. She was the same age as me when I graduated with my AA. My entire family felt the excitement for someone to graduate.”
Family as a source of strength	“As refugees of the Vietnam War, my parents have always encouraged and influenced me to seek out as much knowledge as I could from this country that has offered me so many opportunities like having access to an education system. Being the oldest of 4 children, I always felt like it was my duty to pave the way...”
Family as a source of strength	“...especially during the first year because I was physically separated from my family—my biggest cheerleaders.”
Family as a source of strength	“I reminded myself just how much I wanted to do if for my brothers, but also for my

Family struggle to family as a source of strength	parents and grandparents who sacrificed a lot for me to have this life.”
Family struggle to family as a source of strength	“...they had no idea how to help me in high school, so I did it on my own. I applied to college on my own. I looked for scholarships on my own. I looked for scholarships on my own. I know they couldn’t help me as much, but they were as supportive as they could be and were there for me.”
Family struggle	Her father, a stone worker at a quarry, and her mother, a custodian at an elementary school, have worked hard to try to alleviate the cost of tuition for Juarez.
Family as a source of strength	“My sister Krysalynn was born premature and was very sick for quite a long period of time. She was on a feeding tube and was cared for by a physician’s assistant named Rachel,” Chris said
Family struggle	Today, Krysalynn is living the life of a normal 14-year-old, but her struggles as a newborn made a lasting impression on the soon-to-be College of Business graduate. “Her fight for life taught me how not to take things for granted and reinforced my belief that I’ve been very fortunate in many aspects of my life.”
Family struggle to family as a source of strength	Stevenson and her younger brother were born and raised in Denver’s Five Points area to a single mother
Family struggle to family as a source of strength	Despite her father’s absence in her life, Stevenson considers herself to be a family-oriented individual, as she has a large extended family she often spends time with while not in school.
Family struggle to family as a source of strength	...the guiding words of his single father, who had died of brain cancer. “‘If you argue for your limitations, you get to keep them. But if you argue for your possibilities, you get to create them.’ Those are my dad’s words,” Brazenwood said. “He was a writer. These 23

	words capture the essence of him, and they are my connection to him.” Looking back, Brazenwood remembers his dad’s way of turning life into an adventure, as if they were “two nomadic heroes.”
Family struggle	He and his dad, Kelly, often survived on rice and beans—sometimes nothing. They slept where they could, sometimes outside, sometimes on the couches of friends. His father died when Brazenwood was a high school senior. He lost the poet who gave him consistent hope for the future.
Family as a source of strength	“To support my family and show my children the importance of going to college.”
Family struggle	“I knew from the fact that my parents never went to college. My mother never finished high school.”
Family struggle	“I did not have family support.”
Family struggle	“By knowing my parents did not attend college.”
Family as a source of strength	“My family also pushed me to get a degree so I could be successful in what I care about.”
Family struggle	But a long history of family struggles led Justyce to make the difficult decision to move out of the home she grew up in, so she could focus on her studies.
Family struggle	“The only concern I had was making it through college just so my parents could say, ‘Through all the trials and tribulations, we had one child make it,’”
Family as a source of strength	Pierre said she owes much of her success to her mother, Nicole, who moved to the United States from Haiti. While it took a little time to acclimate, Nicole Pierre found success in her new home without a college degree. Despite her experience, she made it clear to her two daughters, Stacey and her younger sister, Karybe Jean-Gilles, that higher education was necessary.

Family as a source of strength	Pierre's mom questioned her daughter's choice to pursue a Biological Science major. She wanted Stacey to consider how tough the coursework would be, especially if she planned to participate in extracurricular activities. "One of my mom's first questions was how would I get this done," she said. "She said I have to make sure I'm putting the work in." Mom's words of encouragement and caution have worked.
Family struggle	"...both because I did not want to hurt my parents' feelings and I knew they could not relate..."
Family struggle	...as the daughter of parents who had to compensate for their lack of degrees.
Family struggle	"My family was just proud that I broke the "cycle." The "cycle" consisted of five generations of women, including my mother, that had a child before the age of 20 and thus did not graduate high school. As you can see, I had a lot of family pressure on my shoulders."
Family struggle	As a child of a single parent working two jobs in a low-income household...
Family as a source of strength	"Hanging out with friends, and most importantly spending time with my family."
Family struggle	"Those close to you might understand and support your new ideas, or maybe you will feel their disapproval." Stephen Torres grew up, the son of a barber, in a Mexican-American neighborhood near Austin, Texas.
Family struggle	"...but also those of your family and others who care about you. Your former teachers may already picture you on a certain career path. Your family might expect you to keep helping out in the ways you did before. Your romantic partner may expect to stay together or you might have children who need attention."

Family struggle	The oldest child of a correctional officer and teacher's aide, Kildow is a first-generation college student who has carved a niche as a rising star as a researcher.
Family as a source of strength	...and encouraging parents were key ingredients as well.
Family as a source of strength	"My parents were always very supportive of whatever decision I was going to make, but I think they always wanted me to go to college and do something they didn't get a chance to do."
Family as a source of strength	...occasionally quiz her on the value of furthering her education compared to joining the real-world workforce as soon as possible. But they have gone all in on her passion to satisfy the need to be as informed and impactful as possible before she makes that transition.
Family as a source of strength	"They've been instrumental in helping me prepare for graduate school and in my research, which is based around film and media studies,"
Family struggle	"...my parents' highest education level was elementary school for my dad and high school for my mom."
Family as a source of strength	"Yet, despite not having the knowledge to provide me with much advice or assistance, my parents supported me in everything I set out to do."
Family as a source of strength	"But as I settled into high school, I decided I wanted to be the change in my family. I wanted to be an inspiration not only for my younger brother but for all the underclassmen with similar backgrounds. I wanted to show them that we can accomplish big things—we just have to go out and let our voice be heard."
Family as a source of inspiration	"...I want to show my younger brother that I completed my college degree, it's possible

