First generation college students creation of meaning

A Research Paper

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Abstract

In this article we examine how first generation college students create meaning and develop identity through their college experience. We interviewed 20 JMU college students to understand their real-world experiences and interpretations. Our findings show that three general themes of meaning and identity building emerged: support systems, emerging independence, and motivations of success. Participants demonstrated meaning and the creation of identity through the support systems they created. Their time in college also gave participants time to grow independent from their family, by choice and by default through their college experience. Participants also created meaning in their motivation for success in school. Through our findings, we provide personal understanding to the created of meaning and development of identity within the first generation college experience.

Keywords

First generation college student; support; experience; family; identity

Introduction

A first generation college student is one who is the first in their immediate family to attend college, or, a student whose parents have no form of college degree (Fernandez, 2018). In the research, it was found that family support (Isaacs-Thomas, 2019), support from universities (Hasan, 2019), and availability of first generation community (Hasan, 2019) were recurring challenges.

First, the need and lack of family support was established in research. While most college students turn to family and parents for advice in their college education (Glaser, 2019); many first generation students rely instead on fellow students and other first generation students for help in navigating various school needs due to their parent's lack of expertise in the matter (Isaacs-Thomas, 2019). The study will seek to know and understand more about the first hand experience with family dynamics, and understand the amount of support coming from family.

The range of first generation students enrolled in a college varies widely, between 22 and 77 percent, therefore the lack of support is still seen as first generation peer support cannot be always obtained in colleges with low first generation populations (Hasan, 2019). As a result first generation students look to support from college programs (Hasan, 2019). Many colleges have taken note of the lack of home support first generation students have while navigating college decisions, and have sought to establish various support systems for their students while also creating a group identity for them to connect with (Glaser, 2019). These systems vary from school programs focusing on career success, to honor societies focusing on academic success (Lindberg, 2019; Catawba, 2019). However this study sought to look deeper into understanding

how community at the university plays a role by asking interviewees their involvement with campus activities and with the university's explicit support for first generation students.

Lastly, there is a current issue with the creation of a first generation culture, in order to support others struggling with first generation lack of support and understanding of the college process. First generation students have also established conferences to promote a sense of identity amongst each other each year (Gilpin, 2019). This study sought to understand from the perspective of first gen students, the importance of first generation families and experiences.

Literature Review

Phenomenological Tradition

The study uses the phenomenological tradition to analyze the data received from interviews. Phenomenological Tradition was created by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century (Sawicki, 2019). Phenomenology is used to describe real-world experiences "without metaphysical and theoretical speculations" (Sawicki, 2019). The tradition, which can also be used as a theory, analyzes these real-world experiences from the standpoint of the person living them, allowing the research to show how the person interprets their own subjective experiences (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2015). The study uses this belief that truth is subjective and that the data is to be understood from the viewpoint of those being interviews. Using phenomenology establishes the studies belief that all participants interpretations are valid and differing according to their own experiences as a first-generation student.

Research Question

The study desired to understand personal experiences and interpretations of the life of a first generation college student. The interview questions were written in hopes to understand how

first generation students find meaning and identity in their circumstances and real-world experiences. This lead the study to the following research question: How do first generation college students create meaning and develop their identity through their college experience.

Support System

First generation college students are more likely to drop-out within their first year of attendance compared to a continuing-generation student (Glaessgen, MacGregor, & Cornelius-White, 2018). College comes with stress but without proper support that individuals get from other experienced individuals, programs, and resources, that stress can increase and impact a first-generation college student greatly due to there lack of support (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron, 2013).

