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## Examining First-Year, First-Generation College Students' Perceptions of Parental Involvement

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Examining First-Year, First-Generation College Students' Perceptions  
of Parental Involvement

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

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## **Abstract**

Parental engagement and support have been shown to have a positive impact on the academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being of undergraduate students (Harper et al., 2012). While continuing-generation college students utilize knowledge and insight from their parents to navigate the collegiate experience, first-generation undergraduate students face hurdles that can impact their experience due to the unfamiliarity associated with being the first in their family to pursue higher education. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine underrepresented first-year, first-generation undergraduate students' perceptions of their parent(s) involvement when deciding to attend college, high school to college transition, and first-year academic and social experiences. The data for this study was collected from participants in academic enrichment programs at a land-grant, mid-southern research university. Findings from the study indicate that parental involvement could play a significant role in the college experience of first-year, first-generation undergraduate students of color.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Audry Bernard Spencer. As a lifelong educator your passion for education and providing opportunities for those less fortunate continues to inspire me. Your love and unwavering support enabled me to achieve my dreams. I am so lucky to call you Mom. Your motto of “Be The Best You Can Be” has truly made me a better person.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

#### **Context of the Problem**

Each year millions of first-year students enter the halls of higher education across the country and contribute to the over 19 million students pursuing post-secondary education degrees (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). From attending large flagship institutions to community colleges, these students are seeking education past the secondary level (Husser et al., 2020; Nichols & Islas, 2016). Researchers have studied what colleges and universities need to do to support first-year student success. Many institutions have developed comprehensive orientation and transition programs that provide students with resources and tools needed to complete their first year successfully (Mack, 2010). These resources include tutoring services, mentoring programs, living-learning communities, developmental workshops, and first-year experience courses that focus on college freshman support. The overall goal of these programs is to “familiarize students to academic and behavioral expectations, education programs, and the student life of the institution” (Mack, 2010, p. 5). These types of programs also “increases the ability of students to succeed both socially and academically, in turn reducing attrition rates” (Noble et al., 2007, p. 40).

According to Engle (2007), students whose parents or close family members attended college, have a better understanding of the higher education landscape. These individuals then pass on this knowledge and can provide a support network that can help the student be successful in college (Paulbusa & Gauvin, 2017). Lack of knowledge about the college landscape and insufficient family encouragement have been identified as factors that increase first-year student attrition rates (Cuseo, 2018).



Parents being involved in their student's educational career is not a new concept, as most have played a significant role in their child's educational career since a young age (Hines et al., 2014). Ranging from registering a child for after-school activities at the local elementary school to serving as a chaperone for a school dance or field trip, parents play a crucial role in their student's educational career. For some, this role carries on past high school and into college, if a student chooses to pursue a post-secondary degree. The study of parental involvement has traditionally been reserved for explaining family members' involvement during the K-12 years and not necessarily beyond (Wilder, 2014). However, over the past few decades, there has been an increase in the number of parents who continue their involvement in the college years, requiring higher education institutions to review their attitudes about working with parents while their student is attending an institution (Engle, 2007). Parental support, encouragement, and involvement have been shown to positively affect students during this transitional phase (Kenyon & Koerner, 2009).

The population of students attending institutions of higher education has also evolved over the past decades to be more racially diverse and include a larger proportion of first-generation students or students being the first in their families to attend college (Pascarella et al., 2004). The United States Department of Education (Cataldi et al., 2018) noted that approximately one-third of undergraduate students are first-generation students. This population is characterized as being less academically prepared, members of lower socioeconomic status, and having lower enrollment intensities (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001). Although many institutions have programs to assist these students, they still lack the cultural capital from parents that have not attended college to help them navigate institutions from day one (Cataldi, et al., 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Obtaining a college degree is an important way to advance oneself in society, increase the chances for career advancement, and ensure financial stability by being a member of the workforce (Hines et al., 2014). Higher wages and greater career mobility have been directly linked to individuals having a two-year or four-year degree (Baum et al., 2010). In a 2002 longitudinal study of sophomores by Lauff and Ingels (2013), 26% of those with less than high school completion in 2012 were unemployed, compared to 15% of those with a high school diploma or GED and 5% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher. In terms of personal income, the same study (Lauff & Ingels, 2013) concluded that 7% of those with less than high school completion earned a yearly income of \$40,000 or more, compared to 14% with a high school diploma or GED and 33% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher (Ross, 2016). Although the process of obtaining the degree can differ for many, the college choice process begins during the primary and secondary education years (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). The college-choice process was described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) in the three phases of predisposition (grades 7-9), search (grades 10-12), and choice (grades 11-12). Each phase building upon the previous with the final goal of a student choosing and attending an institution of higher education.

During each of the college choice phases, parental encouragement and support is a core component of the process and rated as the strongest predictor of a student's early educational plan (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler et al., 1999; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) characterized parental encouragement and support as having two distinct dimensions relating to the college choice process. During the first dimension of motivation, parents develop and maintain high educational expectations for their student which

are articulated in different ways throughout their child's early educational career. The second dimension of proactivity is when parents become directly involved in helping their student decide which college to attend and start preparing financially for their student to attend that institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2000; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Bergerson (2009) noted that parental involvement during this process is a more powerful influence than parents' educational level and students' academic achievement and is true across race and socio-economic levels. In a study by Noel-Levitz (2012), 50% of the students surveyed reported that parent and family members' advice were important factors in their decision to enroll and 61% of them conducted college research with assistance from their parents.

Besides encouragement, the support parents provide for their student also comes in the form of financial support. According to Sallie Mae (2017), 31% of students' college expenses were paid by a combination of parents' income, savings, and borrowing. With the substantial amount of money being invested in the continuation of their students' education, parents have a significant financial stake in the success of their child which leads them to be invested in the outcomes of their student's actions while in college (Kolkhorst et al., 2010; Ma, 2009). In addition to finances, parents also contribute to their student's social and emotional well-being of their students as they navigate college life (Ross, 2016; Schubert, 2016).

With an increasing number of students being the first in their families to attend college, the needs of first-generation college students and their families have required institutions to design programs and initiatives to assist them in being successful on campus. According to a report released by Redford and Hoyer (2017) from the National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately one third of students enrolled in an institution of post-secondary education identify as the first in their families to pursue a degree. As the first in their family to attend

college, first-generation students and their parents enter institutions with disadvantages not experienced by continuing generation students and their parents (Salas, 2016).

As institutions look for ways to increase student retention and graduation rates of first-generation college students, it is important to identify as many factors as possible that might positively impact this student population. Identifying and understanding the role parents play in college student development is one way for institutions to partner with parents to promote student success (Reed, 2017). With parents playing an increasingly important role in their children's educational journey, it is imperative that higher education institutions develop ways to better utilize and support parents as they assist their students in college (Salas, 2016). There is a need for research in this area to develop a better understanding of parental involvement with first-generation college students and the impact that parents can have on their students' post-secondary experience.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine underrepresented first-year, first-generation undergraduate students' perceptions of their parent(s) involvement when deciding to attend college, transition from high school to college, and first-year academic and social experiences. The seven student participants all participated in an academic enrichment program at the selected university and were members of an underrepresented student population. The stories of these students may inform secondary and higher education professionals on how to decrease the knowledge gap experienced by first-generation undergraduate students of color and families as they transition to higher education settings.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to explore this inquiry:

1. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parent(s) played when deciding to pursue a college degree?
2. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parents played in their transition from high school to college?
3. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their academic experiences during the first year of college?
4. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their social experiences during the first year of college?

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Several delimitations were imposed in this study. The current research sought to focus on student perceptions of their parent's involvement in making the decision to attend college, transition from high school to college, and their initial academic and social experiences. This study only examined students enrolled at one, four-year public land grant university with a High Research Activity Carnegie Classification and participated in one of the targeted first-generation student success programs at the institution. Also, the study focused on students that came from households where no parent(s) attended college. Participants also must have been traditional-aged college students between the ages of 17-20 who returned to the institution after successfully completing their freshman year and were members of an underrepresented student population (Arnett, 2000).

There were a few limitations that should be taken into consideration in the study. Due to the nature of qualitative studies focusing on a smaller number of participants, the results of this study are not generalizable to all first-generation college students (Creswell, 2015). Study participants were members of an academic enrichment program at the university. These

programs are open to first-generation, Pell-eligible students, so their experiences may not be transferable to other students attending the university or similar institutions. Students were interviewed once they concluded their first year at the university and entered their sophomore year. Experiences may differ for students during different time periods of the transition process as well.

In addition to the above limitations, it is important to note the research study took place during the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Participants concluded the second semester of their freshman year with all classroom instruction being delivered online due to campus closures. The campus experience continued to be different for participants' sophomore year due to courses being offered in a hybrid or remote model and limited campus life activities due to social distancing guidelines. Student experiences may differ due to the way the pandemic has affected the traditional campus life environment.

### **Definitions**

To ensure consistency in the use of terms, the following definitions were used.

*Continuing Generation College Student:* A student whose parents did attend and graduated with a degree from an institution of higher education (Engle, 2007).

*First-Generation College Student:* A student whose parents did not attend nor graduate from an institution of higher education with a degree (Engle, 2007). This study focused on students with no parent attending a higher education institution.

*First-Year College Student:* A student who attends an institution of higher education for the first time. This study examined experiences of traditional-aged college students between the ages of 17-20 (Arnett, 2000).

*Parental Involvement:* The phenomenon of parents or guardians taking an active and participatory role in their student's college choice and transition process. Levels can vary depending on the nature of the parent to student relationship (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

*State University:* The term State University is used throughout the research study to refer to the location of the study. Utilizing this term protects the confidentiality of participants and the institution.

*Transition:* The developmental process a student goes through as they move into a new educational setting. This process can include entering college as a first-year student or transferring to a new institution from a different one. A successful process results in the student being retained at the institution and achieving academic and personal goals (NODA, 2012). This period includes the time students' graduate from high school to when they have matriculated into a postsecondary setting (Zhang & Smith, 2011).

### **Significance of the Study**

As students transition into institutions of higher education, it is important to ensure they can be successful once they have matriculated. In reviewing literature about student development and transitions, one factor that has emerged is the impact parental involvement can have on college student development (Wolf et al., 2009). For most students, parental involvement has been a part of their entire educational career and continues throughout college. Although many in higher education view parents as intrusive and not wanting to let go, many institutions have realized the vital role parents can play as partners in their student's education (Self, 2013). Kuh (2018) wrote, "colleges and universities should do more to involve parents in their student's education in appropriate ways" (p. 1).

With limited research into this phenomenon, this study can assist administrators in both secondary and higher education institutions with developing programs and initiatives supporting first-generation undergraduate students for success during their first year. Staff members working with first-generation college student academic enrichment programs can utilize this research to better understand the roles of families as they assist their students in transitioning to college and supporting them academically and socially. In addition, high school counselors and college admissions officers can utilize this research to design interventions that provide further insight into the college-choice process that occurs as students and their families start to think about attending an institution of higher education during the predisposition (grades 7-9) and search (grades 10-12) phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The study results may also benefit parents and family members that are unfamiliar with the landscape of higher education by providing them with detailed information about the transition occurring when students enter and navigate the collegiate environment. Research in this area can also assist higher education professional associations, specifically NODA – Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education and AHEPPP – Family Engagement in Higher Education in the development of professional standards, policies, and programs. These initiatives from the above-mentioned professional organizations can assist institutions in meeting the needs of this student and family population.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As students start to think about attending an institution of higher education, research suggests much of the process is driven by a parental figure (Wright & Lyon, 2019). Students rely on parents to help them through the process by serving as advisors and sounding boards for ideas and to provide feedback. This assistance can be attributed to the student being bonded to their



parents for support, reassurance, and guidance. These bonds stem from birth and play a vital role in the student's overall development and adjustments throughout their lifespan (Mattanah et al., 2011). The research of John Bowlby (1988) has been credited with the development of modern-day attachment theory. Bowlby's work began with the study of children dealing with maternal loss and deprivation and expanded to include overall personality development (Bretherton, 1992). His work was also expanded to include the research of Mary Ainsworth and her studies around security and the need of infants and young children's dependence on their parents prior to exploring new situations (Bretherton, 1992).

Attachment theory focuses on the relationships and bonds associated with and between individuals, especially parental figures (Bowlby, 1988). According to Mattanah et al. (2011), "researchers have devoted considerable attention to the role of parent-child emotional bonds in affecting the functioning of adolescents and young adults as these individuals grapple with tasks of developing adult identities" (p. 565). This study's framework utilizes attachment theory because of the significant role parents can and do play during the college choice and transition process. Attachment theory has provided the framework for multiple studies including a recent study by Wright and Lyon (2019) which focused on the continued attachment of students to their parents as it relates to social domains including nurturance, guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, emotional support, and sense of belonging. Other studies about college student transition and development have focused on parental attachment and how its relation to emotional and social competence (Rice et al., 1997) and college adjustment (Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002).

In addition to attachment theory focusing on the skills of exploration, discovery, and skill acquisition in young adults, continued parental attachment is also related to both emotional well-

being and social competence (Rice et al., 1997; Wright & Lyon, 2019). The concept of social competence contributes to an individual's social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of collectivity-owned capital” (pp. 248-249).