	and he can do it too.”
Family struggle	Ludwing is a first-generation college student who moved to the U.S. with his family at a young age, so finding the right fit when searching for a college was a challenge, and a bit overwhelming.
Family struggle	“Personally, I found it fruitless to ask my parents for collegiate assistance.”
Family as a source of strength	“I also like the campus and the people; it’s close to home and I like to be close to my family.”
Family limitation to family as a source of strength	“I was born in Dallas, Texas into a family unit that lacked the correct structure to positively support a child. I moved to Bartlett, Tennessee, shortly after I was born and placed in the care of my aunt and grandmother. These two lovely ladies, alongside my uncle, would raise me in an environment full of love and encouragement and also provided me with a clear path to success.”
Family as a source of strength	“...but my family has always pushed me to go to college. They are like my own personal cheerleading squad and it’s pretty cool. I never would have found such a sense of pride in myself without the support of these people whom I call family.”
Family as a source of strength	Gaby grew up around children in a large yet tightknit extended family—her mother is the oldest of nine siblings. “As the second-oldest cousin, I loved caring for and playing with my younger cousins.” Family is the driving force behind Gaby’s academic success and journey to college. During the last academic year, Gaby lived with her two sisters...
Family struggle	When Gaby’s mother and father were young children, economic hardship forced them to quit school. Although he loved school, Gaby’s father left in the 8 <sup>th</sup> grade to help support his family. He worked in the fields of a



	<p>Nicaraguan farm before enlisting in the military at the age of 18. Gaby's mother grew up in Mexico, and she stopped attending school in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to help care for her eight younger siblings.</p>
<p>Family as a source of strength</p>	<p>Gaby tears up when she talks about her parent's brief time in school, but she describes it as a motivator to pursue her own degree. "Growing up, my dad always enforced school and talked about its importance. He would say, 'Education is something you will always have. You are so fortunate to live in America where education is free. Don't take it for granted and always do your best.'"</p>
<p>Family struggle</p>	<p>"My parents aren't very fluent in English, and growing up I watched them struggle to communicate with my teachers."</p>
<p>Relationship with family</p>	<p>...the daughter of parents who immigrated from Honduras and Colombia.</p>
<p>Family limitation to family as a source of strength</p>	<p>Rodas' mother, a single parent, wakes at 4 a.m. each day to begin the job she works until 4 p.m. Several evenings a week, she works another four to six hours at a second job. Rodas' mother has worked at least two jobs for as long as she can remember, including to help support her older brother through his education at Lee University. "Her dream was to become a nurse, but she was never given the opportunity to get the education," Rodas said. "She gets to see her dream fulfilled through me and my brother, who is an athletic trainer. She says both of her children are going into the field she would have chosen."</p>
<p>Family as a source of strength</p>	<p>Rodas again mentioned her mother, "My mom has worked so hard for my brother and me and at multiple jobs so that we can graduate without debt, and now we have a future where we can live a good life that's enough—comfortable—and something I can</p>

	sustain. "But for me, one of the very best things about getting my college degree will be giving my mom the incredible pride I know she will have."
Family as a source of strength	"As an only child, I have always received an abundant amount of love, support, and guidance."
Family struggle	"Although I was still receiving the same amount of love and support, my family did not know how to guide me in my application process."
Family struggle	"Although I could express my fears and worries to my family, they could never truly understand what I was struggling with because they had never experienced it."
Family as a source of strength and inspiration	"...but I want to make sure I make my family proud and can be an example for others with a similar background."
Family as a source of strength	"That is one thing that my father always told me. He would say, "If I die tomorrow, I want you to finish college, get your education, and start your career." I love my father, so I can't fail him."
Family as a source of strength	"My parents had my twin sister and I when they were very young and weren't able to attend college, so this opportunity is dedicated to them and their sacrifices..."
Family as a source of strength	"My grandparents worked long hours in poor working conditions to provide for our family after emigrating from the Philippines."
Family as a source of strength and inspiration	"...for my family. It means to persevere and exert resilience when I feel defeated. It means to achieve excellence in hopes that I can inspire my younger siblings to achieve great heights. It means to educate, mentor, and foster new opportunities within the family. Being a first-generation student not only means bettering myself, it means bettering my family by introducing new ventures that we were not aware of before I

	was in college.”
Family as a source of strength	“...as my parents and generations before them were not so fortunate to have this opportunity. It’s knowing that this chance, no matter how challenging it may be at times, is and will continue to be beneficial for myself and my family for generations to come, so that my future children will not have to be lost throughout this process...”
Family as a source of strength	“My parents didn’t go to college and they’ve worked really hard to financially put me through school. They made it happen.”
Family as a source of strength	“Since I was little, I remember my dad saying not ‘if’ but ‘when’ I go to college.”
Family as a source of strength	“This day isn’t just about me; it’s about my family. Celebrating with them, hearing my name when I walk across the stage at my business school graduation, it’s going to be great.”
Family struggle	Growing up, Cynthia Castillo’s parents worked in the fields, where she would join them each summer. And while her parents and other family were really supportive in her education, she was unsure as to how to approach the college-going process, mainly because no one in her family had done it before.
Family as a source of strength	Not only would it allow her to live at home and stay close to her family...
Family as a source of strength	“...I feel like it is truly preparing me for a future that will make my family proud,” she said.
Family struggle	There was a lot to think about in attempting to be the first in her family to get a degree.
Family as a source of strength	“At the end of the day, I just want to make my family proud,” Sandra said. “Truly, I’m doing it for them, not for me, I want my siblings to follow my footsteps and graduate.”

Family struggle	She struggled initially. As a first-generation student, she had no family to ask for advice about what she should do.
Family struggle	“As a first-generation student, my path to college has been quite strenuous and coming from a family background of little to no post-secondary education has greatly influenced my goals and aspirations.”
Pressure to go to college	“...I always felt like it was my duty to pave the way for my younger brothers by going to college, but a part of me always felt like I wasn’t “smart” enough to make it through.”
Pressure to go to college	“My family also pushed me to get a degree so I could be successful in what I care about.”
Pressure to go to college	Despite her experience, she made it clear to her two daughters, Stacey and her younger sister, Karybe Jean-Gilles, that higher education was necessary.
Pressure to go to college and family limitation	“I knew I had the burden of figuring out how to get where I wanted to be all on my own. Knowing that, combined with the high expectations that my family had for me, the pressure was on.”
Pressure to go to college	“I had a lot of family pressure on my shoulders.”
Family struggle	“Growing up in a low-socioeconomic household, I understand how adversities such as poverty and poor health can shape the realities of many low-income people...”
Family struggle	“As a first-generation student, my family lacked the resources to help me move through the higher education system.”
Family struggle	She said the initial process of filling out paperwork and enrollment forms, especially in regard to financial aid and scholarships, was a challenge for Kildow and her parents at first, simply because it was a new experience.
Family struggle	“The loss of my grandmother and biological