First-generation students have also shown more concern for creating relationships due to their desire to fit-in over their academic achievement (Cushman, 2007). Continuing generation students are able to relate to their family members due to their families past experiences and knowledge of college education, more so than that of first-generation students (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Having social support systems have proven to help alleviate some of the stress that first generation students feel (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018; Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007). A social support system also ranges from informational, emotional, and instrumental support (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Overall, a good social support system will help lead to academic success (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018)

Mentoring relationships have also posed as a great support system for first generation college students (Wang, 2012). It has been said that the gap between first generation and continuing generation college students can be reduced by a positive mentor relationship (Orbe,

2008). Mentor relationships can be a result of a first generation student searching for support outside of their family (Orbe, 2004). Typically, first generation students find their mentor being one of their professors who takes the time to connect with them in and out of the classroom (Wang, 2012). Mentors may also include a former teacher, counselors, or friends (Gibbons, Rhinehart, Hardin, 2019). Mentor relationships can provide first generation students with first hand knowledge and answers to "how to" messages such as how to create a class schedule or how to get involved on campus (Nichols & Lucas, 2010). First generation students also feel that their mentor has provided them with "memorable messages" that have helped shape them into who they are or becoming through the college experience (Wang, 2012). Through a positive mentor relationship, it can lessen the level of stress a first generation student is feeling as well as increase academic success (Wang, 2012).

Some schools offer bridging programs that help first generation students make the transition into college (Checkoway, 2018). These programs allow the students to arrive earlier if they are living in a residence hall and the students are able to participate in different workshops that teach them about time management, counseling programs, and other campus activities available (Checkoway, 2018; Moore, 2007). Bridging programs also open up the opportunity to create friendships between other first generation students as well as making the students feel that they are apart of a community (Checkoway, 2018). There is great emphasis put on social development within these programs that helps to shape a first generation college student (Checkoway, 2018). Faculty members have a critical role in being the bridge for first generation students to success (Glass, Gesing, Hales & Cong, 2017). Their role is to help guide students the

challenges they will face in college, but also creating an environment that will make student feel welcome (Glass, Gesing, Hales & Cong, 2017).

Relationship with family

First generation college students experience pulls and pushes between college and family (Wang, 2012). Parents aren't able to give their child advice on what to expect in college, so parents are learning from their children on how they are experiencing college (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Most importantly, parents have trouble letting go of their children on being independent and being away from home, which makes first generation college students' parents worry more than continuing generation college students' parents (Gibbons, Rhinehart & Hardin, 2019).

Students receive memorable messages from their parents during their time in college. One of the main messages students receive is pursuing academic success (Wang, 2012). There were three subthemes in pursuing academic success: finding appropriate sources, finding a balance between educational and social activities, and making intelligent decisions that would pay off in the future (Wang, 2012). As parents want their children to succeed in school, they want to be sure their children are happy. Parents seem unsure about their children going off to college since they either never went to college, or they never finished. They don't understand what their children are going through while in college (Wang & Nuru, 2017). However, they feel a sense of pride as parents that their children was able to go to college (Wang, 2012).

First generation college students overcome challenges from their parents. They want their child to have family goals as their priority in addition to educational goals (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Parents know they want their children to succeed, but more to represent their family than children representing themselves as an academic scholar (Wang, 2014). The disconnect between

family and college caused students to question what they really go to college for, causing the pulls and pushes between parent and child (Wang, 2014). Parents want their children to succeed as some parents are helping them pay for part of their tuition. Parents are financing the dream they never had so their children can (Wang & Nuru, 2017). First generation college students also discuss how they are doubting their dream of going to college, and having to leave their family behind (Wang & Nuru, 2017).

Identity Development

The act of leaving home to study at an unfamiliar place forces oneself to further develop their own identity as an adult and demonstrates how multiple aspects of identity are negotiated in an educational environment (Orbe, 2004). The students enter a foreign culture in order to study, but they also learn about culture when immersing themselves in this situation (Orbe, 2004). They are learning to adapt to a culture separate from their own, so they are especially observant to the cultural norms and taboos that go unnoticed but someone native to that culture (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Students are socialized at the start of college, which is important for them to realize if college is the right thing for themselves (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018).