A primary function of social capital is access to specific human and cultural capital in addition to resources and support that is owned by a particular group or entity (Coleman, 1988; Perna & Titus, 2005). In these terms, cultural capital refers to the “system of attributes, such as language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms, that is derived from one's parents and that defines an individual's class status” (Perna & Titus, 2005, p. 488). Coleman (1998) also suggests social capital is derived from two different types of relationships – the relationship between parents and their student and secondly, the relationship between a students' parents and other adults who have a connection to an institution that the student wants to attend (Perna & Titus, 2005). Parental attachment and how it relates to a students' social capital can play critical roles in a student's decision to attend college, transition to the institution and their academic and social experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

Deciding to attend an institution of higher education can be overwhelming for some students. The college choice process includes phases in which parents' insight is seen as the key contributor to why students attend college (Kenyon & Koerner, 2009). While continuing-generation students often utilize their parents for insight into this new phase of their educational career, first-generation college students often lack the cultural capital needed to succeed in this

new setting. This study examined the role that first-year, first-generation undergraduate students of color believe parental involvement played when deciding to attend college and in their transition to the institution. Utilizing an attachment theory framework as a guide for students during the emerging adulthood phase of development, information was provided on what college and universities can do to support students and parents during the transition process. Research from this qualitative study can be used to assist both secondary and higher education institutions in supporting first-generation college students academically and socially in their first year in college.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

This chapter includes an overview of current research in higher education related to first-generation college students of color and the roles played by their parents during the college search and transition processes. In addition, research related to first-generation college students and their academic and social experiences is also included. The literature review will provide background on study topics including college students and parental involvement, first-generation college students, and first-generation college student parental involvement that provide a foundation for the study and guide the research questions.

#### **Scope of the Review**

Literature was searched online utilizing educational databases available through the University of Arkansas Libraries including *Ebsco Academic Search Complete*, *ERIC (Education Resource Information Center)* *Pro Quest*, *JSTOR*, and *ProQuest Central*. Additional materials were obtained from professional contacts knowledgeable with college students and parental involvement. Common search terms included “first-generation college students,” “college student parental involvement,” “parents and college,” “higher education and parents,” “first-generation college students and parents,” “college student transition,” “attachment theory and college students,” “helicopter parents” and resources were found within the timeframe of 2000 – 2022. In addition, reference lists of relevant research articles were also reviewed to gain further scholarship about this topic. Websites for multiple higher education professional associations and research organizations including NODA – Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education, AHEPPP – Family Engagement in Higher Education, NASPA – Student

Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, Campus ESP, EAB, and the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition were also reviewed.

### **College Students in the Emerging Adulthood Phase of Development**

Traditional students typically enter college immediately after high school. While some might consider themselves an adult, developmentally these students are considered emerging adults. The concept of an emerging adult was first presented by Jeffrey Arnett (2000) as a new developmental category taking place between adolescence and early adulthood. His research, grounded in the work of Erickson (1950, 1968), focused on development occurring in the late teens through the mid-twenties. This period from age 18-25 is when traditional students attend and graduate from college. Arnett (2000) stated this “period is characterized by change and exploration for most people, as they examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldview” (p. 479). He later added (Arnett, 2007) this is the “age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feelings in-between, and the age of possibilities” (p. 69).

During this phase of development, individuals are working towards greater self-reliance in decision making and managing finances while still relying on parental figures to assist them with certain tasks (Arnett, 2007). Parents often feel they still need to be involved in their child’s life but also recognize their child must experiment and explore what the world has to offer (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). This becomes a balancing act some parents can handle, while others resort back to earlier periods when they were more involved in the everyday decisions of their child. In their 2012 study, Padilla-Walker and Nelson developed measures that could be used to determine if intrusive parenting was distinct from other styles of parenting for individuals in the emerging adulthood phase of development. Participants in this quantitative study included

438 undergraduate students from four universities across the United States and at least one parent of each participant. The measures used to determine intrusive parenting included helicopter parenting, behavioral control, psychological control, parenting dimensions, parent-child relationships, self-worth, school engagement, and perceptions of adulthood and identity (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012).

Data analyzed from online questionnaires discovered helicopter parenting did emerge as a distinct form of control during the emerging adulthood phase of development and could be related to both positive and negative aspects of the parent-child relationship. Guidance, disclosure, and emotional support were highlighted as being positive dimensions, while parental autonomy granting and emerging adults' school engagement, where discovered to be negative aspects (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). This study highlighted how parental involvement during the emerging adulthood phase of development could be a time of self-discovery and exploration with assistance and guidance from a parent, or a time of continued over-involvement by a parent still trying to maintain their locus of control.

With the emerging adulthood phase of development being a critical time for development, one can see why there are multiple studies (Aquilino, 2006; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Schnaiberg & Goldenburg, 1989) highlighting the role parents can play during this period. An exploratory study investigating the number and type of child-initiated parent-child interactions associated with students in the emerging adulthood phase of development, found almost half (44.3%) of the research participants involved their parents when it came to making important decisions (Pizzollato & Hicklen, 2011). Two distinct caveats to the idea of involving parents in decision making emerged from this study. First, most of the involvement interactions with their parents was initiated by the child. Secondly, only a small percent (15.1%) of

interactions involved parents more than on one occasion when dealing with any particular decision (Pizzollato & Hicklen, 2011). The study also emphasized most of the involvement comes in the form of consultation and not directed towards trying to find answers to problems (Pizzollato & Hicklen, 2011). Both studies (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Pizzollato & Hicklen, 2011) reinforce the concept of the emerging adulthood phase being a time when students feel that they can explore and still consult with their parents as needed.

### **Attachment Theory and College Students**

The parent and child relationship is one formed at the beginning of life and continues throughout. Researcher John Bowlby (1969, 1988) is credited with developing what is known as modern-day attachment theory. His original research started with the study of children and their experiences related to maternal loss and deprivation. He later extended his research to include personality development (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby's initial work was later expanded by Mary Ainsworth with her research focusing young children's dependence on their parents when it came to security and experiencing new situations (Bretherton, 1992). Attachment theory focuses on the relationships and bonds associated with and between individuals, especially parental figures (Bowlby, 1988). These relationships focus on exploration, discovery, skill acquisition, and the overall development of self-confidence (Ainsworth, 1982).

Most of the attachment theory research is centered around babies, children, and adolescents (Mattanah et al., 2011). Though limited, researchers have also explored the way attachment carries on through the college years and the ways parents influence their students' collegiate experiences. Utilizing the Continued Attachment Scale – Parent Version (CAS – Mother and CAS – Father) (Berman 1988; Berman et al., 1994) and the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ) (Balistreri, 1995), researchers surveyed 100 first-year students ages 17-20,

to explore the role of attachment to mother and the attachment to father on the identity-related constructs of exploration and commitment during their first year of college (Samuolis et al., 2001). Findings concluded continued parental involvement past childhood and early adolescence can be healthy and are positively related to further identity development and exploration in college-aged students and processes should be put in place to develop these important familial relationships (Ainsworth, 1982; Samuolis et al., 2001).

Kenny (1987) produced similar findings in a quantitative study involving 226 first-year students utilizing the Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ). Researchers also stated the important role parents can play during the college transition process (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991). The PAQ included scales associated with affective quality of attachment, parental fostering of autonomy, and parental role in providing emotional support which were evaluated to examine the combined usefulness of parental attachment and family structure in explaining social competence and psychological well-being during the college transition process (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991). The quantitative study found that while female participants did have higher levels of attachment to their parents compared to male participants, both male and females relied on parents for support and encouragement throughout the college transition process and “attachment is an adaptive component of human development when combined with an adaptive family structure” (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991, p. 485).

A study conducted by Wright and Lyon (2019) examined how college students’ continued attachment to their parents related to social domains including nurturance, guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, emotional support, and sense of belonging. This quantitative study with 419 college students enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course, utilized the Social Provisions Scale (SPS) (Cutrona & Russell, 1987) and the Continued



Attachment Scale (CAS) (Berman et al., 1994) to examine domains associated with parental attachment and student persistence. The study concluded that continued attachment to parents did significantly influence the social provisions of these students especially when it came to emotional connections. While the provisions emerged at different levels for mothers and fathers, the study aligns with attachment theory paradigms by “demonstrating that greater secure attachment is congruent with a positive self-others internal working model that represents one’s own perceived value in relationships and how others are available in time of need” (Wright & Lyon, 2019, p. 11).

A meta-analysis study by Mattanah et al. (2011), reviewed 156 studies conducted between 1987 and 2009 examined parental attachment and adjustments during the college years. Researchers utilized key words including attachment behavior, parental attachment, parent child relations, college students, and college adjustment, to analyze previous studies on the topic. Multiple concepts were researched including how parental attachment contributed to stress levels, the distinct role mother and father attachment played during the college years, and attachment security to name a few. After their review, the authors concluded while there was only a small-to-moderate relationship between parental attachment and college adjustments, the role parents play during the transition was still significant (Mattanah et al., 2011). Other influences including romantic partners and other developmental processes occurring during the emerging adulthood phase of development, contributed to the adjustments as well.

### **College Students and Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement on the college level can take on many different forms as it relates to college student development. In the book, *Parenting to a Degree: How Family Matters for*

*College Women's Success*, author and sociologist, Dr. Laura Hamilton (2021) presented five approaches to parental involvement during the college years:

1. Professional Helicopter – parents that carefully orchestrated all their student's academic and career decisions. These parents were predominately upper-middle class and had the resources and networks to assist their students in all areas of their college careers.
2. Pink Helicopters – parents that largely invested their energy and resources in their student's social successes to ensure that they could secure a spouse. Financing their student's higher education career was seen as a duty for these parents that mostly belonged to upper-middle and upper-class statuses.
3. Paramedics – parents that valued their student's independence but would intervene when needed. These parents were “hands off” but would step in at any moment when their child was in trouble.
4. Supportive Bystander – parents that utilized this approach provided minimal involvement in their student's college career because they were unfamiliar with the college environment.
5. Total Bystanders – these parents provided neither financial nor emotional support to their students. Parents believed their students should be self-sufficient since they were now considered adults (Fifolt, 2018).

Research about parental involvement in college student development has increased over the past 30 years (Self, 2013). Segrin et al. (2012) summarized the concept of “helicopter parenting” as a version of parenting in which “parents demonstrate excessive involvement in their children's lives and apply developmentally inappropriate parenting tactics by failing to allow for levels of autonomy suitable to their child's age” (p. 237). This involvement can be both positive and

negative in relation to the student's ability to handle difficult situations on their own. Some may just look to their parent to handle the situation solely based on how the parent handled previous situations.

Many in higher education equate parental involvement at the college level with the term "helicopter parent" (Self, 2013). Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) stated that parents exhibiting characteristics of a "helicopter parent" are "highly invested, extremely concerned for the well-being of their children, and well-intentioned albeit misdirected (p. 1178)." Parents displaying these characteristics are investing in the daily lives of their children to protect them from any negative outcomes that could arise in their lives (Bradly-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014). This type of parenting style can happen throughout the course of a child's lifetime but is more often used to describe the late adolescence and early adulthood stages of development (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2007; Segrin et al., 2012).

While the term "helicopter parent" can carry a negative connotation, parental involvement and support as a concept deserves much more attention. Wartman and Savage (2008) defined the concept of parental involvement by concluding that:

The phenomenon of parental involvement includes parents' showing interest in the lives of their students in college, gaining more information about college, knowing when and how to appropriately provide encouragement and guidance to their student connecting with the institution, and potentially retaining that institutional connection beyond the college years. (p. 5)

Appropriate levels of involvement have shown to have a positive impact on students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being (Harper et al., 2012; Self, 2013; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Simmons (2008) observed some students believed their parents' involvement was vital to their success and provided them with guidance in academic and career decision making.

A study by Fingerman et al. (2016) also found students with intense parental support had better psychological adjustment and life satisfaction compared to students that did not have this type of support. This quantitative study of 1,301 undergraduate students ages 18-22 from Germany, Hong Kong, Korea and the United States asked whether students experienced high involvement from their parents in terms of frequency of contact and overall, how satisfied they were with their parents' involvement during their college careers. The study provided perspectives from students in multiple countries and concluded students from Asian countries reported higher levels of parental involvement including advice, financial assistance, and companionship than their western counterparts (Fingerman et al., 2016). In addition, student participants in all countries relied on their parents for insight and encouragement throughout college with female students reporting higher levels of support than males (Fingerman et al., 2016)

In a qualitative study examining the association between overparenting, parent-child communication quality, and both negative and positive traits in adult children, Segrin et al. (2012) concluded overparenting is directly associated with lower quality parent-child communication and is also a significant predictor of child entitlement. Parent-child dyads were measured in the areas of parenting style, family environment, overparenting, open parent-child communication, family satisfaction, entitlement, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and positive relationships with others. These measures all contributed to the child having strong feelings of entitlement, not only from the parent, but from others they are in contact with as well (Segrin et al., 2012).

Segrin et al. (2012) also concluded most parents that utilized overparenting tendencies associated with communication, entitlement, and social adaptation do so because they believe

these practices will produce positive child outcomes, even though some research shows otherwise. In a study by Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan (2014), measures of parental involvement and overparenting were examined at a large US university with 482 participants. The study concluded overparenting could be detrimental to some young adults, especially those with a lower number of children in the household (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014). With fewer children in the household, parents invested more time and energy into their child's experiences in and out of the classroom. In addition, the study also found general parental involvement was positively related to students' social self-efficacy and general self-efficacy, while overparenting was related to negative social self-efficacy and general self-efficacy (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014).

Schiffirin et al. (2014) examined the effects of over-controlling parenting/helicopter parenting and its impact on depression and satisfaction with life. The results indicate students with parents exhibiting factors associated with overparenting had higher levels of depression and decreased satisfaction with life. Overparenting has been associated with lower levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in a study involving 297 undergraduate students at a public liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region (Schiffirin et al., 2014). Schiffirin et al. (2014) noted that "intense and intrusive involvement that strips students' sense of autonomy and feelings of competence may lead them to become more psychologically distant from their parents" (p. 554). Findings from Kouros et al. (2017) also determined parenting done in an intrusive and over-protective way was associated with lower levels of well-being, especially with females. It was said the well-being might be lower for females due to factors including lack of conflict resolution skills and everyday life stressors experienced by these students (Kouros et al., 2017).