	father within months of each other...”
Pressure to go to college	“...my family has always pushed me to go to college.”
Pressure to go to college	“Growing up, my dad always enforced school and talked about its importance.”
Pressure to go to college	“Everybody in my family told me I was going to go.”
Family struggle	“At first, I was completely intimidated. I had never been exposed to research at this level, and in addition to this, I had never lived more than 40 minutes from home.”
Family struggle	“I am a first-generation college student and I do come from a low-income background...”
Family struggle	“It is challenging to balance finances, support my family, and excel in school while being a student leader. I find the common denominator between my family and my professors is the lack of understanding through the mind of a First Gen student. They feel as if hardships are just excuses—not even considering my experience of “imposter syndrome.””
Pressure to go to college	“Since I was little I remember my dad saying not ‘if’ but ‘when’ I go to college.”
Family struggle	Booker lived in foster care as a child...
Family struggle	As the first in her family to attend college, Vargas said she had a lot of questions about the college process and procedures where her parents weren’t able to help as much because they hadn’t been through it, themselves.

Table 3

*Engagement*

Subtheme	Comments
Importance of engagement	<p>“In 2014, I studied Language and Cultures with the Japan Center for Michigan Universities in Hikone, Japan,” she says. “And again, I studied abroad in 2015 with an Environmental History program through CGIS,” CGIS is the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts’ Center for Global and Intercultural Study.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>At U-M, Drew tapped two major support networks, the First-Generation College Students @ Michigan and the Blavin Scholars’ comprehensive program of mentoring, academic and personal counseling, social and volunteering opportunities.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>...she joined Alpha Epsilon Phi, a Greek life sorority; and was hired by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) as a peer advisor for Changing Gears, the community college transfer student program.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>...a program called Cardinal First and said to meet with Julie Carballo who is the director of first generation student programs.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“The program also helped me figure out what I truly wanted to major in and it was Economics. I believe this program is a perfect way to attain knowledge about all the resources on campus and what the school can do for you. I was very impressed with how involved the program and the school was with students who are the first in their immediate family to go to college. Cardinal First truly helps you stay on track and</p>

	motivated to succeed in your goals.”
Importance of engagement	This Honors College student...
Importance of engagement	...Jivani decided to create the Society of First Generation Scholars. The organization connects first-generation students and provides them with an open forum to learn about resources to help them complete their degrees.
Importance of engagement	He serves as the vice president of finance in the UTSA Business Student Council and is the treasurer for the UTSA chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA).
Importance of engagement	...an Honors college student.
Importance of engagement	While at UTSA, the undergraduate has also developed his service leadership skills by becoming a mentor for area middle and high school students and by volunteering with community organizations like Habitat for Humanity and the San Antonio Food Bank.
Importance of first-generation engagement	She joined and became vice-president of First to Go and Graduate (F2G&G), a student organization which has 64 members.
Importance of engagement	...hosted First-Gen Feast.
Importance of engagement	In between classes, working with F2G&G and helping with the Student Government Association.
Importance of engagement	An honors student...
Importance of engagement	A non-profit, the PhD Project is a catalyst for African American, Hispanic and Native American professionals to return to academic, earn their doctorates and become business professors.
Importance of engagement	The FIRST program at Clemson University sponsored a summer course that helped prepare her for success in her coursework. “The program allowed me to see that other first-generation students were at Clemson,

	<p>too,” Garrett said. “I’m still connected with students from the summer preview program, and we have been able to use what we learned that week throughout our Clemson experience.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>And when Garrett struggled in a biology course, the Academic Success Center (ASC) empowered her to succeed. The ASC serves all Clemson students, but it can be an especially valuable resource for students without four-year college degrees in their family history. The center offers free services such as workshops, tutoring, and coaching.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“The ASC made me more confident in my strengths and in my ability to succeed.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>The FIRST program reports that 474 of the freshmen entering Clemson in 2017—or 12.8 percent—identified themselves as first-generation college students.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>.... the FIRST program, which currently serves 461 students. To participate, a student must meet with an assigned mentor every week and attend one FIRST event each month. In return, students receive academic support and assistance with other aspects of their transition to university life. First-generation students who participate in the FIRST Program are more likely to return...</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“Clemson is doing an amazing job in its FIRST program by assisting first-generation student,”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Since her first semester at Clemson, Garrett has served as a CAAH Student Ambassador.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Outside the University, Garrett volunteers at school and events to promote higher education.</p>
Outside engagement	<p>When Garrett competes in the Miss South Carolina pageant next month...</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>However, she sought out and joined several</p>



	<p>on-campus communities and organizations like CSU's Key Communities, Africans United and United Women of Color to help her find her sense of belonging both on and off campus.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>He became a resident assistant for the Outdoor Leadership Residential Learning Community, and he started a job in a biogeography lab. He found new mentors and peers in the CSU Fostering Success Program, which supports independent students who don't have families to rely upon.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Much of that success is because Pierre got an early start at Florida State by participating in the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement's Summer Bridge Program in the months leading to her freshman year.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Once they begin college, CARE students receive tutoring and computer lab assistance, advising, life-coaching, financial aid support and post-graduation prep. When she arrived at FSU, CARE paired Pierre with a student ambassador who helped her get ready for the classroom and beyond.</p> <p>"I wouldn't have come here if CARE wasn't around," Pierre said. "A large part of being in college isn't just being smart enough and having friends. It's also making sure you have faculty members and fellow students who are clear about things outside of school. I had no one in my family who could relate to what I was going through. CARE has your back."</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Being part of CARE has given Pierre the confidence to thrive and accomplish things she never thought possible</p> <p>A former student-body vice president, she was elected president in February 2018 and is only the second African-American student in school history to earn the position. As president, Pierre oversees the Student Government Association's executive branch</p>