First generation college students construct a multidimensional sense of identity (Orbe, 2004). This means that while they may be exploring and experimenting with new things (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Having to constantly negotiate home and college life results in "trying to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds" (Orbe, 2004). This leads first generation college students to feel like outsiders at school as well as home. First generation college students are self-aware of the fact that they are the first members of their family to attend college (Orbe, 2004). Some students are able to use this awareness to motivate themselves to do

better because they want to set a good example. Although other students may fold under this pressure, but for some the centrality of their first generation college student identity served as a key motivator for success (Orbe, 2004).

The salience of first generation college student identity is highly situational. Certain situations prompt students to think about their identity in this fashion, like the first week of classes or the first time on campus (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Therefore it was contingent on other things that were going on in their lives (Orbe, 2004). Although, becoming acclimated to college life results in a reduced level of consciousness of their first generation college student status (Orbe, 2004). It is important to recognize that there will be a range in the reduced level of awareness per student, meaning that for some this acclimation may happen sooner than others. For those who have a reduced level of consciousness after acclimation, events like graduation can result in a resurgence in terms of their identity of first generation college students (Orbe, 2004).

Methods

Data were collected as part of a study to further understand the personal experiences of first generation college students (FGCS) and examine how those experiences has impacted the subjects family and social life. Consenting FGCS were interviewed face-to-face. Data for the study presented here were collected between January and April 2019 from students located at a mid-size university in the United States. Institutional review board approval was granted from the supporting university where the study was conducted.

Participants

Participants were first generation college students. Participants enrolled in the study had to be 18 years or older, English speakers, be the first in their immediate family to attend college or a student whose parents have no form of college degree, enrolled in the university where the study was conducted, and healthy individuals. For the purposes of this study, first generation college students were defined as "one who is the first in their immediate family to attend college, or, a student whose parents have no form of college degree" (Fernandez, 2018). Participants were in their first, second, third, or fourth year at college, studied different topics such as Health Sciences, Business, and Psychology, and had family structures with the number of family members varying, such as one sibling, or three siblings. At the time of analysis, 20 FGCS had participated in the study. Included in the participant pool, there were Males and Females, ranging in age from 18-21. Therefore, the total study sample consisted of 20 transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews and the coding for those interviews.

Procedure

Data collection was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. The first step in the procedure was to retrieve participants through the JMU SCOM SONA website. In the second step of the procedure participants would sign up for interview slots. The third step in the procedure was to conduct the interview using a series of interview questions developed by the researchers and to audio record the interviews. Researchers then transcribed the interviews, and coded the transcript using thematic analysis.

The interviews were later transcribed and coded and the participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality reasons. The audio recording devices used were encrypted iPhones using the Voice Memos app for recordings. The interviews were conducted during a

time and place convenient for the subjects, and the subjects coordinated with the researchers to determine this place. Face-to-face interviews ranged in length from 10 minutes to 25 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data from all interviews with FGCS were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis and through an ongoing randomized selection process (Wittenburg-Lyles, Washington, Demiris, Oliver, and Shaunfield, 2013). Members of the research team first reviewed the audio-recording and identified segments of data during which FGCS discussed identity. Members of the research team listened to audio-recorded discussions and identified and transcribed all instances in which participants spoke about their support systems, independence from their family, and their motivations to succeed in college. To ensure that all discussions of identity were captured, each researcher independently transcribed identity content for five participants, amounting to five interviews each. The researchers then met and reviewed transcription, transcribed the data for five more interviews, met and reviewed, and then split the remaining data set in and transcribed independently (Wittenburg-Lyles, et al, 2013).

Researchers adopted an inductive approach to thematic analysis, identifying themes that were linked to the data themselves. First, each member of the research team independently reviewed the data set and developed codes to classify items of information related to participants comments about FGCS identity. Second, codes for the participants were organized and determined through discussion to identify patterns, further explanation, and portrayals of meaning in the data. The themes were derived are analyzing each researchers findings and interpretations of the thematic analysis.

Results

From the data analysis, the following three themes became apparent: support systems, emerging independence, and motivations of success. In the first theme, participants described the formal and informal support systems they have within the university. They also describe the range of support within their families. In terms of the second theme, participants promote their gained independence throughout their college experience. With regard to the third theme, participants described their reasons behind motivation to succeed. The three themes are described in more detail below.