The Controlling Parents Survey (Dreher et al., 2014) was developed to measure a student's perception of intrusive parenting control in the student's life. Subscales for the tool measure intrusive parenting and students' emotional immaturity. The researchers indicated the tool could be "used to explore connections between the rise in controlling parent behavior in recent years and the increasing learned helplessness and anxiety among young people who feel they have little control over their lives" (p. 107). After conducting tests with three separate samples with 362 undergraduate students to test the validity of the tool, the authors found that like similar scholarship on this topic, students with controlling parents did experience lower personal control and goal-directed initiative, compared to their peers that did not have controlling parents (Dreher et al., 2014).

The idea of continued parental support beyond secondary education is just not a concept unique to the American education system. An international quantitative study examining college student parental involvement in Germany, Hong Kong, Korea, and the United States (Fingerman et al., 2016), concluded the levels of parental involvement was similar across all four countries. In addition, the study revealed the students from Hong Kong and Korea received more support and had more frequent input from their parents than did the students from Germany and the United States (Fingerman et al., 2016). These findings coincided to those investigating the contributions of parental involvement of a group of Canadian students which found a small, yet significant correlation between parental involvement and student adjustment to college (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000).

### **First-Generation College Students and Parental Involvement**

First-generation college students (FGCS), or students who are the first to attend college in their family, currently make up a third of students enrolled in college (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

Due to limited data on entire family compositions, first-generation status is usually based on parental education level (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). According to the most recent snapshot from the NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Center for First-Generation Student Success, 47% of first-generation college students attended four-year institutions, 40% of these students were enrolled full time, 60% were female, and around 51% of first-generation college students belonged to underrepresented student populations including Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander with the largest population being Hispanic/Latinx (RTI International, 2019a).

Prior research has suggested FGCS students come from lower SES (socio-economic status) backgrounds, have lower critical thinking skills, lower degree aspirations, and received less encouragement from their family to attend college (Terenzini et al., 1996). According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2021), first-generation college students had lower median household incomes (\$41,000) and more unmet financial need which contributed to FGCS incurring more debt than continuing-generation students (\$90,000). In addition, 66% of first-generation college students were employed (on-campus or off-campus) while attending college to assist with financing their education and worked 20 or more hours per week. First-generation students are also more likely to have unrealistic academic, social, and personal expectations about college (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Dennis et al., 2005) and how they fit into this new environment (Strayhorn, 2006). Quinn et al. (2019) stated that unfortunately, “academic difficulties, social challenges, and family factors often plague promising first-generation college students and end their higher education careers permanently” (p. 45). Pascarella et al. (2004) acknowledged that “not only first-generation students confront all of the anxieties, dislocations,

and difficulties of any college student, their experience often involves substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (p. 250). Approximately 65% of first-generation college students utilized financial aid services compared to only 49% of continuing-generation college students (RTI International, 2019c). Research focusing on this population illustrates how this group of students start the college choice process from the beginning at a disadvantaged rate (Hines et al., 2014; RTI International, 2019b; RTI International, 2019c; Strayhorn, 2006).

First-generation college students face many challenges including risk associated with persistence and degree attainment as they tend to be less academically prepared than continuing-generation college students (Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996). Only 48% of first-generation college students are on track to graduate three years after their enrollment compared to 66% of continuing-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018). In terms of academics, the NASPA First-Gen Student Success snapshot (RTI International, 2019a) highlighted that during their first year of college, 65% of first-generation college students were enrolled full time compared to 75% of continuing-generation college students and only 6% of first-generation college students completed an advanced level math course, like calculus, compared to 18% of continuing-generation college students. During their first or second year on campus, FGCS are also more likely to enroll in a remedial course compared to continuing-generation counterparts (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). While 72% of freshman continuing-generation college students utilized academic advising services on their campuses, only 55% of FGCS took advantage of these resources (RTI International, 2019c).

Utilizing data from the *Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study* conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, Strayhorn (2006) compared differences in the influence of various factors between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation



counterparts in relation to overall academic achievement. The study included 11,192 students from multiple college campuses and examined variables including ACT/SAT scores, time between starting college and graduation, demographics (race, gender, and age), employment status, grade point average and their relationship to first-generation college student status (Strayhorn, 2006). Results suggested race, gender, and first-generation college student status were significantly related to academic achievement as reflected by participant grade point averages and first-generation students entered college with lower levels of college preparedness (Strayhorn, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Involvement in extracurricular activities has also been seen as a challenge for first-generation college students (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Strayhorn, 2006). A survey conducted by the NASPA First-Gen Student Success Center of 19,490 first-generation college graduates from the 2015-2016 academic-year, reported only 46% of respondents participated in extracurricular activities while in college compared to 65% of continuing college graduates (RTI International, 2021). Participation in study abroad, research projects with a faculty member, and paid internships were also lower for first-generation college graduates compared to continuing generation college graduates (RTI International, 2021). The survey also noted of these underrepresented student graduates, more Asian first-generation college graduates participated in extracurricular activities compared to other minority student populations.

### **Culture Shock**

The “culture shock” of preparing for and adjusting to college life has been identified as a major concern of first-generation students and their families (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Torres (2009) described culture shock as the “strangeness and discomfort (underrepresented/first-generation students) feel when they matriculate” (p. 855). Not having someone in their

immediate family to discuss the concept of “college” with contributes to the shock these students experience and present some difficulties with familial resistance (Coffman, 2011; Quinn et al., 2019). Utilizing data from a quantitative study investigating parent and student communication about college during the transition to college, Paulbusa and Gauvain (2017) compared responses from 344 first-generation college students and continuing generation college students about the frequency of communication with their parents and their perceptions of the helpfulness and quality of emotional and instrumental support in their experiences. Participants were sent two online questionnaires during the first 3 weeks of their first year in college at a 4-year public university in Southern California. According to the study, non-first-generation students reported the conversations had with their parents about college were more beneficial and positively contributed to their experience compared to those of first-generation status. Paulbusa and Gauvain (2017, p. 111) also stated that although “first-generation students do not get as much college information from their parents, these students benefit from parents’ emotional support as they prepare for college.” This study highlighted the positive ways parental involvement can impact a student. The study concluded even though first-generation parents might not have insight about college details, they can still offer support and encouragement like continuing generation parents (Paulbusa & Gauvain, 2017).

Familial expectations/influence and “culture shock” were discussed in a study about the transitional experiences of students of color from urban areas to an “extreme predominately white institution” (McCoy, 2014, p. 156). The qualitative study (McCoy, 2014) utilized narratives from eight students of color at a predominately white institution to explore their experiences transitioning to their campus. In this context, transition was described as “any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Schlossberg

et al., 1995, p. 27). Respondents indicated high familial expectations left them with goals they often deemed to be unrealistic in practice, but they wanted to bring “pride and honor” to their families (McCoy, 2014). The “culture shock” experienced by respondents included racial isolation, overt racism, and microaggressions and required them to navigate multiple competing cultures at one time (McCoy, 2014). Multiple participants mentioned how during the college search process they did not realize how important diversity and being around others of the same culture were to them until they arrived on campus.

Adams and McBrayer (2020) examined the lived experiences of first-generation college students of color at a predominately white institution (PWI) in the Southeast United States. Interview and focus group participants all mentioned how attaining a college degree was a way to earn a better quality of life for them and their families. By “breaking generational cycles,” (p. 742) participants described how important it was for them to serve as role models for others in their families. Concerns associated with finances and safety were discussed as challenges that all experienced on the campus. In addition, participants observed the need for academic and social support as a first-generation college student having to integrate to an institutional culture that was very different from their own. Previous research has noted the experiences of students of color and their college careers at PWIs as being overwhelming and including multiple barriers to degree completion (McCoy, 2014; Strayhorn, 2006). Participants all expressed gratitude for their opportunities to attend the institution and their abilities to make future impacts in their communities but mentioned how feelings of racial isolation and political polarization were ever present as they navigated the campus environment as first-generation college students of color at a PWI (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). Findings from this study mirror students of color experiences at PWI’s as they navigated the new culture of their campuses and dealt with realities

associated with “culture shock” as a member of an underrepresented student population (McCoy, 2014; Strayhorn, 2006; Perna, 2000).

### **Support and Encouragement**

A qualitative study by Nichols and Islas (2016), examined the differences in parental involvement of first-generation and continuing generation college students enrolled in a premedical course. Interviews were conducted at the conclusion of students’ first quarter and focused on how continuing generation students felt “pulled” through the first year by their parents and the first-generation students felt “pushed” by their parents. The concept of “pushing and pulling” was discovered after investigating the social, cultural, and human capital available to students with parental involvement related to parents having attended college versus those that did not attend (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Pulling from college educated parents occurred when students sought advice from their parents and parents “pushed” them to campus resources that could help them and told them to seek out professors that could assist them when needed (Nichols & Islas, 2016). On the other hand, “pushing” for first-generation students was characterized by the amount of support provided by their parents. Although it was never specific advice about classes or housing, it was more motivational in nature and “holding them up” (Nichols & Islas, 2016).

Sy et al. (2011) compared how parental support (emotional and informational) and stress during the transition to college differed between first-generation and continuing generation students. The study of 339 female students found when compared to continuing generation students, first-generational students had both lower emotional and informational support. Results also indicated those students with more emotional support from parents had lower levels of stress. Researchers also found first-generation student stress level was reduced when they

interacted with peers and were involved with extracurricular activities, even though they were less likely to do so (Sy et al., 2011). This type of outcome could be a result of first-generation students trying to find others to gain the social capital needed to successfully transition into the institution, since their parents were not able to provide insight.

Results from a study by McCarron and Inkelas (2006) yielded similar results found by Sy et al. (2001). Utilizing student survey data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study 1998 – 2000 distributed by the National Center for Education Statistics, the study examined if parental involvement had an influence on the educational aspirations of first-generation students as compared to the aspirations of continuing generation students. The researchers concluded parental involvement from first-generation and continuing parents was important and was a viable predictor of college success (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). With first-generation parents not having “insight” into the nature of postsecondary education, they still provided support both financial and emotional, which was critical to the success of their students. The study further highlighted those first-generation students struggled with the demands and expectations of college life. While this could be attributed to many factors, parental involvement and lack of college understanding was identified as a deficient area by the study (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

In a qualitative study focusing on the “memorable messages” first-generation students received from their parents, five themes emerged as students discussed messages from family members that played a significant role in their collegiate experience (Wang, 2014). Memorable messages are described as “verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (Knapp et al., 1981, p. 27). Themes from the study included remembering family, focusing on

family, counting on family, not worrying about family, and setting a good example. Wang (2014) stated these “memorable messages about counting on family reaffirmed that first-generation students could depend on family relationships during college and that these family relationships would help them manage the challenges that were embedded in the transition from high school to college” (p. 282). Wang (2014) and previous research concluded family relationships were critical to the success of the first-generation students and suggest strong parent-child relationships can assist first-generation college students in overcoming college challenges (Benmayor, 2002; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Simmons, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). While parents and families might not understand how college worked, they were able to provide the support needed (Chapman, et al., 2018; Chlup et al., 2018). These messages contributed to students not being worried about things happening back home but focused on their new experiences and what they needed to do to be successful (Wang, 2014).

A qualitative study by Chlup et al. (2018) also supports the notion of students having to focus on their new experiences, while also not forgetting “where they came from” and how their families played an important role in their new college environments. Chlup et al. (2018) utilized nine parent focus groups to examine perceptions and experiences of predominantly Spanish speaking Latina mothers related to accessing information and resources to aid their students in enrolling in postsecondary institutions. Researchers used purposeful sampling and asked participants to discuss topics associated with the pre-college enrollment process related to what they knew and needed to know about college readiness, overall college knowledge, and college access (Chlup et al., 2018). Participants all had children enrolled at an independent school district in the South Texas region. Mothers from the study mentioned support for their college students not only comes from them as the family, but also from their larger community with

people that have attended college and can serve as role models for their students (Chlup et al., 2018). In addition, parents indicated they were eager and willing to anything that would contribute to their students being successful in college. Chlup et al. (2018) stated, “working with, not simply involving Latina/o families, is the key” (p. 18) for success. The study concluded that while schools did offer some insight into college access for these families, they lacked in providing families with detailed information that could better assist them in providing support for their college going children (Chlup et al., 2018).

To offer a different viewpoint about the college transition process, Harper et al. (2020) studied the college transition process from the perspective of first-generation college student parents. A case study using longitudinal data from eight parents examined how parents of first-generation college students experienced the transition to college during their student’s first year. Researchers used the *Model of Parent Characteristics, Engagement, and Support* (Kiyama & Harper, 2018) as a theoretical framework to guide the study. This model focused on important pre-college and college factors that can contribute to parental support including family characteristics, social networks, self-efficacy, educational aspirations, involvement and encouragement, and dimensions of support. Findings of the study revealed that as students transitioned to college and new educational environments, parents also transitioned into new roles of support for their student with the benefit being centered around their “steadfast belief in the power of higher education and desire that their children obtain the degree that they (parents) were unable to complete themselves” (p. 556). The role of supporter and encourager aligns with previous research highlighting the new role that parents played during their student’s collegiate experience (Kenyon & Koerner, 2009; Kiyama & Harper, 2018; Wartman & Savage, 2008).