Importance of engagement	and cabinet. Pierre is also the only student who votes on the FSU Board of Trustees.
Importance of engagement	Palin excels in her academics, receiving honors in her major as well as being inducted into a number of honor societies including, the national engineering honors society Tau Beta Pi, the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, the Phi Eta Sigma National Honor Society and the Order of Omega honor society. "My involvement in academic and honors programs has added to my college success because being involved in different organizations helps us find what we are passionate about and connects us with people who push us to be the best versions of ourselves," Palin said.
Importance of outside engagement	<p>Outside of the classroom, Palin gives back to her community through volunteering. She spent a summer break volunteering with the GREEN Program in Peru, helping with water conservation and sustainable and clean energy restoration practices. She mentors a young female student who is potential chemical engineering major from Detroit, Michigan, and also teaches math and science to kids at local elementary and middle schools. In addition, Palin does philanthropy work through her sorority, Zeta Tau Alpha, raising money for breast cancer education and awareness.</p> <p>"Becoming involved in community events and volunteer work outside of FSU really puts things into perspective," Palin said. "I am lucky to have been given the chance to enhance my education through these experiences and inspire others to do the same."</p>
Importance of engagement	Blue & Gray tour guide, Orientation advisor, New Student Orientation, Lannan Poetry

	Fellow, Former member, Spirit of Georgetown Residential Academy.
Importance of engagement	<p>“Living in the Spirit of Georgetown Residential Academy was a unique experience, and I was incredibly lucky to get to live there as a sophomore,” Barry says.</p> <p>“The Spirit of Georgetown emphasizes the Jesuit values in general, but also specifically focuses on creating a community of acceptance and care for one another and ourselves.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“I am the President of the Student Health Advisory Committee on campus and that organization has been a big part of my life since my freshman year.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“...the Student Success Center has created the First Wave Program to establish a community specifically for first-generation students. With opportunities like first-gen events and academic mentoring, you are sure to find individuals who come from similar background like your own, allowing you to build a supportive community.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“...I immerse myself in several on-campus activities that challenge me to learn more about such inequalities and advocate for change such as the Student Government Association, First Wave Program, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and Inter-group Dialogue.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Division of Academic Engagement and Student Achievement, Counseling and Psychological Services, Center for Counseling and Community Engagement, Sally Casanova Scholarship</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“Getting to host a workshop series about the Asian American Pacific Islander experience and organizing an SDSU delegation to the Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education</p>

	<p>conference as a part of a Student Success Fee have been my proudest achievements at SDSU. The workshop series is called (API)phany and continues to be hosted in collaboration with Counseling and Psychological Services and the Center for Intercultural Relations..."</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>But as he became involved in Latino groups on campus...</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>In addition, she also became involved in campus leadership opportunities, including the Peer Mentor Program in the First Generation Freshman Office and Student Leadership Retreats.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>...including the Environmental Club, Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), and Seminole State Volunteers campus organizations (SSV).</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>She was also a Peer Mentor for the First Generation Freshman Office</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>Instead, the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) team at Texas Tech, including the First Generation Transition &amp; Mentoring Programs, helped facilitate a positive transition and experience for Kildow.</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>"As a transfer student, it really made things a little easier when I joined TRIO SSS," she said. "It helped that I had some goals in mind and knew what I wanted to do, and they were very supportive. They offer a lot of services that are very helpful for first-generation students, like tutoring sessions and computer labs. We have to have advising three times a semester and they are very encouraging and always telling you, 'You can do all of this stuff.'"</p> <p>She also praised TRIO SSS for offering a free Graduate Record Examination prep course as she prepared for the next step in her process.</p> <p>As impressive as Kildow's educational journey has been, she is quick to credit the TRIO SSS</p>

department, especially lead administrator Marcus Graham, for its role.

Importance of engagement

....his experiences as a first-generation student and undergraduate researcher in the Texas Tech McNair Scholars Program.

Importance of engagement

"The main thing I've been involved with here at Texas Tech has been the McNair Scholars Program," Tejada said. "They've been instrumental in helping me prepare for graduate school and in my research, which is based around film and media studies."

Importance of engagement

"On a personal level, I relate to my work with the McNair Scholars Program through the group of students we work with, mostly because we're all from underrepresented groups. I think that's really important for diversity and inclusion," Tejada said.

Importance of engagement

While attending UC Blue Ash, Ludwig served as a Student Orientation Leader, Student Ambassador, and truly enjoyed living the complete college experience

Importance of engagement

"I serve as an Occupational Analytics Team member for UMRF Ventures at the University of Memphis. I also serve as the Project Assistant for the African American Degree Completion Academy at the University of Memphis."

Importance of engagement

"The sense of belonging that was received when I joined the Student Government Association was remarkable refreshing."

Importance of engagement

"Being the Project Assistant of the African American Completion Academy, it's my goal to help support the progress of young African American men."

Importance of engagement

"The academic coaching provided through the program coordinators, the Living Learning Community that the students engage in, the

financial literacy/assistance, and even the peer mentoring that was implemented have all been strategically designed to contribute to student success.”

Importance of engagement

“The first-generation organization Tigers First was one of the first meetings that I attended upon coming to college. I found this to be not only a very safe, but welcoming environment for all students.”

Importance of engagement

“My experiences, including my Greek organization have given me a sense of what I can do whenever I put my mind to something.”

Importance of engagement

“As an orientation guide, I also found that one of my most favorite parts of the college experience is providing a sense of comfort to first-generation students like me and helping them to figure out what it is they want to do.”

Importance of engagement

...all were UNO students sand Thompson Scholars

Importance of engagement

Gaby shared her family's experiences through her work with UNO's Service Learning Academy. First introduced through faculty member Dr. Sandra Rodriguez-Arroyo's Foundations of English as a Second Language (ESL) course, Gaby worked over several semesters on the College Prep and Family Learning project for the Learning Community of South Omaha, a program that helps ESL families prepare their children for college by providing resources like campus tours and financial aid literacy classes.

Importance of engagement

“I got involved with the student newspaper and met people who had similar interests as I did.”