Support Systems

Reaching out to family was less common due to a gap of knowledge between participants and families. One participant stated:

> It's really hard sometimes because there are times when I feel like my parents can't understand what I'm going through even though they know I have assignments and papers. I haven't asked my parents for help after I took AP classes in high school. Sometimes they just don't know things...It's hard for them to be empathetic and I have told them that. They didn't get support from their parents with something like this so it's hard for them to see how to be a parent in this new role.

Families take on a new role in the individuals life. As they said, it guides individuals to seek support from outside sources presented to them through the experience. In terms of support systems from outside sources, peers and advisors were mentioned as systems of support outside

of the immediate family. The transition from the family support system to a support system centered around their peers signals a shift in identity. This participant described:

> The application process was very complicated. My advisor in high school helped a lot and my friends did too. You know when you have other people going through the same things as you are then you can make sure you're doing the same things in the same ways like writing the essays in this way or creating the accounts and signing the right forms and sending those too.

Everyone who wants to go to college has to go through the application process. However, for first generation college students, they needed to learn from outside sources that were not their parents. They were able to use those lessons, and reflect on it on future endeavors. One participant said:

> Since succeeding, definitely, originally I was used to a college workload since I took college level classes in high school, but overall I think just the environment, having to live away from home, from your support base, but over time, I sort of just got accustomed to it.

Without the help from family, first generation college students are likely to try to adapt to their surroundings to try and blend in. They try to be someone they are not and won't feel they are getting their definition of what a first generation college student is supposed to be. This participant had a different experience with support:

> I have my academic advisor as a support. For centennial, I have a mentor, and a big sister, the counseling center, they have someone there I have to

> talk to, and also the professors, my SCOM professor, she's very open, she tells us, even if we don't talk about SCOM, we could come to her office hours and just talk to her, and my roommate, she is a very big support system.

This participant was given resources from her scholarship and was able to have different outlets of support to guide her through her college experience. She also got to know her professor on a personal level, without having the professor-in-class mindset. They also used the JMU Counseling Center. They shared:

> I managed to deal with these obstacles by going to the counseling center. They were a lot of help, they suggested different therapists and psychologists to go to, help me to vent, and they also like provided a safe space where I could go sit there and feel comfortable or pet dogs if I wanted to.

This participant gets the emotional support from a free university resource that is able to provide for student if they need help. The obstacles first generation college students face vary as it's challenging to get through college on your own. This participant realized:

> Definitely managing my time and prioritizing the things I think that are important, and then surrounding yourself by people who have the same values as me.

This participant was able to relate to her peers. An added support system first generation college students have are their friends they make through campus activity involvement. Most

say their college experience would've been different if they didn't join a campus organization. Another participant explained:

> I'm currently an initiate of the Phi Sigma Pi honor fraternity, so I went out so I could be a part of something, cause my first semester, I honestly lacked on putting myself out there, which was a huge change from high school, because I was very involved, so I went out not expecting anything out of that, and I met the people, they were awesome and then I knew I just wanted to be part of something with a common interest.

The added support system amongst peers in a campus organization share commonality where first generation college students are able to mingle with continuing generation college students to feel a sense of belonging. They continued:

> ...So my first semester was kind of hard to adjust in like clubs, and involvement, so Phi Sigma Pi (PSP), has had so much of an incredible impact on me, and the group of people within that organization are very like goal-oriented within their different paths they are taking.

Everyone has a different goal when they go to college, but they all share a commonality of getting through college together. The commonalities would go further with roommates: One participant shared:

> My roommate, 100%. I don't know how I went 18 years without this girl in my life like and she's from Long Island too. She actually lives on my dad's block because my parents are divorced so like he lives in a different

> town than I do. We are like the same person. We are so honest and never fight. She's my rock.

Most first generation college students don't have older siblings, but having a roommate you can closely relate to can help as a support system they need as they are living with each other for a full school year.