### **Parental Involvement Based on Socio-Economic Status**

Socio-economic status (SES) has been identified as an important factor when discussing the levels and types of parental involvement of college students (Lucas, 2001; Wells and Serna, 1996). Families with higher socio-economic statuses tend to offer more support and resources to their students throughout the collegiate experience (Wells & Serna, 1996). A study by Ma (2009), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study 1988 – 1994, focused on parental involvement, SES, and students' college major choice. Findings suggested students from lower SES tend to major in technical, business, and life/health fields due to parents' attitudes about majoring in fields that can make higher wages (Ma, 2009). Ma (2009) concluded this attitude is consistent with parents' feelings that higher education is a way to achieve upward mobility and economic security which was also discussed by Davies and Guppy (1997).

Rondini (2016) suggested some lower SES parents involved themselves in their student's lives more, because socioeconomic mobility is easier with a college degree. A qualitative study with 30 low-income students and parents was conducted to examine how each group felt about parental involvement and how it impacted the student's collegiate experience. Parents in the study spoke about how they did not want their children to "struggle" as much as they did and wanted to make sure their student did not make similar mistakes (Rondini, 2016). Multiple students in the same study commented they felt added pressure from their parents due to this reason. Rondini (2016) stated these students "took on the role of "aspirational proxies" for their parents, carrying with them the hope to achieve socioeconomic mobility that had eluded the previous generation" (p. 108).

Socioeconomic class was the topic of a similar qualitative study by Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) that sought to define how school context was shaped by parental involvement and vice



versa. In addition, the study also described how the higher education, state, and economic contexts all shaped parental involvement for students in five states as it relates to college choice. Of interest in this study was the fact that financing college was a major concern for lower SES parents and because of that concern, they put more pressure on their students to perform better academically (Rowan-Kenyon, et al., 2008). Higher income parents stated they had been saving for college or financing college would not be an issue for their student, as compared to middle- and lower-income parents that shared that financing college would have to be a shared cost with their students (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

### **Parental Involvement in Decision to Attend and Transition to College**

According to a survey of 1,313 parents by Ruffalo Noel Levitz, Campus ESP, and TeenLife (2019), three out of four parents indicated they are “very involved” in their students' college search process and most felt college should be the most important thing their student should be doing after high school. Parents also agreed they were dedicated to ensuring their child went to college and stated the college planning process started early with 34% expressing the process started prior to their student's freshman year in high school (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). The report also indicated over half (54%) of the parents surveyed had directly received some type of communication from their student's college via email, direct mail, telephone, or text message. Previous scholarship about this topic highlighted the important role parents can play in their student's decision to attend college (Chapman et al., 2018; Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The Hossler-Gallagher (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice has been used to understand the college choice process (Chapman et al., 2018, Myers & Myers, 2012). This process entails three stages including predisposition, search, and choice. During the first phase of

disposition, students decide whether they want to continue their education beyond the secondary level and decide to make choices that will increase their ability to attend an institution of higher education including taking college-bound courses and involvement in extracurricular activities. A key component of this phase is parental expectations and encouragement (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The second phase (search) requires students and parents to begin gathering information about specific institutions and visiting campuses. The final phase (choice) is when the student begins to narrow down choices and arrive at a decision about which school to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). While the ultimate goal of the process is for a student to make a college choice, there is back and forth movement between each of the phases with parents playing an important role during the entire process (Chapman et al., 2018).

In the *2019 Parents' Role in College Planning Report* by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019), parents indicated multiple ways in which they helped their children during the decision to attend college and college planning phases. Parents scheduling and attending campus visits and parents selecting a few campuses for their child to consider were rated the highest ways in which parents assisted their students. In addition, 89% of the surveyed parents indicated they attended a college night either at their child's high school or on a college campus and 80% of them assisted their student in filling out college applications. Once their student transitioned to their selected institution, 76% of the parents surveyed indicated understanding the financial aid process was the most difficult part of their experience (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). Issues related to completing the FAFSA, helping their child apply for scholarships, and understanding what they needed to pay for once all aid was accounted for were seen as the most confusing part of the financial aid process.

A qualitative research study by Friedline et al. (2017), examined what parents thought about their young children's educational futures and their preparation for future educational costs. Thirty-seven parents of kindergarten children from a school district in a midsized, Midwestern city all agreed they would play significant roles in their children's futures when deciding to attend college. One of the key findings from the study concluded that parents started to form expectations and decisions about college at the start of the child's educational career (Friedline et al., 2017). Additional findings concluded that parents from different socioeconomic statuses perceived the payoff to a college degree differently. Parents with higher income and high levels of education questioned the overall value of the degree in terms of related debt and lower income, less educated parents viewed college as a catalyst for their child's adult life (Friedline et al., 2017). According to the researchers, most parents relied on their own experiences to gauge their levels of involvement in their students' college choice process (Friedline et al., 2017). These findings highlight how many parents begin to think about college and their students' decisions to attend college at an early age which demonstrates how parental influence during the first phase of the Hossler-Gallagher (1987) model of college decision making can even occur prior to a student's secondary education career.

Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) used a qualitative case study to evaluate how seven low-income, first-generation college students perceived the role of their parents during the college planning process and how it related to their self-determination toward college. Interviews were conducted with students and students self-selected primary motivators including parents, high school teachers, school counselors, and significant others. This study focused on student's self-determination in terms of autonomy, competency, and feelings of relatedness. Researchers concluded parents and other family members had strong influences on motivation with the most

influence related to their student's autonomy development (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). It was also observed motivation waivered when parents could not provide insight about college related topics including lack of awareness about what to expect in college, lack of assistance during the admissions process, and financial worries about financing their higher education career. Previous studies have also concluded parents unfamiliar with the college choice and transition process was a factor that caused student motivation to waiver (Chapman et al., 2018; Chlup et al., 2018; Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). According to the researchers, "despite these challenges, these students remained steadfast toward college and were often able to draw on support from others in the school setting or in their peer or familial network for guidance. However, these hurdles could have easily derailed their motivation to pursue their college dreams" (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018, p. 599).

College choice and the role parents played in decision making was also the focus of study by Chapman et al. (2018) that explored the role of African American parents during the college choice process of their high-achieving students. This mixed methods study utilized surveys from 710 African American students, 74 individual student interviews, and 8 interviews with parents of student interviewees to further scholarship about the roles of African American parents during the college decision making process (Chapman et al., 2018). While the experiences of African American students and parents during the college choice process was the foundation for the study, these findings support previous research highlighting the significant role parents play during the entire college choice process (Bergerson, 2009; Friedline et. al, 2017; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Parents disclosed they began the predisposition and search stages well before their students were ready to apply to college because setting expectations early was critical to ensure future success (Chapman et al., 2018). In addition, the

study highlighted how receiving a college education could ensure personal success and combat some racism experienced by African Americans. This study compliments findings from Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019) that indicated that 77% of African American parents felt a college degree is worth all the time, money, and effort put forth to ensure future success.

### **Parental Involvement in Academics**

Academics are an integral part of college life and parents have a vested interest in their students' success (Self, 2013). Data from a quantitative study on the undergraduate experiences of over 10,000 students on multiple University of California campuses examined domains including academic engagement, civic engagement, student development, and student services on each campus. Undergraduate students completed the Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) to examine their experiences on campus and provide administrators with important information related to the overall University of California undergraduate experience (Wolf et al., 2009). Student respondents utilized a Likert scale to rate their feelings with academic variables including:

1. My parents and I discuss what classes I should take;
2. My parents and I discuss what I learned in class;
3. I am pursuing or considering a major I don't like in order to please my parents;
4. My parents are very interested in my academic progress; and
5. My parents stress the importance of getting good grades (UCUES, 2006).

In terms of academic engagement and their parents, 67% of the student respondents agreed or strongly agreed their parents were interested in their overall academic progress, 60% agreed or strongly agreed having good grades was stressed by their parents, but only 15.5% agreed or strongly agreed their parents influenced their choice of major and/or classes (Wolf et al., 2009).

The idea of parents being interested in overall academic success and not a particular course of study was also discussed by some participants in a study by Cullaty (2011). This study explored how parental involvement influenced the process of college student autonomy development and examined implications of the process for higher education administrators. A group of 18 undergraduate students, with different levels of parental involvement (high, medium, and low), were interviewed three times over the course of an academic year about their parent's involvement in multiple areas including academics. When discussing academics, some participants reported their parents provided support from afar and were not concerned with particulars including majors, even when majors were changed multiple times (Cullaty, 2011). Researchers concluded parents showing supportive involvement assisted their students in their autonomy development while intrusive parents hindered their students' feelings of autonomy especially when it came to control of academic, career, and financial decisions (Cullaty, 2011).

In another study examining parental involvement and academics, Kriegbaum et al. (2016) studied patterns of shared agency with parents as predictors of academic achievement and motivation in college students. This quantitative study used an online survey to measure factors including shared and nonshared agency with parents, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, amotivation, achievement goal orientations, and academic achievement with over 800 undergraduate students from a large, public university in California. The researchers utilized the Chang et al. (2010) concept of shared agency to discover the extent to which parents and their child share similar academic goals and pursued those goals together. Influences on the shared agency spectrum included parental accommodation, parental collaboration, and parental support. The unshared agency spectrum includes parental directing and parental uninvolved (Chang et al., 2010). The study did confirm the hypotheses that shared agency was associated with high

factors of motivation (greater intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, less amotivation) and greater academic achievement, while unshared agency was associated with higher amotivation and lower grade point averages.

Roksa and Kinsley (2017) studied the role of parental involvement in the academic success of low-income students. Researchers analyzed findings from 728 first-year low income (students with expected family contribution of less than \$10,314 and at least \$1,000 in unmet financial need) students attending eight four-year institutions in Wisconsin in 2014. The study examined how emotional and financial family support are related to academic outcomes including grades, credit accumulation, and persistence. Additional factors including family support at varied income levels and extent of student engagement and psycho-social adjustment related to family support and academic outcomes were also studied. The findings showed students that received more family emotional support were more likely to have 3.0 or higher-grade point averages, more likely to have completed at least 24 hours during their first year of college, and more likely to persist to their sophomore year (Roksa & Kinsley, 2017). These participants also reported higher levels of psychological well-being. Further analyses indicated overall, female participants had higher grade point averages compared to male participants and participants from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups were less likely to earn a 3.0 grade point average or accumulate at least 24 credit hours after completing their freshman year (Roksa & Kinsley, 2017).

### **Parental Involvement in Social and Emotional Life**

Aside from academics, a large amount of college life takes place outside of the classroom and parental involvement spills over into this realm as well. A quantitative study examining the level of parental involvement in the academic lives of undergraduate students in the University

of California system found over half (54%) of the students surveyed as part of an undergraduate experience survey agreed or strongly agreed their parents asked about their friends and non-academic activities as well (Wolf et al., 2009). While the primary focus of the study examined the academic experiences for these students, it was mentioned parental interests in campus academic experiences correspond with their interests in the social lives of their students (Wolf et al., 2009). The social adjustment and the way parents helped facilitate this process was highlighted in a later study by Harper et al. (2012). The study focused on how the parental contact, measured by frequency, and parental involvement corresponded to participant's self-assessed academic development, social satisfaction, and sociopolitical awareness. They were able to test measures associated with parental involvement and how they affected the social integration of students into college. The quantitative study determined students that had healthy parental attachment and involvement levels were able to use those skills to pursue new social activities in college (Harper et al., 2012). Healthy levels in the context of the study were described as students feeling secure enough to pursue goals and social activities corresponding with their new lives in college (Harper et al., 2012).

Emotional well-being related to parental involvement was reviewed in a qualitative study on parental support during the college years (Kolkhorst et al., 2010). Online instant messaging interviews via private, password protected chat rooms, were conducted with 58 third-year undergraduate students to gain a better understanding of their parents' involvement during their first few years of college. Researchers utilized this format because it was identified as one of the most convenient and efficient ways of communicating with program participants at the time. Social and relationship discussions were the second highest rated topic that participants discussed with their parents, while financial discussions were the highest rated topics of



discussion (Kolkhorst et al., 2010). Seventy nine percent of the participants expressed pleasure with how their parents were able to provide emotional support and encouragement during difficult situations. In addition, participants added receiving supportive and inspirational messages from their parents was beneficial to their college experience (Kolkhorst et al., 2010).

Mosier (2021) examined the familial support experiences of first-generation college students in a school of social work. Undergraduate students pursuing degrees in social work and child and family studies and graduate students enrolled in a social work master's program, participated in focus groups as part of this qualitative study. On one side of the experience, participants expressed strong emotional support from their families throughout college with parents consistently offering words of encouragement, offers of financial assistance, and emotional guidance. Mosier (2021) noted some participants stated their parents were "living out their own educational dreams through them" (p. 11). However, participants also mentioned while parental support was constant, there were many situations in which parents expressed concerns and questioned decisions made by their student related to future employment opportunities, ability to finance the college career, and ensuring familiar responsibilities were still being met. In addition, Mosier (2021) also highlighted the important role class, cultural norms, and gender played in parents supporting their student. Female participants reported being challenged and questioned about degree choices and social experiences more than male participants.

Familial responsibilities and guilt associated with leaving home provided the foundation for a study of Latino/a first generation graduate students and their collegiate experience (Moreno, 2021). Utilizing the concept of *survivor guilt* in relation to first-generation college students (Piorkowski, 1983) and their pursuit of higher education, Moreno (2021) examined the college going experiences of six Latino/a participants. First-generation college students can experience

*survivor guilt* when their abilities to excel and attend college are questioned while others in their families or from their communities are not afforded the same opportunities (Piorkowski, 1983). Morena stated “the guilt felt by these students can be linked to depression, difficulties concentrating, and study skill problems, which, in turn, affect academic success” (p. 216). Multiple interviews were conducted with participants allowing them to share their experiences with the researcher. Findings showed most of the participants felt guilt when they were not able to be home during major family difficulties. Participants expressed while parents provided support and encouragement from afar, they were unable to provide needed academic, social, and financial support which is similar to participant experiences described by Roksa & Kinsley (2017). Moreno highlighted while the stressors associated with guilt was prevalent throughout the college career of all participants, they were able to stay motivated with the long-term goals of giving back and supporting their families and communities.