Importance of engagement

She credits programs such as the University Leadership Network with helping her gain

Importance of engagement	confidence and succeed.
Importance of engagement	During her time at UT Austin, she has held various positions to help her community, including as a public relations intern at UTeach Outreach; as a mentor in the Google Community Leaders Program; as a communications intern for CATCH Global Foundation; and as an account manager for Con Mi Madre with Texas Tower PR, a student-run PR firm at UT.
Importance of engagement	“The University Leadership Network definitely helped me sharpen my professional skills while also helping me develop a small community within this large university...”
Importance of engagement	.... she is a first-generation college student with support from the University Leadership Network.
Importance of engagement	“I am in the Global Honors program and serve on the ASUWT Senate and as the First Gen Fellows Leadership Development Coordinator...”
Importance of outside engagement and importance of engagement	She worked with artist-in-residence Noah Scalin on his textile portrait of Maggie Walker and volunteered as an ambassador for the business school, giving tours to prospective students. In October 2016 she traveled to Qatar as part of VCU’s leadership exchange program.
Importance of engagement	...but after performing an internship in the medical field and working in the GEAR UP program and as a student ambassador at WSU Tri-Cities, she realized her true calling lie in helping students achieve their full potential.
Importance of engagement	“Working with GEAR UP, I was able to assist seniors in high school with their college and financial aid applications. I also gave a few

presentations providing more information on important deadlines and scholarships available,” She said. “I realized I love working with students.”

Importance of engagement

“Through events like our Etiquette Dinner, where students get to interact with prospective employers, and the career fair, where you can meet a lot of people from out in the community – those events are great for networking,” she said

Importance of engagement

In addition to her studies, Vargas also works in the admissions office as a student ambassador and serves as part of the MECHA Club and the Compass Christian Club. She is also a member of the TRIO program, which provides academic and social support for students who are first-generation, economically disadvantaged or have a documented disability.

Her involvement in various student and campus-led initiatives and programs, she said, has made for a wonderfully well-rounded student experience.

Importance of engagement

Sandra has also been involved with the Student Organization of Social Work (SOSW), which was a key component to her success as a student in the program. I always told myself I wanted to be involved in school, so I found the student organization of social work and that helped me find other peers and get to know more about the program,” Sandra said. “I joined my first year and then the second year, I decided I wanted to try for a leadership role. So I ran for president and was elected for a year.”

The WSU social work program and the SOSW have strengthened the relationship she has to the field.



“I think being a leader for the SOSW has helped me be able to advocate for other students who may not always feel comfortable,” Sanchez said. “If we go as a team that strengthens us.”

Discuss major

Her baccalaureate will be in International Studies with concentration areas in East Asian Studies and Global Health and Environment

Discuss major

Campbell is now a senior majoring in women’s studies with a minor in Community Action and Social Change.

Discuss major

“The program also helped me figure out what I truly wanted to major in and it was Economics.”

Discuss major

The UTSA marketing and finance major especially appreciates the smaller class sizes he experiences as an Honors College student...

Discuss major

...the 24-year-old senior marketing major.

Discuss major

In May, she graduates from Clemson University after completing a double major in women’s leadership and philosophy with an emphasis in law, liberty, and justice.

Discuss major

Before her time as a social work major, Stevenson initially intended to become a psychologist and open her own private practice, However, her interest quickly shifted after someone mentioned that she should look into social work for her degree. Taking their advice, Stevenson dug deeper and quickly found she was interested in the field. Although she wasn’t entirely confident in her decision and took some psychology courses just to be sure of her choice, she ultimately decided psychology was not for her. But, she chose to study social work in tandem with other closely-related field: sociology.

Discuss major	...Brazenwood is set to graduate this spring in natural resources management, with a minor in geography, and an academic resume stacked with research and leadership experience.
Discuss major	Undergraduate Major(s): Political Science
Discuss major	Undergraduate Major(s): Nursing
Discuss major	Senior psychology major Justyce Pinkney plans to earn a Ph.D.
Discuss major	Pierre's mom questioned her daughter's choice to pursue a Biological Science major.
Discuss major	Palin, now a senior at FSU, was always interested in the medical field and she began her college career as a biochemical major on the pre-medical route. However, throughout her time at FSU, she found herself excelling in and more drawn to her math classes. So, she decided to change her major to chemical and biomedical engineering.
Discuss major	Regional and comparative studies; concentration on Latin America and the Middle East; minor, Arabic.
Research	SIGLA, which updates an older database that brought a great deal of attention to Georgetown's Center for Latin American Studies, will initially feature data on Colombia, Brazil and Mexico, and expand over time to include other Latin American countries. Barry is a research assistant on the Colombia team, with her research thus far focusing on institutions of intelligence, the military, state-owned enterprises, the judicial branch and participatory institutions.
Influential courses	Barry cites States, Drugs, and Bugs in Africa with Scott Taylor, professor and director of the African Studies Program, as a favorite course, as well as Latin American Government and Politics with Kapiszewski.
Influential courses	"In 2014, I studied Language and Cultures

	with the Japan Center for Michigan Universities in Jikone, Japan,” she says. “And again, I studied abroad in 2015 with an Environmental History program through CGIS.”
Influential courses	...such as Introduction to Finance and Principles of Investments, taught by UTSA business lecturer Ronald Sweet.
Research	This past summer, Palin and her research partner, Scott Boebinger, were awarded the Mark and Nancy Caspter Hillis Endowment for Undergraduate Research to conduct research on Alzheimer’s disease at the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory.
Discuss major	For his graduate program, Robinson chose Georgetown’s Master of Science in Foreign Service graduate program, seeking to be a diplomat.
Discuss major	Infuriated and disappointed by the lack of institutional psychological support for children in low socioeconomic communities, I decided to study Psychology (pre-med) in hopes that one day I will be able to provide therapeutic resources to children suffering from a negative home life.
Discuss major	M.A. Postsecondary education leadership with a specialization in student affairs.
Influential courses	“I was able to sit in on master’s level diversity course with Frank Harris 3...”
Discuss major	When he won a scholarship and began his first year at the university, everybody thought he would go on to be an engineer. But as he became involved in Latino groups on campus, his interests to politics. I thought, “Wow, this is college, so let me get a little understanding of what it really has to offer.” I love engineering, but when I realized how much my identity and my background meant to me, I changed my major to Mexican-American Studies.”