First generation college students get support from all over. Their families are their number one support system. Families want what is best for their children, but also making sure their children are happy. First generation college students also receive support from friends, advisors, professors, and clubmates within being in college. Being away from family, they are able to start their new found freedom of independence.

Emerging Independence

Participants described that their families lack of knowledge as well as physical presence led to a sense of independence. Also, participants expectations were met in regards to college creating more freedom for an individual. Johnny Clarinet described his reason behind independence:

> I have become independent and resilient because you can't always ask others for help you gotta just do stuff on your own and face your own problems. I guess that sounds really avoidant but you know I think that's important instead of depending on others for basic stuff like asking your parents for things all your life you know, especially when they aren't here. In the future you won't have someone holding your hand, telling you step by step what to do and how to do it so it is preparing me for job life.

Johnny articulates the importance of being independent at college but also advocates for carrying this independence with him in the future. He describes the lack of reliance on his family and the importance of the experience. Independence becomes a part of the students identity due to the communication gap between themselves and their family.

Students independence also began forming before entering college through the application process and has continued to evolve throughout each new step. Participants stated that their high schools did not provide them with as much support and they began figuring it all out on their own. Susanne Red stated:

> My high school was the worst with all of that kind of stuff. I kind of had to decide which colleges I wanted to apply to and find the applications myself. Then when I was filling them out I resorted to my friends who were also filling them out or I'd look it up online. My high school didn't really push college.

The reliance on friends is seen throughout many participants responses. Susanne's response is demonstrating the beginning steps of their independence resulting from the college experience. This is also demonstrates the obstacle that participants face with their families ability to contribute advice and guidance. Jim April gives another example of this in his statement:

> I think a lot of people depend on their parent's for help, a lot. I've heard a lot of people calling their parent's for just like advice and stuff when they're stressed. And obviously I could still do that it's just that they can't give me the same feedback as parents would if they went to college beforehand.

This statement signifies the disconnect that many participants talked about between themselves and their families. Participants identified as independent as well as relying on oneself rather than others. None of the participants described negative relationships with families in regards to the disconnect. Most participants described their families perspectives as "*excited for them*" or a "*big deal*". However, participants expressed that even though they had a form of support from their family, they could not rely on their guidance. When asked what obstacles to succeeding in college have you encountered as a first generation student, Kelly Target responded with:

> Not being able to ask my parents because they didn't have the university experience, so it's also weird explaining it to them. They do not fully understand how hard the workload is and time consuming college can be. I talk to them less, not because I don't want to but because I am busy and it is tiring trying to explain the aspects of college life. I have become more reliant on myself rather than them….

Many participants expressed the difficulty of explaining the college experience to their families. This participants' response shows the distance one may feel because it is more difficult to connect with their families about experiences at college. Reliance on oneself shows up again with this individual due to circumstance. Tommy Recash also gives another example of the distance participants have with one's family:

> .... It means you're on your own really. I mean it's not like I don't have a family or other students are here alone too but I'm more disconnected than they are when I compare myself to how they talk with their families. I feel a level of independence that I did not have when I was at home and kinda free….

Tommy is comparing himself to his peers and how they are adapting to the experience. With the growing distance between his family and himself, he suggest that his independence has increased due to college. Many participants see the experience as "*all up to you*" as Tommy also demonstrates above. Again comparing his experience Tommy Recash states:

> I see others get more help from their family than me but there are still ways for me to get help you know. I just feel more independent than others.

The feeling of independence stems from the distance that this individual feels. He also reveals underlying disconnect between himself and his peers. Many participants showed this same feeling and expressed it by saying college "*made me grow up*" or "*helped me grow to be an independent person"*. Kelly Target is one of several participants to respond in this way:

> It has made me more independent because I cannot rely on my parents for things like others can. It's like you're on your own which can help the transition from college to actually having like a life. It's scary to enter college but I think it's like almost even scarier leaving college. So being independent is setting me up better for that.