### **Chapter Summary**

Parents can play an important and significant role in the educational careers of their children. Many have been involved at the earliest stages and have guided their children through elementary, middle, and high school with different levels of engagement. Parental involvement, though different, continues as students prepare to go to college (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Previous research on traditional college-aged students classifies them as an emerging adult (Arnett, 2000). This developmental stage is classified as a turning point in which students begin to explore the possibilities available to them as adults while also still relying on guidance and input from their parents (Arnett, 2000). The guidance traditional college-aged students seek from their parents during the emotional adulthood phase of development phase, takes on many forms and can be both positive and negative.

The research reviewed for this study acknowledges the important role that appropriate levels of parental involvement can have on college student development. Parental engagement and support have been shown to have a positive impact on academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being for students (Harper et al., 2012). When appropriate roles are not maintained, parents can be seen as “hovering” over their student and trying to do everything for them (Schiffrin, et al., 2014). The idea of “hovering” has been popularized by use of the term “helicopter parent,” to describe parents that become over involved in aspects of their students’ lives. Helicopter parenting can be detrimental to student development and has been linked to lower levels of self-efficacy and competency and increased child entitlement (Segrin et al., 2012).

While all students must adjust to the transitions that occur in college, first-generation undergraduate students unlike their peers, face additional hurdles that can have a significant impact on their experience. These students have been characterized as less academically prepared and motivated, from lower SES households, and having lower levels of critical thinking skills (Terenzini et al., 1996). These disadvantages continue as parents of these students lack the social capital and insight into higher education that can ease stress during this time (Sy et al., 2001). Professionals must be prepared to work with these students and their parents to level the academic playing fields when it comes to adjusting and succeeding at institutions of higher education (Stephens et al., 2012).

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

First-generation undergraduate students face many challenges including, risk associated with persistence and degree attainment as they tend to be less academically prepared than continuing-generation college students (Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996). Parental engagement and support have been shown to have a positive impact on the academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being of college students (Harper et al., 2012). This study examined the role that parental involvement played in first-generation college students' of color decision to attend college, transition from high school to college, and first year academic and social experiences.

This qualitative study used a case study research design to guide the examination of first-generation college students' experiences. This design was used because it focuses on the individual stories and experiences of participants to generate data that can be used to describe the experiences of one person or a group of individuals with similar characteristics (Creswell, 2015). Utilizing interviews to gather stories, interpreting the information collected from the interviews and then reporting on the meanings of an individual's experiences, make this type of design a critical part of qualitative studies. According to Creswell (2015), participants in this type of study also feel their experiences and stories are truly important to the researcher, and this gives them a greater sense of purpose in the study.

This chapter includes the research methods and procedures used to develop the methodology of this qualitative case study. Sections include research design, participants, role of the researcher, data collection procedures, and data analysis. This chapter also provides

information about trustworthiness factors of the study including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Research Design**

The study used a qualitative case study inquiry to examine underrepresented first-generation college students' perceptions of their parent(s) involvement when deciding to attend college, transition from high school to college, and first year academic and social experiences. Qualitative research is described by Creswell (2007) as a type of inquiry that "begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning an individual or group ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). Qualitative research is conducted in natural settings with people in real-world situations. It involves using non-mathematical analytical procedures, interviews, observations, content analysis, and focus groups (Creswell, 2007).

Yin (2014) defined case study research in a twofold manner. First, he wrote that a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in-depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident." (p. 16). The second part of the definition details the components of the case study and its distinct features, including the case being a "technically distinctive situation, relying on multiple sources of evidence, and being based on prior development of theoretical propositions that will guide the data collection process" (p. 17). Case studies have traditionally been conducted across multiple disciplines and focus on studying an issue or problem using the "case" or situation as a specific illustration.

Cases can involve a single individual, several individuals, group, programs, or a specific activity. Purposeful sampling is often used in case study due to this type of sampling requiring

the researcher to select cases to show different perspectives of the problem or event being studied (Creswell, 2007). This sampling procedure also produces rich information for the study and “offers useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Research designs utilizing case study inquiry consist of five important components, including the research questions, its propositions, its units of analysis, the linking of the data to the propositions, and its interpretive criteria (Yin, 2014). Each component builds upon each other to ensure a valid research design. By utilizing this design method for the study with this specific group of individuals, I identified how parents either assisted or did not assist their students during this transitional period.

### **Participants**

Participants for the study included seven first-generation undergraduate students of color participating in mentoring programs administered by the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education and Student Success Center at a land-grant, mid-southern research university with a student population of over 29,000. The institution is comprised of 10 academic colleges and schools with over 200 academic degree programs including 96 undergraduate programs, 81 master’s programs, 38 doctoral and specialist programs and 32 graduate certificate programs and boasts a 19:1 student to faculty ratio. Approximately 55% of students have in-state residencies with 40% being from out-of-state and 4% foreign international status. The institution had a 77% acceptance rate in fall 2019 and a 66.2% six year-graduation rate.

All participants must have completed their first year of studies as a full-time student, having completed a minimum of 24 credit hours at the institution as participants in an academic enrichment program and returning as a second-year student in the fall 2020 semester. Participants must have come from a household where no parent(s) attended an institution of

higher education. Also, participants must be from an underrepresented student population on the university campus. According to the Office of Institutional Research, underrepresented student ethnicities include Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino and made up approximately 24% of the fall 2019 undergraduate enrollment. This sample population was selected due to the high number of first-generation college students and underrepresented population students participating in mentoring programs available at the university.

As stated by Creswell (2015), purposeful sampling requires the researcher to intentionally select participants meeting identified characteristics. These characteristics described in the above paragraph all play a role in the central phenomenon being studied by the researcher and show different perspectives on the problem (Creswell, 2007). Characteristics include being an underrepresented first-generation student and having no parent(s) attended college. More importantly, this group is a homogenous sample because all participants belong to an identified subgroup in relation to their status as an underrepresented, first-generation college student, participating in an academic enrichment program (Creswell, 2015).

The academic enrichment program in the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education is a student success program designed to assist first-generation, low income and other underrepresented students on campus by providing mentoring and academic coaching. The fall 2019 cohort included 70 students in the program. Participants entered the institution with a combined grade point average of 3.75 and an averaged composite ACT score of 24. Students in the program receive mentoring and academic coaching throughout their first year on campus as members of the initiative at the university.

The academic enrichment program in the Student Success Center is designed to support first-generation students awarded Federal Pell Grants. Students are placed in specialized first-year experience courses and are assigned a faculty advisor to assist in their transition to the institution. Participants receive assistance in all areas of their college experience including academic, social, financial, and wellness support. The fall 2019 cohort included 54 participants from underrepresented student populations. Participants entered the institution with a combined grade point average of 3.32 and an averaged composite ACT score of 21. Gatekeepers in the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education and the Student Success Center assisted in identifying students eligible to participate in the study. Note for the context of this study, gatekeepers are individuals in official or unofficial roles at a test site that can identify study participants because of standing relationships with potential subjects (Creswell, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In total, nine individuals agreed to participate in the study, but only seven completed the interviews. Multiple unsuccessful attempts were made to contact the other two individuals that agreed to participate in the study.

### **Researcher as Instrument**

As a researcher, my interest has always been centered on examining the lived experiences of people. This is a core component of qualitative research and speaks to the essence of my work as a professional (Creswell, 2015). As a student affairs administrator with almost 20 years of experience, I have worked directly with undergraduate students, parents, and family members in multiple capacities. These experiences have ranged from designing orientation programs for first-year students to creating curricula for leadership development programs to leading webinars for parents about issues their students might face as they start college. Student development and engagement has been and continues to be part of my daily existence.



As a student affairs professional, I offer a unique perspective in this study. I direct programs and initiatives assisting parents and family members in supporting their students throughout the college years. This work has provided me with direct insight into the important role parents can play during the college years, especially when it comes to supporting their students' success. As a continuing-generation college student, my parents played a vital role in my success as a student. While I understand this is not the case for all students, I acknowledge my experience could create bias as I conducted the study. I employed multiple tools to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study. I believe my background and experiences working with undergraduate students, parents, and family members gave me a better understanding of the study's data.

### **Data Collection**

This study relied heavily on individual interviews with participants to collect the data needed. Each participant engaged in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview with the researcher that took place after the completion of their first year on campus. The one-on-one interview is one of the most popular ways to conduct interviews for qualitative studies because it can provide researchers with opportunities to gather detailed information and accounts from participants about their individual experiences (Creswell, 2015). One-on-one interviews also allow the researcher to probe participants about specific situations or actions that can contribute to the data of the study and present topics or themes that might not have been addressed by the researcher (Creswell, 2015). In addition, a document analysis was conducted by reviewing relevant program documents including applications, meeting agendas, meeting summary notes, and student participant retention data. The document analysis provided limited information; therefore, one-on-one interviews were noted as the most significant source for the studies research analysis.

Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix A) was secured prior to the data collection phase of the study. Students were identified by requesting data from the Center for Multicultural & Diversity Education and Student Success Center. Students meeting the initial study requirements were asked to complete a pre-survey (see Appendix B) to ensure that they met all study requirements and gauged their interest in participating in this research study. Once students were identified that met the research criteria and consent (see Appendix C) obtained from each potential participant, the study's data collection phase began with those students agreeing to participate.

I conducted pilot interviews with two first-generation students not meeting the study's full criteria. Pilot interviews allowed me to examine the effectiveness of questions and the flow of the interviews. After receiving feedback from pilot interviewees, I made changes to the interview questions and protocol as needed to ensure information was collected in a meaningful manner and to confirm the data addressed the research questions posed. Data collected in the pilot interviews were not included in the study as recommended by Creswell (2015).

The initial interviews took place after participants completed their first year on campus. This timespan was chosen because it provided participants time to reflect on their college choice process and the first year of their transition to the institution. The interviews took place online via Zoom with video and audio recordings. Online interviews were conducted due to the Covid-19 pandemic and many campus functions and classes being conducted remotely which impacted access to participants. After each interview, the recordings were transcribed. Field notes were taken during each interview to ensure that key concepts were identified and in case there was a malfunction with the audio recording device (Creswell, 2015). The interview protocol outlines questions that were asked during the interview (see Appendix D).

## Data Analysis

The data from the interviews was organized and then transcribed, as recommended by Creswell (2015). The transcription review process took a generous amount of time due to the number and length of the participant interviews, but this was crucial for this study since the researcher was searching for information related to each participant's experiences with parental involvement during the college choice and transition process. I utilized thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to analyze all data from participant interviews.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) is defined as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” (p. 57). This form of analysis is becoming more recognized as “unique and valuable” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57) qualitative data analysis method. Also, thematic analysis allows the researcher flexibility to focus on meanings across an entire dataset or one aspect of the data in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Braun and Clarke (2012) described a six-phase approach when conducting a thematic analysis. The six phases include: (a) familiarizing yourself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. These phases provide the researcher a process for “producing a good thematic analysis that is thorough, plausible and sophisticated” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 66). In addition, the phases provide a visual map of the process and allow the researcher to easily identify themes and the connections that exist between them in the research (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

In the first phase of thematic analysis, I immersed myself in the data by reviewing transcripts and interview videos multiple times to become familiar with the data and start identifying relevant information that contributed to answering the study's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The second phase required me to generate initial codes that emerged from the data. These codes provided the foundation for the next steps in the process where I developed themes. Braun and Clarke (2012) stated that coding during this phase must be "inclusive, thorough, and systematic" (p. 610). In phase three, codes were condensed into themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). With codes placed into thematic categories, I was able to identify similarities and developed overarching topics that began to tell the story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During phase four, themes were reviewed to ensure that they answered the study's research questions. Braun and Clarke (2012) describe this as a way of quality-checking. Phase five required the researcher to define and name themes for the study. Themes should be concise and adequately describe the data. Final themes at this phase should have a singular focus, not overlap, and should directly answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The final phase required the researcher to develop a report that creates a story based on data analysis.

### **Research Rigor**

In the qualitative research process, trustworthiness is critical to justify the reliability and validity of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four areas that should be addressed when discussing rigor for qualitative studies, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Creswell (2015) also identified three processes that validate qualitative

studies' accuracy, including triangulation, member checking, and auditing, which correspond with the Lincoln and Guba (1985) areas for trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate competence in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was established through an extensive literature review, preparation and training for the study, and my professional experience as a student affairs educator. One strategy of credibility used was member checking. Each participant was asked to check the transcribed text to ensure their viewpoints were accurately addressed. Member checks also provide the study with an additional level of credibility by allowing participants to clarify viewpoints or experiences and ensure the researcher interpretations were correct (Creswell, 2015).

Also, a peer reviewer was utilized to serve as a guide throughout the study. A peer reviewer is described as the "process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). These strategies ensured that participant experiences were validated and credible.

### **Transferability**

In qualitative research, transferability describes the process of ensuring that a study can be generalized to other contexts or settings. Through the rich, thick description of data collected, readers can determine if results would yield similar results in their specific setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participant data including demographic details were collected, analyzed, and presented in this study to examine multiple perspectives of the study's phenomenon.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was addressed by having an external researcher knowledgeable about college student transitions and parental involvement review the study to ensure the findings were grounded in the data. The external reviewer also provided overall feedback about the data collection and analyses processes. This trustworthiness strategy ensured the study was logical, traceable, and documented (Nowell et al., 2017).