Discuss major	When first starting college at SSC, Mackenzie was uncertain of her major, but after completing her first year, she felt much more confident and sure of herself and of her future career goals.
Discuss major	Mackenzie will be earning her Associate in Arts (A.A.) degree in Elementary Education in Spring 2018.
Discuss major	Gearhart is pursuing her Associate in Arts (A.A.) degree in Biology and plans to transfer to the University of Central Florida (UCF) to complete her Bachelor's degree in Biology
Discuss major	"I am a second-year student majoring in Human Biology."
Discuss major	A natural resources management major in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.
Discuss major	Aaron Tejada of Midland is a business administration in management major in the Jerry S. Rawls College of Business. He also is pursuing a minor in film and media studies.
Research	...Tejada traveled with other Texas Tech McNair Scholars to the University of Buffalo's annual Undergraduate Research Conference to present his work. He said he hopes the next step is getting published, followed by graduate school, where he hopes to study film and media.
Research	"Conducting undergraduate research has been an interesting experience, because this is my first time doing any research. And, especially as an undergraduate, I think it's going to help me a lot once I get to graduate school, because I already have that experience."
Discuss major	Ever since he was a young boy, Ludwing Gonzalez dreamed of going to college to earn his business degree and become a successful entrepreneur. Thanks to his drive and determination, he is well on his way to

	making that dream reality.
Discuss major	“On a personal level, I relate to my work with the McNair Scholars Program through the group of students we work with, mostly because we’re all from underrepresented groups. I think that’s really important for diversity and inclusion,” Tejada said. “The Texas Tech community is what connects me to my major—the welcoming environment in the Rawls College of Business, and just the general atmosphere of the university.”
Discuss major	She’s on track to graduate in May 2019 with a dual endorsement in Elementary Education and ESL with a Spanish minor.
Discuss major	A month ago, I received a B.S. in Mathematical Sciences. In about two months, I will be starting a M.S. in Applied Statistics.
Discuss major	Journalism
Discuss major	...is a junior nursing major...
Discuss major	“None the less, I persevered, and I was accepted into the Entomology and Plant Pathology program at the University of Tennessee within Dr. Heather Kelly’s lab.”
Discuss major	“Time carried on, and I am now in my second to last semester of graduate school at UT. I am more confident in my research, professional, and academic abilities than I have ever been.”
Discuss major	...as a public relations major.
Discuss major	Now a junior majoring in health promotion and behavioral sciences in the University of Texas at Austin’s College of Education
Discuss major	“I am a senior in healthcare leadership.”
Influential class and discuss major	She will graduate with a bachelor’s degree in marketing with a focus in product and brand management—a field she pursued after taking an integrated marketing communications class taught by K.K. Harris,

	an adjunct professor.
Discuss major	“My major is social welfare.”
Discuss major	As a senior high school student in the running start program, Vargas was initially interested in nursing, but after performing an internship in the medical field and working in the GEAR UP program and as a student ambassador at WSU Tri-Cities, she realized her true calling lie in helping students achieve their full potential.
Discuss major	When researching what college majors were right for her, engineering seemed like the perfect fit because it would blend her love for math with a practical application of making the world a better place. Initially, she pursued civil engineering as her degree emphasis, where she was excited about the prospect of designing and building structures like bridges, roads and more. But after taking a few courses in the subject, she realized that electrical engineering would be a better fit. “I realized I liked the practical aspects of electrical engineering,” she said. “I could apply the theories directly into the field, and I like how it all seamlessly works together.”
Discuss major	...with a Bachelor of Social Work degree and an undergraduate certificate.
Discuss major	...strategic communications major...
Importance of engagement	“My admission adviser told me about a program called Cardinal First and said to meet with Julie Carballo who is the director of first generation student programs...”
Importance of engagement	“After that she kept me up to date with all the meetings and they were very informative for first gen students and even transfer students.”
Importance of engagement	Jivani says the support he has received from the Honors College has kept him on course to graduate in May 2018. “The advisors have been so helpful with scheduling my classes

and they've worked with me, so I could stay on track to finish my degree program in three years," said Jivani.

Importance of engagement

"Many of the faculty in the College of Business are world-renowned researchers and have decades of work experiences to share their students."

Importance of engagement

"Two of the most influential people in my life have been my grandfather, Randy, and Dr. Bennett," Chris said. "I wouldn't be the student I am today without having met Dr. Bennett. He took me under his wing and taught me how to be a good student. He showed me that being a professor involves more than teaching. It's about making an impact on people's lives that lasts long after graduation."

Importance of engagement

"Dr. Bennett was in business before he was introduced to the PhD Project. He wanted to expose me to the opportunities available through the program at their annual conference where colleges recruit Ph.D. candidates."

Importance of engagement

"Dr. Bennett was right about the value of events like the PhD Project conference."

Importance of engagement

"Behind that megawatt smile, what you see, hear, and get in Chris is an intelligent, genuinely nice person who brings so much to the classroom and to anyone who comes in contact with him," Bennett said. "He's one of those students any educator would enjoy teaching. He's smart, eager to learn, and accepting of any challenge."

Importance of engagement

Added associate marketing professor Jennifer Siemets: "Chris always brought insightful questions and comments to my consumer behavior class. And, he was skillful in getting focus group participants to open up in a Creative Inquiry. That smile, and his engaging personality opens doors, but there are so much more about him that tells you his

	opportunities and levels of achievement are without limits.”
Importance of engagement	Bennett said Chris’ many assets will be redeemable no matter the career path he chooses. “The only thing that overshadows his intellect and brilliant smile is the Chris is one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet. Even among his peers, Chris is described as ‘the nicest person ever.’ All of his attributes would serve him well in the workplace or graduate school.”
Importance of engagement	“When faculty introduce personal travel experiences into global topics, Garrett said they might not realize it sometimes “cuts off and disconnects” first-generation students. But when professors introduce the idea of studying abroad and its intellectual benefits for all students, she said it gives first-generation students a feeling they, too, can participate.”
Importance of engagement	“Brooklyn’s dedication to helping first-generation students find their way academically and personally is a model for what it means to be part of the Clemson family,” said Diane Perpich, director of the women’s leadership program in the College of Architecture, Arts, and Humanities.
Importance of engagement	“From the moment I met Arian, I knew he was special,” said Heidi Stuckert, a financial aid officer and the first person on campus to meet Brazenwood. “He really wanted to attend CSU, and financial aid was critical to making that happen. He opened up about his journey. I knew he needed someone to stick with him and make sure he got through the process.”
Importance of engagement	“He got close to 100 percent in my class,” said Troy Ocheltree, an assistant professor in the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship. “Arian’s real strength is his critical thinking and creativity. Managing