This individual demonstrates that her independence has been forced upon her with this new experience. Also seen in participants responses such as this one was fear in result of the independence. However, most participants saw it as an advantage for their future.

First generation students in this study described their feeling of independence as a result of attending college. Many described their high schools as lacking necessary support and many expressed difficulties communicating with their families. Self reliance has grown into their identities due to the college experience. Participants connected their disconnect from their families to their newfound independence.

Motivations of Success

Participants often had internal desires to do well, desire to make their family proud and give back to their parents, and desire for a good job to set them up for the future. Often, participants expressed desire to succeed regardless of external influences. They felt their competitive spirits and internal drive to learn and grow in certain subjects helped them succeed in their academics when school became challenging. When asked, what motivates you to succeed a participant said:

> The opportunity that I am given, I'd say first off you don't want to waste it. The desire to do well and competitiveness definitely, I've been like that since I was a little kid, and being a first generation emphasizes that, I want to show that I can do it. [...] And I, personally, I love learning. I love getting in these classes and then finding things that I had no idea about and then I can dig in and, doing one of these tests is cool but it also tells me that I am learning and I'm doing my part so I'd say that's what motivates me.

The participant shows that it is their personality that helps to drive the success. Furthermore, the participants' desire to learn allows motivation regardless of situation. Some participants also

desired to succeed in college because of the lives they would impact in the future, having nothing in particular to do with being a first generation, but rather just the hope they see coming from families without a degree and seeing the impact they can make with a degree. One participant said:

> Definitely my patients, like my future patients that I'll have. When I'm studying for an exam or practicing a skill or listening to a lecture and get really bored, I just think that learning now is going to be important. [...] Really thinking about my patients, thinking about how I just really want to be the best nurse I can be for them because nurses are the last line of defense for them.

The participant's love for their major and their future career increases their drive to succeed. This participant, along with many of the first generation students, saw that being a college student opened doors to careers they felt could make a big difference. Other participants had a similar career desires and did not see their first generation identity as a part of motivation for a better future, rather an appreciation for what they can have. Others that did mention their identity as a first generation college student as part of their motivation to succeed felt that it was less about them and more about their parents inability to attend college or support towards the participant in attending college. On participant stated:

> What keeps me motivation? Knowing my mom wants what's best for me, but the only way that I'm gonna get that is if I try something new, meaning go to college, and do things that she didn't do, so I can have a better education.

This relationship with parents and family shows the appreciation and respect this participant had towards their family. The participant saw college as an opportunity that not all were able to grasp, this helped her to be motivated to succeed and not throw out an opportunity.

Some participants also felt that first generation college students were looked on as less than other college students. One participant stated:

> I think the biggest thing that keeps me motivated is proving to everyone that just because I'm a first gen student doesn't mean I'm going to do any less than someone who has the support to walk them through what college usually is. Showing that I can do it just as well.

This participant felt that success meant proving a point, showing that they were equal to any other student in the school. Participants felt their identity as a first generation student was not a weakening factor, and saw success as a means to prove such. Participants also felt that regardless of their families lack of college education, they could succeed as well as those with families with degrees. Another participant stated:

> Seeing how my parents didn't graduate and see the whole college part, they get to live through me even though they can't give me guidance. But being able to do my own thing.

This participant shows how motivation and independence work together, as he appreciated his parents and enjoyed giving them the ability to see what college is, while also maintaining that his college experience was his own. Comments similar to "*definitely proving something to myself and impressing my parents while making them proud*" gave an understanding that this desire to succeed went beyond their proving themselves, but proving to their family that they could

succeed as a thank you for what their family has supported them to do, showing self-motivation to succeed. One participant, Shanika, stated:

> What keeps me motivated is being a first generation college student. Knowing my mom wants what's best for me, but the only way that I'm gonna get that is if I try something new, meaning go to college, and do things that she didn't do, so I can have a better education.

This shows the internal desire to succeed in life, not only in college. Participants appreciated that they parents did not go to college yet often supported the participant's choice to attend school. Participants like Shanika established how motivation to succeed and support from family worked together.