### **Confirmability**

According to Elo et al. (2014), “confirmability refers to the objectivity, that is, the potential for congruence between two or more independent people about the data’s accuracy, relevance, or meaning” (p. 2). In addition, the results must reflect participants’ experiences and not include biases from the researcher (Elo, et al., 2014). Confirmability for the study was established by providing an audit trail of all materials including audio recordings, notes, and transcription texts used during any part of the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audit trails are defined as the “transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, p. 1). In this present study, the audit trail included copies of all correspondence sent to study participants, completed informed consent forms, field notes, recorded interviews, copies of interview transcriptions, members checking forms, and any supporting documents made available to the researcher throughout the study.

### **Chapter Summary**

The study utilized a qualitative case study methodology as its basis. A purposeful, homogenous sampling method was utilized to identify participants that met the study’s criteria. One-on-one, online interviews were conducted for data collection. After each interview, data was

transcribed and segmented into codes. Themes were developed to capture the experiences of study participants. Criteria addressing research rigor including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability was utilized to ensure trustworthiness throughout the research process.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

This chapter presents the themes that emerged from the research data. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore underrepresented first-year, first-generation undergraduate students' perceptions of their parent's involvement in the students' decision to attend college, transition from high school to college, and freshman year academic and social experiences. Data were collected through interviews with seven first-generation college students of color that participated in an academic enrichment program during their first year at State University and were members of an underrepresented student population.

A demographic profile of each of the seven participants is presented (see Table 1). Demographic information collected included gender, race/ethnicity, undergraduate major, and academic enrichment program of each participant. The chapter also includes an institutional summary of State University, the research questions, design, data collection, and analysis. I next present an overview of the study participants, discuss findings, and conclude with a chapter summary.

#### **The Participants**

The participants consisted of two male and five female students at State University with four of them being Hispanic, two being African American, and one being Asian. All were sophomores pursuing a bachelor's degree at State University and were members of a campus academic enrichment program during their freshman year. The academic enrichment programs were supported by the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education and the Student Success Center at State University. Pseudonyms were given to all participants to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality.



Table 1  
*Participant Demographic Data*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>AEP*</b>
Brandy	Female	Hispanic	Psychology	SSC***
Diana	Female	Hispanic	International Business	SSC
Guy	Male	Asian	Biochemistry	CMDE**
Kristina	Female	Hispanic	Communication Disorders	CMDE
Lawrence	Male	African American	Ag Leadership & Business	CMDE
Lisa	Female	Hispanic	Social Studies Education	SSC
Rebekah	Female	African American	Marketing	SSC

\*AEP = Academic Enrichment Program

\*\*CMDE = Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education Academic Enrichment Program

\*\*\*SSC = Student Success Center Academic Enrichment Program

**Brandy** is a Hispanic female majoring in psychology from Texas. She has no relationship with her birth parents and was being raised by her two cousins that she refers to as her “moms.” She has no biological siblings but did grow up with other cousins in her household and was a member of the academic enrichment program administered by the Student Success Center. She participated in a dual enrollment program in high school and earned an associate’s degree. Being financially independent in the future was one of the main reasons she knew she wanted to attend college. She stated that her moms wanted her to “go further than them” in life, so there was an expectation that she would attend college. Growing up she experienced food insecurity and money was always at the forefront of every conversation. She knew that paying for college out-of-state was going to be a challenge, but it was something that she knew she had to do. When discussing college preparation, she stated that she relied heavily on support from high school teachers and internship sponsors for assistance. The mental needs of close family members and friends served as a catalyst for her pursuing a degree in psychology. She stated that “mental health was never really talked about, especially in my (Mexican) community and there are so many people that need help...that’s why I’ve always wanted to go to college and help others.”

**Diana** is a Hispanic female from Arkansas. She was involved in the Student Success Center mentoring program and is an international business major. Diana is an only child and lived on campus her freshman year. From an early age she knew that she wanted to attend college because her goal was to “get a good job.” Her viewpoint of college eventually changed as she realized that she liked to learn and getting a job became a second priority. Diana believes that her parents’ passion for education and drive for her being the best were the major factors that led to her realizing the importance of higher education. Diana stated she and her parents discussed college topics daily once she began high school; “Even during the summer, I took classes through Upward Bound, so even (my dad) started asking me about like scholarships and classes and stuff, so pretty much a regular basis for like an hour or two every day senior year.” She was drawn to State University because of the prestige and ranking of the business programs but admitted it was the cost and financial aid package that solidified her decision to attend the institution.

**Guy** is an Asian male majoring in biochemistry. He was born in India but has lived in the United States for 13 years and considered an international student by State University. He is an only child and lives at home with both parents. Guy participated in the academic enrichment program through the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education. Throughout the interview he shared how going to college was never a big discussion with his parents and was more of an expectation. Even though his parents did not experience attending a higher education institution in the United States, they knew attending college was something he had to do to be successful in this country. He stated when discussing difficult classes or challenges that arose during his freshman year, his parents would tell him to “try your best and then, if you can’t get it, we can find someone to help you because we don’t know how these things work.”

**Kristina** is a Hispanic female communications disorders major from Arkansas. She was a member of the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education enrichment program and was raised by her two parents with two siblings. She started to really think about college her junior year because she was involved in a pre-college enrichment program that exposed her to colleges and universities across the country. She stated her family has not been that involved in her collegiate experience because she has always been independent and was told to “figure it out on your own” and “always ask questions to knowledgeable folks.” This has been her main drive as a first-generation college student because she wants to make her family proud. She stated, “I do this for my family.” She remembers a time from her first semester when she was driving to class and said, “I had a class super early and I was driving...and I was looking at how pretty it was with the sunrise and I had this moment and was like wow, I’m going to State University, like I’m going to school!” She said this moment of realization almost brought her to tears. As the first to attend college in her family she understands the impact in improving the lives of her family.

**Lawrence** is an African American male student from Arkansas majoring in agricultural leadership and agricultural business. He is an only child and was raised on a working farm with his parents and grandparents. Lawrence was a member of the academic achievement program through the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education. He began taking college level courses while in high school at a local community college and received a technical certificate in power plant technology. From an early age he knew that he wanted to go to college and stated “from probably age 12, I always had an affinity for higher education and people who did have a degree. I felt like they, kind of, I don’t want to say got things a little easier in life, but you look at the very successful people around you and see that.” His parents stressed the importance of him “making connections” with as many people as possible so he could be successful on campus. He

stated anytime he visited campus during the college search process he “made it a point to build as many connections as possible.” He credits his grandparents for playing a very active role in his upbringing and for providing guidance during the college decision making process.

**Lisa** is an in-state Hispanic female studying social studies education and history. She commuted from home her freshman year and participated in the mentoring program coordinated by the Student Success Center. Lisa is the eldest daughter of Mexican immigrants and has two younger siblings. She has always wanted to be a teacher from a young age and knew she had to attend college. Lisa stated that she wanted to go to college “because my parents are immigrants and I really wanted to achieve the American dream for them, and I naturally love learning about new stuff every day, so for me college was something that I wanted to do.” While she knew attending college was something she wanted to do since middle school, she also knew about the financial hardship this could bring to her family, so working hard and earning high grades were very important. Lisa has a close relationship with her parents and strives to make them proud of her. She chose to attend State University because she wanted to stay close to home and due to the amount of scholarship offerings afforded her through participation in programs like Upward Bound and being able to take college courses the summer after graduating from high school.

**Rebekah** is an in-state African American female marketing major. She was raised with both parents and a younger brother. She was a member of the academic enrichment program administered by the Student Success Center and lived on-campus her freshman year. She chose to attend State University because she was looking for a place to be around others that looked like her. After attending a predominantly white high school, she thought State University would give her opportunities to learn and grow not only as a student, but as a woman of color. College was something her parents talked about with her as a young girl. She stated, “I have thought

about going to college since I was a kid just because I remember seeing that it was something that everybody pushed on you from like elementary school to middle school.” In describing her parents, Rebekah commented they were “unbelievably supportive in everything that I do” and “very tough...they don’t play any games when it comes to slacking.” Even though her parents did not attend college, she stated many times they were always available to help and sought out others to assist her in the college going process. She stated her mom wanted State University to feel like “home” and would do anything she could to make it happen. She relied on the college preparation programs she attended during high school and her best friend that attended a different college to prepare her for life on a college campus since her parents did not have insight into the college experience.

### **State University Institutional Profile**

State University is a land grant institution located in the mid-southern region of the United States and is classified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as a Research One Doctoral University with very high research activity. The institution enrolled over 29,000 students during the fall 2021 semester with 6,063 of them being first-year, degree seeking students. The student population includes individuals from all 50 states and over 120 countries.

Approximately 23% of the student population belongs to an underrepresented racial/ethnic group including Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino students. As one of the nation’s top research universities, the institution has an endowment of \$1.7 billion and is ranked 78<sup>th</sup> among national public schools by *U.S. News and World Report*. State University has a 19:1 faculty to student ratio and had an 84.7% one-year retention rate in 2021.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parents played when deciding to pursue a college degree?
2. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parents played in their transition from high school to college?
3. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their academic experiences during the first year of college?
4. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their social experiences during the first year of college?

### **Data Collection and Coding**

This qualitative study followed a case study method to answer the research questions. Purposeful sampling was employed by the researcher to select cases to show different perspectives of the problem or event being studied (Creswell, 2007). This sampling procedure also produces rich information for the study and “offers useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 40).

The case study required all participants to be second year students that participated in an academic enrichment mentoring program as a freshman. Participants must have completed 24 credit hours their first year and be a member of an underrepresented population on campus including African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic students. In addition, participants’ parent(s) must have not attended any institution of higher education. Data were collected through one-on-one in-depth interviews with seven

participants that all met the parameters of the study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. Each participant was asked 32 questions with interviews lasting between 29 minutes to 59 minutes. The interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This form of analysis is becoming more recognized as a “unique and valuable” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57) qualitative data analysis method and allowed the researcher to explore participants’ stories to discover themes and commonalities. The six steps of thematic analysis including becoming familiar with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing a report were all followed to analyze the interviews. I became familiar with the data by listening to the interviews and reviewing the transcriptions. I developed codes by highlighting key concepts from each interview which was then formed into specific themes. Support and encouragement emerged as the two main themes of the study.

As with all research, ensuring trustworthiness is an important component of a qualitative research study. I employed multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness throughout the data collection process. During each interview I took field notes to ensure key concepts were identified and in case there was a malfunction with the audio recording device. At the conclusion of each interview, I practiced reflective journaling to ensure past experiences did not interfere with the data collection process. All communications with participants, recordings, and transcription data were kept creating an audit trail for the study. Participants were also given the opportunity to participate in member checking to ensure their transcriptions were correct.

## Research Findings

### Research Question 1 – Decision to pursue a college degree

Two themes emerged from the participant interviews describing students' perceptions of their parents' role in deciding to attend college. Those themes included: serving as a representative of their entire family and making use of resources secured through parental connections (See Table 2). A discussion of the findings is presented in this section.

Table 2  
*Themes from Research Question 1*

Research Question 1:	What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parents played when deciding to pursue a college degree?
Theme 1:	Representative of the entire family
Theme 2:	Resources through parental connections

#### ***Theme 1: Representative of the entire family***

The significance of attending college as a first-generation student and the impact of the experience on the entire family was apparent throughout the interview process. Participants expressed positive and negative emotions associated with serving as representatives of their families and the guidance that parents provided or did not provide throughout the college decision process. From serving as role models for younger siblings to building communities of support, to parents ensuring they had the right skills to be successful on campus, ranges of different emotions were consistent with all participants.

Giving back to her community and her family was always at the forefront of everything she does, according to Kristina. It is always family first and acknowledging the impact she can have on her entire community. She stated:



They (parents) do play a really large role in my life and my decision to attend college. Everything that I have is because of them and I'm super grateful for them. They've always instilled in me to always give back to the community, which is why I get involved in so many things, like I always mention that. I always want to be giving back. Sometimes I give too much. Some would say I give too much of my time to help others even when I don't have time, I make time. I'm like okay, I can do this for you and then sacrifice what I need to do for someone else, just because I always want to be helping other people.

As a child of Mexican immigrants, Lisa wanted "to achieve the American Dream for them" and always knew going to college was a way of pursuing that dream. She stated, "in the beginning my parents weren't that supportive because in our community, the Latin community, college is not a priority, higher education is not something that occurs, sadly." This cultural attitude contributed to her having higher levels of self-determination and pride as she began the college going process. When discussing her status as a first-generation college student, she also stated, "It's a great honor for me to think that I'm going to be the first one in my family to achieve higher education, especially as a woman, that really means a lot to me."

Rebekah shared as a young child, she remembered both of her parents constantly saying she was going to go to college to earn a degree. It was something everyone in the family discussed and expected of her. She stated:

Well, I literally have thought about going to college since I was a kid. That was something that everybody (my parents) pushed on you from like elementary school to middle school. It was something that was like, if you don't go to college, you're not going to be successful, which I later learned once I got to high school that's not true, but it was also kind of the influences around me. I don't think I had a lot of people in my family that went to college.

Rebekah also remembered a specific conversation she had with her father about going to college and being a person of color in predominantly white spaces.

From my teen years...there [were] a lot of things I wasn't allowed to do because this is where they (parents) were very protective of me. It was very frustrating, but you know I told them that I had friends that came here and you know, lived the same exact life that I

did, but their parents didn't tell them anything. Like my parents would say, "You can't go to this party because they'll be drinking and you're 18. Don't you get anywhere near that because, you know, if the police come and find you there, you're going to jail, and maybe not Sally, but you will."