	natural resources is a complex issue, and we need leaders who have a strong understanding of ecosystem function and can apply their understanding to changing conditions.”
Importance of engagement	“He got close to 100 percent in my class,” said Troy Ocheltree, an assistant professor in the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship. “Arian’s real strength is his critical thinking and creativity. Managing natural resources is a complex issue, and we need leaders who have a strong understanding of ecosystem function and can apply their understanding to changing conditions.”
Importance of engagement	“Arian’s story is a great example of how vital financial aid is, and how going the extra mile for a student can transform their life,” said Stuckert, his first financial aid officer. “Arian has already made a positive impact on our world, and the events of the day we met will continue to ripple out and touch lives.”
Importance of engagement	CARE director Tadarrayl Starke said he isn’t surprised by Pierre’s progress.
Importance of engagement	“Stacey has been an inspiring example as a CARE student,” Starke said. “She has used her background as a first-generation college student to fuel her success since arriving at FSU.
Importance of engagement	“Tara has been very enthusiastic in the lab, and she has no qualms about putting in the long hours needed to perform research,” Grant said. “She has demonstrated not only excitement for the work but also is skilled in both the acquisitions and data processing needed in research.
Importance of engagement	Barry cites States, Drugs, and Bugs in Africa with Scott Taylor, professor and director of the African Studies Program, as a favorite course, as well as Latin American Government and Politics with Kapiszewski.

- “Professor Taylor challenged us to think critically and break stereotypical patterns of thinking that are all too commonplace in the U.S. concerning the African continent,” she says. “Professor Kapiszewski is among the most knowledgeable and hard-working people I’ve ever met. She taught us to think analytically as well as how to construct viable hypotheses about political theory and trends, and that skill have proven useful time and time again.”
- Importance of engagement
- Michelle Lopez, assistant dean of undergraduate studies, has been the most influential person throughout my SDSU journey. She’s my supervisor in my graduate assistantship and has connected me to many people and opportunities on campus. As a woman of color in an administrative position of power, I look up to her and know that she supports me in everything I do.
- Importance of engagement
- “She truly is a pioneer in her family,” said Richard Stevens, Texas Tech associate professor in biodiversity and conservation biology, Kildow’s research sponsor. “I have met her parents and they are very supportive. It’s fairly typical for first-generation parents to not understand the whole college process, but her parents have been there with her and for her, and that’s so important.”
- Importance of engagement
- “...they were very supportive.”
- Importance of engagement
- “The whole staff has been like another family for me.” Kildow said. “I’ve spoken to Marcus a lot and especially with a hectic schedule, it’s nice to know that he always supports students like me.” That support found the right target in Kildow, whose younger sister McKenzie followed in her footsteps and is a sophomore at Texas Tech.
- Importance of engagement
- “Almost immediately after she got her from South Plains, she came into my lab and has

been going gangbusters ever since,” Stevens said. “It’s not very often we get undergraduate students as dedicated to research as she has been. It didn’t take me very long to know I could trust her with some important parts of my research. “You don’t just hand a student a research project. You want to make sure they have the maturity to do it. The way she has stuck with it from the day she got here has made it easy to give her more responsibility, and she is going to do great things as she continues her work as a researcher.”

Importance of engagement

“They’ve been instrumental in helping me prepare for graduate school and in my research, which is based around film and media studies.”

Importance of engagement

“It’s the duty of not only students, but also faculty and administration to perpetuate this current climate of diversity, equity and inclusion that we have going so far, and I think we’ve done a tremendous job.”

Importance of engagement

...associate professor Scott Baugh in the English department, has stood out among the faculty and staff members he has interacted with during his time at Texas Tech. “He’s helped me foster my passion for film and media,” Tejada said. “When I started my first year here at Texas Tech, I took his introduction to film studies class. He just made everything super easy to understand and just so fascinating. He has a way of teaching that really opens it up not just for people studying film, but for everybody. I went to his office hours to get some help on an essay, and he really took the time to help me out and sort of explained everything to me. From there, it just spawned this whole passion that I now have with film media studies. As my mentor, he’s been tremendous. He helped me set up my internship and refine my research into what it

Importance of engagement	<p>is now.”</p> <p>“Weeks before classes began, I was in communication with professional staff members who were more than willing to share their resources with me. I had been connected with a peer mentor who I was able to relate to on a more personal level. My cohort also participated in a community building social event during the weekend before our first class.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“...but the advising that I needed as I made the transition into adulthood.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>First introduced through faculty member Dr. Sandra Rodriguez-Arroyo’s Foundations of English as a Second Language...</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>...nominated by Dr. Rodriguez-Arroyo: “Gaby’s commitment to this service-learning experience was more than to fulfill a class requirement, she made it her personal mission to share college preparation information with the families. As a first-generation bilingual Latina college student, Gaby knows firsthand that her parents would have been more than happy to participate in a program when her older sister was starting to think about college, and she was not afraid to share her experiences.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>She gives credit to the advisors who guided her down a personalized academic path. “The advisors at the College of Education have helped me since the beginning. Before entering the Teacher Education program, Katie was super helpful and was always available with her support. She was patient with any questions that I had. Huai-Mei helped see what I would like best, how it would fit into my schedule, and supported what I wanted.”</p>
Importance of engagement	<p>“Soon enough, though, I got connected with some professors in the journalism department who guided me toward</p>

	opportunities that changed my life.”
Importance of engagement	“It’s like having a friend who checks on you,” Reeves says. “We’ve gone to lunch together. It’s really nice to know I have her if I have any questions or need anything.
Importance of engagement	“I’ve talked with current students and they feel such responsibility to do well in school and graduate college. Not just for themselves, but for their whole family. They feel that they would be letting down their entire family tree if they don’t.”
Importance of engagement	“I definitely went to my advisors, I want to say like at least once a month, asking all the questions I could, especially about things like financial aid.”
Importance of engagement	Vargas said she learned from professors who really take an interest in their students, working with them to make sure they are successful.
Importance of engagement	“And the staff and professors here on campus are also great with connecting students to individuals out in the industry and are always willing to help.”
Importance of engagement	But a high school counselor helped her along the way, making her college aspiration dreams not only seem possible, but conquerable
Importance of engagement	Faculty and staff also helped her navigate the process that was new to her and her family. “It was exactly what I was looking for,” she said. “It feels like a small community where everyone gets along. Everyone is really helpful.”