The need for family pride was found in almost every participant interviewed. From participants simply saying "*That all my family is proud of me and wants me to do well*" was their motivation, to participants with more extensive responses, the desire for support from their family and even desire to give back to their family was strong in each participant. One participant felt that their success in college was for their parents who were never given the opportunity to try. Another participant commented:

> My mom wanted to go to school, her older sister took all the money to go and failed out and so my mom never got to go and that was the last thing that happened in my family that had to do with college. So it means a lot because I get to do something that my mom my dad never got to do.

Family members inability to pursue school was important for this participant as she realized how special the opportunity of college is and that understanding helps to motivate her to succeed.

Family was a drive for many participants as they felt their success in college would give their family more reasons to be proud of them. Suzanne, a freshmen participant, stated:

> I want to be able to come back to my parents and be like "oh my gosh I got A's in these classes" cause I love hearing my parents say they are proud of me and that's what every kid wants to hear so they keep me motivated.

Suzanne hints at the idea that the support from family and the relationship to their parents, in particular, plays vital role in their ability to succeed.

Other participants took this idea further, wanting not only to receive support from their family, but also give support to their parents and family in the future through the opportunities college will give them. Taylor Walter expressed:

> The motivation to keep my parents proud, which they will always be proud of me, but I want to work hard enough to get a well paying job and one day making enough money to repay them best I can, which I will never be able to fully repay them, but repay them best I can for all the stupid stuff they have had to handle and all they've done for me.

Taylor's desire to repay their parents for all their support was similar to many other responses by other participants. Often participants felt that their college career was not simply because they deserved it, but because their family provided it. One participant explained that succeeding in college was important because there were "*a lot of people [they didn't] want to let down.*"

The hope for, what one participant called "the stereotypical life", was repeated frequently in interviews. One participant said:

> Getting a degree and getting a job. And wanting to give my parents back all they gave to me. I mean, I want a stereotypical life. I want go to college, I want to get a job, I want to get married, and I want to have my own kids. and I want them to go to college too. Really working to get my life on track so I can give back to my parents all they gave to me. Like 2 years ago I would have been like "I'll just go to community college and see what happens" and now, here I am. At JMU.

This response was the epitome of many participants sentiment, wanting a degree in order that they might have a job and therefore a secure life. Often the participants expressed desire for a career that would support their life desires and saw a degree as the gateway for such.

Ultimately, the internal drive to succeed, the hope for pride from their family, and the desire for a stable career was repeated in one way or another in every interview. This highlights to creation of meaning through the experience of college, the motivation to succeed forms meaning in their college experience. These motivations also help to develop each participants' identity as they establish their own reasoning for why they chose the path of college.

Discussion and Future Directions

Within this study the three themes that emerged were; support systems, emerging independence, and motivations of success. These themes were prominent in a majority of the first generation participant responses and reflected upon the meaning and identity development through their college experience. Participants gave a wide variety of responses supporting the significance of each theme.

The first theme, support systems, focused around first generation students finding social

support within groups on campus. These groups ranged from Greek Life, campus clubs, hallmates/roommates, as well as JMU services. Participants expressed their need for these groups due to the gap of knowledge between their families and themselves. Although many participants recognized their families support and encouragement, they felt that they had disconnect when it came to understanding as well as communicating about their new experiences. One participant, Kelly Target, described her relationship with her family since beginning in college as "*weird*" and "*tiring*" due to the families lack of knowledge on the subject. Other participants felt that their involvement in Greek Life had given them a "*new family*" that was able to help them maneuver different aspects of college living. Students also found formal support throughout the University's staff. Advisors were viewed as helpful and a source for guidance. A centennial scholar, Kim Possible, found her support through a SCOM professor who offered her office hours for advice or help outside of the SCOM course. The counseling center was also viewed as an outlet for first generation students. Very few participants interpreted their relationships with their family as negative although one participant, Michael Military, did not see support from his family and felt that they saw college as "*unnecessary*". With this exception, many participants began finding their independence as a result of the family disconnect.