This stood out for her because she understood the important role her race could and would play in her future at the institution and why her parents focused so much on this issue. She continued by saying conversations like this one with her parents prior to coming to State University played a significant role in how she behaved on campus and how her identity as a woman of color impacted her educational career. Rebekah explained the support and encouragement her parents gave her throughout the college search process was very beneficial even though it might not have been specific, it did let her know "they had her back." She also stated her family provided constant advice and always wanted her to be "better off financially than us."

A factor discussed by all participants was the pride and determination that was felt by them and their parents as they decided to pursue higher education as a first-generation college student. Kristina knew she wanted to go to college from an early age, and with her parents' assistance, sought out programs in both middle and high school that gave her insight into college since no one in her family had previously attended. She stated:

It was like never going to be a question of are you going to school? It was more like you're going to school period and there's no other option. We (her parents) don't want you to be breaking your back, like working hard when you were raised in the United States, and you were born here and you have so many opportunities that other people aren't taking advantage of. You need to be here and do it. It was never a question of do you want to go, it's like okay, what are you going to study and what is your plan?

This led her to take more pride in the decisions she made. Knowing she had the support and encouragement of her parents is what made the transition easier. She also stated:

I think they're really proud of me and all the things that I've done. I know sometimes they might have had like their doubts, like at the beginning. Was I going to be able to do it? But I think with my drive and motivation, those are the biggest things that they've given to me. They always said to be a better version of yourself always. Don't just stay

the same. Don't be satisfied with what you have until you have what you want. They've always been like, if you can get it, get it.

Self-determination was salient for Lisa when deciding to go to college. She remembered telling her parents there was a teacher at her school that said she should focus on going to a vocational school because that would be much easier than college for her. This vividly stood out to her as a moment when she knew she had to achieve higher and prove to herself, her family, and everyone that she could go to college. "I really love to achieve goals and for some people that's not necessary, but ever since that teacher told me that, I just wanted to prove to them that I could do it" she stated. Pride was also evident when Lisa spoke about her family and said,

It's a great honor for me going to college and being the first one in my family to achieve higher education, especially as a woman; that really means a lot to me. You know every time I want to give up, I always think about my grandmother and how she had to drop from the second grade because she had to help her parents on a farm. I also think about my dad who came here alone with no money at age 17.

Lawrence realized that being a first-generation college student is what pushed him to excel and contributed to his determination to graduate from State University. While he expressed this was difficult, in the end it has paid off.

I think I would have had an easier route. I think I would have not developed the determination to succeed if I wouldn't have been a first-generation student. That's something that pushes me to do better than I would otherwise. I think it would have been a lot simpler, you know, figuring out things. But I think going through those struggles and figuring that out on my own made me a lot more mature than a lot of college freshman, a lot of college sophomores. So, I think that's something that helped me in the long run, but in the short term, it would have been a lot easier (to not be a first-generation student).

Brandy was raised by her two cousins she affectionally calls her "moms'." They have always challenged her to do well in school and encouraged her to attend college. Their goal was for her "to do better than us and go farther than us" and serve as a role model for others in the family. While there were only a few formal conversations about going to college, she always

knew it was expected. Brandy applied to many schools and chose State University because she wanted to be in a new environment and “get out of Texas.”

***Theme 2: Resources through parental connections***

As a first-generation college student, participants all agreed not having a parent familiar with aspects of college was difficult at times. With no parent having direct knowledge of college, participants relied on information from others including other relatives, teachers/counselors, and friends/acquaintances of their parents. These connections were valuable for multiple participants and assisted them in better understanding the college environment.

In addition to continual conversations about college growing up, Rebekah’s parents attended college fairs with her and took her on multiple campus visits. Rebekah also shared the support she received extended outside her family to include community and church members as well.

Someone outside of my parents that helped me prepare was my church. We have this Senior Sunday thing, and a lot of people give you cards and stuff saying, oh, good luck, you’re gonna do great and it’s basically just a celebration. From those people, you know, sometimes I don’t even talk to, but they still want to help me out and help me financially, and so I was able to get a lot of stuff for my dorm.

The community of support experienced by Rebekah was also discussed by Diana when she had questions her parents could not answer related to the college application process and types of financial aid. Diana shared while her parents did provide support and encouragement when she was thinking about college, she knew she would have to rely on others to provide direct insight because of their unfamiliarity with the entire process. She stated, “My parents used their friends and their friends’ children to help me with questions and we would just text them and they’d answer.” This was very similar to Guy as well. Utilizing friends of his parents and their children that were in college proved to be an easy way to get first-hand insight and practical

advice when it came to thinking about college. He recounted a specific conversation about classes he had with a friend of his parents, saying “They were like, you’re not going to get notes handed to you, you actually have to make the notes.” He said this stood out to him so much because he was used to getting notes from the teacher in high school, so this was going to be a big change for him in college.

Analysis of participant responses suggests, while the roles played by their parents when deciding to attend college varied, overall support and encouragement was provided to all of them. As first-generation college students, participants experienced a range of challenges associated with being the first in their families to attend college but were able to utilize connections outside of their parents to gain insight about college. Participants recognized, while their parents were not able to provide in depth information about what to expect when attending college, they were able to assist participants in navigating this new territory by providing needed emotional, financial, and affirmational support.

### **Research Question 2 – High school to college transition**

Three themes emerged from the participant interviews describing students’ perception of their parents’ role in helping the student make the transition from high school to college. Those themes included: culture shock, emotional support from their family throughout the transition, and paying for college to lessen the financial burden on their family (see Table 3). A discussion of the findings is presented in this section.

Table 3  
*Themes from Research Question 2*

Research Question 2:	What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parents played in their transition from high school to college?
Theme 1:	Culture shock
Theme 2:	Emotional support from family
Theme 3:	Paying for college

***Theme 1: Culture shock***

The concept of “family” played an important role in the collegiate transition experience of all participants interviewed. Participants navigated ever-changing relationships while also balancing their own needs as they transitioned to being a college student. While the family dynamics of all participants varied, many common experiences were shared by all throughout the transition process. These range from parents showing “helicopter parenting” tendencies to parents helping with scholarship applications, all the way to parents not being involved in the college transition at all. The range of involvement varied, but all participants commented on how they would not have been able to get to this point without the support of their parents.

Participants described their transition to State University as being stressful, exciting, challenging, humbling, and confusing. These feelings were centered around their experience in a new and unfamiliar campus environment as a first-generation college student. As a member of an underrepresented student population on a predominately white campus, participants expressed how their identities and culture also played a role in their academic and social transitions to campus.

Identity not only included race and ethnicity, but also feelings of pride, resilience, self-determination, and a better understanding of self. Multiple participants also discussed issues related to “culture shock” and loneliness on campus that all played important roles in their identity as an underrepresented first-generation college student. The issues of “culture shock” and being in a new unfamiliar environment were two of the main topics discussed by participants with their parents during their transition to State University. It was again noted their parents’ unfamiliarity with this new experience hindered them playing a more active role in the transition. While all said their parents offered emotional support and encouragement, the extent of that support was limited.

Rebekah mentioned the initial “culture shock” she first experienced upon arrival to campus and how she had conversations with her parents about the experience. This was something she and her parents discussed prior to her transition to campus. Coming from a predominantly white high school, she was excited to meet and interact with other students that looked like her but that was not initially the case. “I wanted a good community of people and wanted to be in a safe place...and I don’t mean like safe place as in someone rob you, but safe place just to be myself.” Rebekah also stated:

I came from [a small town] and it’s all right, a good high school that is predominately white and you know my dad taught me how to navigate white spaces and kind of just be myself without it being like, oh she’s a black girl. It’s more like, this is Rebekah and she could do all of these things. Of course being black is a huge part of who I am and I never hid that or anything, but it was just a matter of showing that I’m beyond that, because that’s important if you want to be in a space where there are more white people. So then, you know, I get here, and I like go into culture shock because I was just like, there’s no people, no people of color.

The idea of “culture shock” was also experienced by Brandy when she first arrived on campus. Having been abandoned by both of her parents at an early age, she was raised by her two cousins. They were very hesitant on her attending college out of state and not being close to

family due to finances and safety concerns. “They were mainly concerned about me making friends and being in predominately white places,” she stated. This was not the environment that she was used to growing up in the Houston, Texas area where she was around predominately Hispanic populations. “This place is just really different, and you got to be a bit more careful” she stated when discussing the initial culture shock of being at State University. She remembers moving to campus and stated, “I think they stayed for like maybe a few days or maybe just the whole weekend just to make sure, you know, take me to the store and stuff like that.” Concerns for their daughter’s overall wellbeing and safety carried on throughout the first semester and became an issue when it came to communication. Brandy stated she relied on the emotional support her family provided to overcome transition issues. While they were not near her, she knew they would support her as much as they could from afar.

***Theme 2: Emotional support from family***

According to Lawrence, during the transition period he had to have many conversations with his parents about his feelings of loneliness in a new environment, “...that’s the struggle for first generation students... it’s the not knowing what to expect and being able to gather that information and knowing what exactly to do with it and who to get help from.” He recounted many conversations with his parents when they were talking about college and saying, “we never went through this, so it’s kind of figure it out on your own.” In addition, he also stated:

Whenever I first went up there, like my first semester, I was homesick. I’m a farm boy, you know. I grew up on a farm. We work hard and are always at home. We always have family dinner. So, it was rough. I’ve never lived away from home for an extended period of time. So, my first semester, I definitely talked to them, you know, every day as much as possible.

The loneliness experienced by Lawrence at the beginning of his transition was also expressed by Kristina when discussing her first semester on campus. “The first few weeks were



hard. I was driving back home crying, like every day because I'd be so tired and thinking about being on my own. It would be a falling asleep at the wheel type of thing," she stated. After getting used to things on campus, she went on to say "right now to me, the drive is very relaxing, very good, like it's not a big deal anymore. I'm like wow, I was so tired and scared during that time, but it was just me getting used to this new life." She noted having conversations about these feelings with her parents was something she did daily, but they never truly understood what she was experiencing. They continually told her things would be okay and get better, which they did. According to Kristina, the emotional support they offered during these stressful times assisted her in effectively managing her experience in a positive manner.

Communication or lack thereof was a major problem that had to be addressed by Brandy and her parents when she transitioned to State University. After a few days of not hearing from her they threatened to "drive to campus to see her because she was not replying to them." She shared that one the main reasons for their concern centered on the unexplained death of a female cousin in 2015. Her body was found abandoned and there were still unknown details surrounding the incident. Because of this life changing experience, her parents were even more concerned with her safety at State University and made her utilize a phone app that would track her location and notify them when she was and was not at her residence hall. "So that was kind of the reasons why they have the app on my phone and just to make sure I'm safe. We never really discussed rules and things like that, so staying out late and things like that actually created a lot of conflict with them," she stated. Emotional support from her family translated to safety and concern of her well-being in a new environment.

### *Theme 3: Paying for college*

Struggles with money and finances was a topic discussed by all participants in the study. Most shared they knew college was going to be an expensive venture for their families so they did everything they could to assist with financing their higher education. Several of the student participants expressed concerns particularly about the potential financial burden for their families. These students helped to gather information about scholarships, loans, and ways to finance their higher education experiences.

When Lisa started to have conversations with her parents about attending State University, she had to reassure them multiple times she would do everything she could to make sure it was not a financial burden on them. “Most of the conversations were about money and how we were going to pay for college and saving up money for college,” she stated. Lisa also reflected on the fact her father worked two jobs to make sure that all costs were covered each semester. His willingness to work two jobs to assist with financing her education taught her the value of hard work. She stated, “I really value that hard work, I think that’s one of the reasons why I always give all my full effort in whatever I do.”

Brandy knew from the beginning that paying for college was going to be one of the major roadblocks in the college going process. She knew she wanted to attend college outside of her home state which would add extra fees to the overall bill. She remembers attending summer orientation and her and her mom’s going to the financial aid office and sitting with a counselor and saying, “okay, this is like where I’m at, what can I do to actually be able to come to school this upcoming semester.” She remembers this experience vividly because the financial aid counselor was difficult to work with at first. After her mom stepped in and asked more pointed questions, the counselor did become more understanding. Situations like this stuck out to her

because it's the "unknown" she and her family experienced as a first-generation family figuring out how to pay for the college. "I just remember my mom asking if there's anything that she can do, because I didn't know about all of the scholarships, outside of my high school. I felt like I got the short end of the stick," she stated. The financial hardship college would put on her family back home was also something that Brandy struggled with at first. When discussing this topic, she stated:

[My cousins] weren't fully confident in me being able to financially succeed. That was something they were worried about because I still have my two sisters at home. One of [my cousins] is a teacher, but she's like an aide so she doesn't have teacher benefits and the other [cousin] stays home with my cousins and basically does lots of side work in a sense.

The stress of family hardships back home was very important to her and was one of the reasons why she immediately found a campus job so that she could attend State University.

Diana, Rebekah, and Guy all discussed how applying for as many scholarships as possible was key to them being able to finance their college experiences. Diana and Guy utilized teachers at their high schools and family friends to pursue outside scholarship opportunities. Diana's parents tapped into their social network as well. She stated, "They (her parents) were the ones that actually found out about scholarships through their friends. They would ask their friends at work what their children were doing to pay for everything, and they would just bounce back and forth with ideas." Guy relied on one of high school coaches to help him out whenever he had questions that his parents could not answer about going to State University, especially when it came to scholarships. As an international student, he was not able to apply for aid through the FAFSA, like most students, so he and his parents relied heavily on insight from the International Student Office staff to assist. Rebekah also stated she relied on family friends and church members to find out details about scholarships and ways she could finance her college

experience. She stated, “during my junior year every single day I would come around and [my parents] would ask did I fill out this scholarship application; did I complete that scholarship application.” While in high school it was important for her to save as much money as possible so she would have money to cover the things scholarships would not cover. She remembers her dad saying “yes, you have all of these scholarships, yes you’re doing this, but you gotta understand that you’re not gonna be able to go out and have fun on the weekends and do all that if you don’t have money set aside and we don’t have a growing money tree.”