Table 4

*Mindset*

Subtheme	Comments
Positive outlook toward college	“Coming out of high school, I believed U-M would be best for me, would challenge me a lot. As I approach alumna status, I know I was right.”
Pride	Jivani said it’s an effort he is extremely proud of because he is a first-generation Roadrunner himself.
Pride	"First-gen students are very determined," said Juarez, who will be interning at PricewaterhouseCoopers in January. "We don't take our education for granted and are grateful to have the opportunities that our parents didn't have."
Overcoming challenges	Schoolwork not only was a diversion, but a way for Brazenwood to be successful; his shining academic abilities became his ticket.
Positive outlook toward college.	He has hope.
Pride	<p>“My involvement in academic and honors programs has added to my college success because being involved in different organizations helps us find what we are passionate about and connects us with people who push us to be the best versions of ourselves,” Palin said.</p> <p>She strives to be a role model for younger students in her major and reassures them with guidance and advice.</p>
Positive outlook toward college	Palin’s diverse experiences at FSU have given her confidence to know what she wants to do with her future and begin the next chapter in her life. “I want to be able to impact at least one person’

	quality of life for the better,” Palin said.
Pride	“Although I attribute my success to both my Hofstra journey and my support system, there are some things that I would’ve done differently. I can now clearly see the advantages that I have in the workforce as a first-generation student. I had to go the extra mile to get where I want to be, which goes hand-in-hand with the work ethic that I learned as the daughter of parents who had to compensate for their lack of degrees. The transferable skills that I have acquired as a result of my upbringing will carry me through all future endeavors.”
Pride	“I never thought that I would be the bright, independent, powerful, and courageous woman I am today.”
Pride	“I’m healthier, happier and ready to take on my next challenge. I broke the “cycle,” I’m in control of my life, and I am excited to say, in my senior year, that I’m ready for the next chapter!”
Positive outlook on situation	“That could have easily been my default, but something inside of me said “Go for it.” The opportunity presented a choice: succumb or believe beyond what I could see. Would I believe in myself and in God or believe what society and my bank account said?”
Positive outlook on situation	“All it took was one. It took once choice to say “yes” despite the external “no’s.””
Positive outlook on situation	“Your goals can remain the same while the journey there will be full of the most unexpected things, but it all comes down to your faith in yourself to overcome and your willingness to utilize the numerous resources available to you.”
Positive outlook on situation	“Understanding that curiosity is the foundation for many breakthrough treatments known to save lives today. I appreciate that psychology encourages me to work from a point of wonder and not a set of rigid frameworks.”
Positive outlook on situation	“I try to be as nice to myself as I am to others and

	try to be patient with my journey.”
Positive outlook on situation	“I am now extremely motivated and give myself no other option but to succeed. I definitely think the opportunities I’ve come across and the experience I’ve had at SSC has helped transform me into the person I am today.”
Encouragement from others	“We have to have advising three times a semester and they are very encouraging and always telling you, ‘You can do all of this stuff.’”
Pride	“I feel that I have more resilience toward obstacles thrown my way. I am part of this community where determination and support is strong. I feel motivated to prove that I will succeed. Although it might get difficult at times, I am ready to work hard and explore new possibilities as we work for more first-gen students to have the opportunity to attend higher education.”
Positive outlook on situation	Thanks to his drive and determination, he is well on his way to making that dream a reality.
Pride	“It has allowed me to discover my purpose in life and overall, it has made me a better person.”
Pride	“Now, as a senior in college, I can gladly say that I took advantage of any opportunity that I was interested in instead of waiting for someone else to make me do it.”
Positive outlook on situation	“Continue to work hard because there’s no telling what you can accomplish. There will always be people on the sidelines rooting and supporting through your endeavors.”
Positive outlook on situation	“I remember saying, ‘I want to exceed my expectation,’”
Advice	Her advice to future U-M first gens of the future? “Don’t pass up opportunities to grow!”
Advice	When asked what she wants first-generation students entering college to know, Campbell said, “There are resources available here. You might have a hard time finding them, but you can do it. Don’t stop looking for them. There are people



here, who want to help.”

Advice

“My advice to all my other fellow first-gen students is to trust your process and believe in yourself, self-doubt is the biggest killer of all dreams. Dream big and dream fearlessly. Find resources and network with others because they will be the ones to help you reach that finish line. Lastly, when you’re going through rough times, always think about the people who are cheering you on because you’re doing exactly what they didn’t have the chance to do.”

Advice

“My first piece of advice is to help first-generation students build a network,” she said. “Second, it is important that faculty realize most first-generation student have not had opportunities to travel the world,” Garrett said.

Advice

She encourages the young students to set five-year goals and think about careers.

Advice

“I would tell them to go for it and it’s never too late to start. Ferris has a good support system.”

Advice

“To always be you and study hard! “

Advice

“My advice for any other first-generation college student is: don’t be afraid to not know something,” Palin said. “Ask questions, be curious and change your major a million times. Do whatever it takes until you have found your calling.”

Advice

She strives to be a role model for younger students in her major and reassures them with guidance and advice.

Advice

“Take advantage of everything that is Georgetown and DCC while you can—events, lectures, renowned professors, museums, festivals and so much more. It’s really easy to get caught up in everything you have to do, but it’s just as, if not more important...

Advice

“I encourage all first-generation students to approach their college experience with this attitude and find ways to connect with other first-

generation students that share your thoughts and feeling.”

Advice

“To my entire First-gen family, I say, “You can do it!””

Advice

“There is no perfect college student and there is no definite path for life. Your goals can remain the same while the journey there will be full of the most unexpected things, but it all comes down to your faith in yourself to overcome and your willingness to utilize the numerous resources to you.”

Advice

“Do not be afraid to branch out. Explore new interests, take classes that are not related to your major, and do not be afraid of change! Attend school events, be involved in clubs, and ask for help when you need it. And most importantly, have fun because before you know it, it will be graduation.”

Advice

“I love advice. I don’t only love giving advice, but I also love receiving it—and what I can tell you is that it’s going to be okay. Do not be afraid to try new things or ask for help. Do not take this time for granted. Take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. You never know where this crazy world called college could take you, even as a first-generation student. Who knows how many people will impact you and in return how many people you will impact as well.”

Advice

“...don’t put too much pressure on yourself,” she says. “Being the first in your family to go to college is a big thing. You should be proud of it. It does come with a lot of responsibilities but remember that you’re only human.”

Advice

“Finish what you started and never give up.”

Advice

“Continue to work hard because there’s no telling what you can accomplish. There will always be people on the sidelines rooting and supporting you through your endeavors.”