The second theme, emerging independence, shines light on first generation students growth throughout their experience. After being dependent on their families for the entirety of their life, college opened the door for individuals to experience independence. Participants found that they began relying heavily on themselves when it came to problem solving. A handful of participants first saw their independence emerging within the application process itself and increasing upon arriving at the university. Participants also related their independence to having

a new found freedom. Johnny Recash explains that college made him feel "*a level of independence*" that he did not have at home and "*kinda free*". Tommy Jon stated that he felt more independent due to being away from his "*support base*" and used his freedom to explore the community while creating new friendships, things that he would not have done so easily at home. Participant's Daniel Williams and Kelly Target expressed that college made them "*more independent*". Daniel saw independence as an opportunity to find out who he is and discover new passions while Kelly related her independence to her increased "*maturity*" level upon arriving. Participants saw their new identity of independence as an asset that will carry them into their future giving them an advantage.

The final theme, motivations of success, brings attention to first generation students desire to succeed. A large portion of participants motivations were future and job oriented. The end goal being, graduate and secure a sustainable job that will help give back to their family along with making themselves better off in the long run. Bob Barnard stated that he wanted "*to be financially comfortable*" along with showing his family that he has "*grown and bettered*" himself throughout the college experience. Sarah Peters also discussed that she wanted to "*give back to [her] parents all they gave [her].*" Students demonstrated that they wanted approval from their families on their level of success. Some participants majors kept them motivated as well. Gail Wing, a nursing major saw her future patients as the root of her motivation along with relating her identity to someone who is "*empathetic and culturally sound*". She to had the goal of creating a stable life for herself and future family. Kylie Kenner also revealed her IDLS major to be her number one motivator with hopes of resembling a teacher whom she sees as a role model. Competition also revealed to be a substantial movivator in participant responses. Participants

wanted to do better than their families had but also wanted the satisfaction of doing better than their classmates. Michael Military states that he wants to "*one up*" his classmates which increases his desire to learn and retain knowledge. Other participants had brothers or sisters who are also going through the college process that they wished to do better than. All participants are using their personal motivators to reach their end goal of graduating.

These three themes reveal participants most prominent ways of how they have created meaning and identity development through their college experience. Each one signifies a different part of the experience while also creating a timeline of the participants development. The gap of knowledge that is demonstrated through support systems links to participants emerging independence. This theme then links itself to motivations of success by preparing first generation students for the future which is ultimately their end goal and motivation to complete this experience.

This study helps to give a more personal understanding of the issues of first generation college students. The themes found were similar to the themes in past literature, however this study shows how students differ in needs and understandings of the themes. While some students felt family support was lacking, this study helps to show that it does not result in a negative relationship with family, rather a relationship that differs from non-first generation student's relationship with parents.

Limitations

If researchers carried out this study in the future, researchers would need to factor in the idea that participants or First Generation College Students may transfer to a university. One of

our participants was a transfer, and the fact that they did transfer to this university from another university was a significant contributing factor to their identity development as a whole. In the future, if researchers were conducting interviews with participants who transferred to a university, specific questions such as “How did transferring to a new university impact your identity development?” and “Has transferring colleges impacted the way you view yourself as a First Generation College Student?”.

Researchers also noted that most of our participants were freshmen, so that they were unable to talk about the courses in their declared major. In terms of a limitation, this meant that they were still forming their identity in college and they were only able to express their first impressions on their experiences in college, compared to a student who is in their third year or a student prepared to graduate.

In a related manner, about three fourths of our participants were taking General Education classes as they have not had the chance to sign up for their major classes, meaning that they were taking classes on topics they did not choose too and therefore had no reflection of their personal identity. For example, if every incoming freshman must take a general health education course, they will not be able to explicitly refer to that class as impacting their identity in relation to their chosen career or profession.

In the future, researchers should be mindful of the experience First Generation College Students have at the point of study. It is important to be aware of how long that student has been enrolled, because the longer a student is at college the further their identity is developed.

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