Being able to successfully finance his higher education experience was something Lawrence and his family had been anticipating for many years. This was going to be an important factor to consider as he transitioned to the institution. “I mean starting from a baby, [my parents] helped me save for college and they always talked about, we want you to be the first one in the family to do this,” Lawrence stated. One of the primary reasons he and his family chose State University was because of the financial aid package he received. Being able to lessen the burden on his family was important to Lawrence, so he did everything he could to make sure that he would qualify for as many scholarships as possible. “I’m having the opportunity to go to an institution, a flagship land grant institution for almost free,” he said.

Similar to Lawrence, Kristina and her family decided that attending State University was going to be her best option due to receiving aid and being close to home. She stated:

My biggest thing, like overall, was how I was going to pay for it. That was going to be wherever I got the most money is where I would go, but in the end, I knew I was going to have to stay close to my family. So with State University I tried to get the most scholarships that I could. That was always like the biggest factor when it came to going to school because in my brain I was like, if I can’t pay for school, then I’m not going. They (parents) didn’t help me fill out anything, I filled out everything by myself, it’s like that’s just how you grow up, like how I grew up. I would fill out everything for them (parents). Like when we would go to the doctor, I was seven years old, I was filling out those forms for them.

Kristina’s family and their reliance on Kristina to assist with tasks like filling out forms they didn’t understand since they were written in English and they had limited understanding, was always on her mind deciding where to go to college. Financial and every day hardships solidified staying close to home was the only option.

As discussed by all participants, the role of their parents during the transition to State University varied greatly. While the themes of continued support and encouragement remained prevalent throughout this time, subthemes including identity as an underrepresented first-generation student, everchanging family relationships, and financial well-being were also present as contributing factors to this time.

### **Research Question 3 – Role in academic decisions**

Two themes emerged from the participant interviews describing students’ perceptions of their parents’ role in making academic decisions during their first year on campus. Those themes included: limited discussions on specifics associated with academics and building relationships on campus (see Table 4). A discussion of the findings is presented in this section.

Table 4  
*Themes from Research Question 3*

Research Question 3:	What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their academic experiences during the first year of college?
Theme 1:	Limited discussions about academics
Theme 2:	Building relationships on campus

#### ***Theme 1: Limited discussions about academics***

Participants all agreed their parents’ role in their academic careers at State University was very limited. All shared their parents inquired about studying, exams, and grades, but their

parents also did not know specifics associated with college level academic planning and processes. Participants all agreed overall support and encouragement was the role that their parents played when it came to their academic endeavors on campus during their first year. While their parents did not offer many insights into specific academic endeavors, all participants mentioned parents promoted the use of campus resources to assist with any academic related issues and the importance of finding people that could help them when needed.

Constant encouragement from his family was experienced by Lawrence, especially when he went home for holiday and school breaks. When discussing support and encouragement around academics, he stated:

As for as my grades, nobody ever questioned my grades. I think it was more of when I talked about things, like if I had a big project coming up or upcoming test. I remember practicing giving a PowerPoint in the living room and they would be helping me. They asked questions or whatever. But they helped me a lot. We talk a lot about academic stuff, just not necessarily grades.

While they did not ask about specifics unless he discussed it, they did provide the emotional support that he needed during stressful times. Lawrence's parents did offer him their words of wisdom, by stating:

Study...that goes back to the grit and determination, you know. Buckle down and do what you have to do. I mean, I couldn't obviously ask my mom about chemistry, but I mean, they would tell me to go lock yourself in the room, go in the office, go do whatever you have to do and just buckle down and study for an hour.

When Rebekah's parents offered her encouragement, it was some of the same advice they had been telling her since a young girl. She stated, "I think they pretty much just reiterated the advice they've been giving me forever, which is to just stay on your stuff. You gotta do, what you gotta do. It may be painful, and it may be difficult, but you gotta do it."

Rebekah also shared having financial discussions with her dad while in high school also played a role in her choosing to major in business and marketing. His advice to her was to do something where you can be “your own boss.” She also explained:

I remember starting off I wanted to be a graphic design major and so I looked into that, and I was like, okay that’s cool. I loved it and maybe I could do it for a magazine or do it for somebody around here, but I remember my dad was like, okay, you can do graphic design, but you should actually do business because you could have your own business. So that was a conversation I had where he actually encouraged me...why don’t you do a major in business and a minor in graphics.

This level of insight from her father stemmed from him having his own DJ service and knowing that having your own business was something that could have larger payoffs in the future. His advice to her was always to go to college so that you can be “better off financially than us.”

Family and the role she played in her family contributed to Kristina not only deciding to attend State University, but this role also contributed to her deciding which academic major to pursue in college. According to Kristina:

So, for my major, I didn’t feel like I really knew what I was going to do until my junior year because my grandma had a stroke. So, during that time period I spent a lot of time in the hospital. Since I speak Spanish, I was talking between the doctors, like this is what my grandma needed to do and everything. So, I spent a lot of time there and during one of those visits we met a speech pathologist and I just got to know her. There was a student from State University who was doing her observations there, so I got to talking to her about the program and that was the reason that I ended up choosing communications disorders because I went through a situation with my grandma. So, I found it (academic major) through that and once I told my parents, they were like, “wow!” I mean it was a bad situation, but at least you know you’re getting something good out of it...you’re finding your passion. I was motivated and I had a motivator, like what happened to my grandma.

Lawrence’s family also played a significant role in his decision on an academic major.

While they didn’t have insight about specific classes, they understood what work could possibly be like for him once he graduated. He stated:

My parents, they own a small cattle farm. So, whenever I said I’m an agricultural leadership and business double major, I’m kind of following along and do what they do.

It was always Ag (Agriculture) for me. In high school I was President of FFA. So, I was always big into Ag and don't think it was a surprise to anyone when I chose to major in agriculture in some capacity.

When Diana's parents questioned her about her major, she stated, "I just told them that I enjoy traveling and that business would be a field of work that has a lot of job opportunities and good security, so they were like, okay...as long you do something that could get you some money in the future."

When discussing communication and struggles with her moms related to academics, Brandy shared she had difficulties talking with her moms about a specific class that she was failing. She indicated:

So, with that it was kind of hard to talk to them about class because I didn't want to tell them that, "oh I'm struggling," because they would be on my ass about it. "Oh, you gotta do good!" So, I had to learn to tell them that, I'm going to keep that to myself and if I need your help, I'll let you know. So, I had to learn to better communicate with them. At one point they got really anal about it and said oh, we're gonna get into your Connect and see what your grades are. You have to show us your grades.

### ***Theme 2: Building relationships on campus***

Due to their unfamiliarity with how academics worked at State University, Guy's parents kept their advice simple. He remembered that when discussing anything related to academics their advice has always been to "talk to the professor, then talk to your friends and then do whatever works for you but don't try to overwork yourself." The main concern his parents continually discussed with him outside of class his freshman year was his need to meet new people and build more social networks. According to Guy, relying on professors and others that were familiar with the academic environment, unlike his parents, would provide him with the knowledge that he needed to excel in the classroom. He acknowledged the support of his parents was there, but they knew they were not able to provide insight about his actual classes.



Diana and Lisa both participated in Upward Bound (UB), a federally funded college preparation and access program for first-generation and low-income students. Diana credits the Upward Bound program for walking her and her parents through the entire college search and application process and providing her family with insight into what academic life would be like in college. “I had a mentor and an advisor through them (Upward Bound), so any questions I had about scholarships, they would answer. Any questions about admissions, they would answer. Anything about federal aid, they would answer,” she stated. This program was able to provide Diana with valuable information that assisted her and her parents with understanding details about the overall college experience. In addition to the Upward Bound program, Diana was also part of an academic bridge program for first-generation students through the Honors College at State University. She was able to take courses the summer prior to her first fall semester. This program provided her with an upper-class mentor that was able to give her much needed insight about State University. “I think that the exposure I had during the summer after I graduated really helped me kind of understand everything. So, if I had questions, I would mostly just go to the bridge program,” she stated.

Lisa also credits the Upward Bound program for making the transition process easier, especially for her parents. She shared they also attended workshops planned by UB staff specifically for parents. “For my parents, just going to UB meetings and taking me to my UB meetings helped them understand that I wanted to go to college and how the college process works,” she stated. In addition to the workshops she attended in high school, taking courses the summer prior to her first fall semester also provided her an opportunity to better understand her new college environment and gave her the “first little taste of what my four years will look like.” Lisa felt all the information covered by the Upward Bound program throughout high school

including where to find scholarships, how to fill out applications, and how to choose a major, significantly contributed to her family's ability to navigate the college environment. In addition to the workshops, she and her family also toured multiple college campuses. By participating in this program, she felt it helped ease some of the confusion and frustrations both her and her family experienced.

During both her junior and senior years in high school, Rebekah participated in a pre-college program coordinated by the College of Business at State University. This program served first-generation, low-income students interested in business programs. She was able to work with other students and create a business plan that was presented to a non-profit organization. The summer prior to starting classes in the fall at State University, she participated in the Business Leadership Academy (BLA) also coordinated by the College of Business at State University. This program served incoming underrepresented business majors and gave them the opportunity to network with faculty in the College of Business while developing leadership skills that would assist them in being successful on campus. She stated these programs were "great ways to get acquainted with the university." The connections she made during these programs were very beneficial to her and made her feel more at ease when she started classes her first semester. She stated,

My two closest friends at State University came from BLA. I met them, we hang out every weekend or sometimes during the week if we have time. I love them because we are all very, very focused on school and so that's something that has definitely without a doubt, helped the environment here.

She also shared when she attended these programs, her parents become more and more comfortable with the campus, and this helped ease some of their concerns about attending State University as a person of color. The program also provided her parents with insight about what types of classes she would be taking and what was required of her to be academically successful.

She explained the insight gained from the program gave her parents the ability to better understand academics at State University which helped them assist her when she ran into academic related issues.

The connections made with pre-college program staff and other student attendees was also expressed as very significant by both Kristina and Lawrence. Lawrence took classes at a local community college and made a connection with a staff member that assisted him greatly. “I had a really good person in the Office of Scholarships and her title was Career Coach. She took her time and she really helped me with financial aid and a lot of scholarship applications,” he stated. The coach was able to assist Lawrence and his parents with navigating the scholarship process for multiple institutions, just not the community college. He also stated:

I really, really made it a point to build as many connections as possible during campus visits and during interview days. So that was my biggest thing... you know, trying to see what I can find out about people and how I can build a connection with them. And I think my mom is also a master networker. She’s always meeting new people, so that’s something that I probably kind of developed from her.

Lawrence knew building relationships with campus and program staff members would better assist him and his parents with understanding college academic life. He shared he believed his mom pushed him to build these important relationships because she knew they could assist him significantly in the future and provide him with information that they (parents) could not since they never attended college themselves.

Kristina also utilized program staff members as a sounding board whenever she hit roadblocks. These college professionals were able to work with her and her family to navigate the process in a way that was easy for them to understand. A staff member was also able to assist with translations for her family since English was not their first language. Kristina also

mentioned, “she (program advisor) understood everything with my family...like my family wasn’t going to let me go anywhere else.”

While study participants noted that their parents were unfamiliar with the overall academic experience of college, they did want to ensure their students had the proper skillset to be successful on campus. When discussing skills her parents wanted her to have, Diana stated:

I would say financial literacy was something they taught me. How to take care of my money, how to save, where to shop, how to make the most of my money. Other skills, studying, making time and time management was also a big thing they did. They put me on a schedule, in a sense. And [they also emphasized] critical thinking and stuff like that. They would always tell me to try my best, to think for myself, so that helped me.

Making sure she had skills that would help her navigate campus was also an important tool that Kristina’s parents wanted her to have. She indicated, “I think they really wanted me to go to people that you know, can help you. Ask questions if you have a question. Don’t be shy or nervous. Just go because you never know by asking a question what you can find out.”

Participating in pre-college academic programs as a first-generation college student was experienced by multiple participants. Having this experience was beneficial while preparing and adjusting to life on a college campus. While the programs varied, participants believed that the pre-college academic programs were significant contributors to their success and assisted their parents in gaining a better understanding about college academic requirements. Five of the seven participants participated in a pre-college academic program while in high school. The programs ranged from federally funded educational programs to outreach initiatives at a local community college. According to one participant, these programs provided her with a “leg up” in navigating the higher education landscape.

Academic success and being able to perform at the college level were factors that all participants agreed were important to their parents. While not necessarily knowing specifics

about what was needed to ensure success in college, parents were able to provide support and encouragement for their students. Many participants discussed, because of their involvement in pre-college academic programs in high school, they were better prepared as first-generation college students and program staff contributed to their understanding of academic related requirements. Parental involvement in the pre-college academic programs also contributed to study participants and their parents comfort levels with college level work.

#### **Research Question 4 – Role in social experiences**

Four themes emerged from the participant interviews describing students' perceptions of their parents' involvement in their social experiences during their first year of college. Those themes included: general conversations about college social life, parents serving as cheerleaders and champions, participants serving as role models for younger family members, and defining appropriate boundaries with changing parental relationships (see Table 5). A discussion of the findings is presented in this section.

Table 5  
*Themes from Research Question 4*

Research Question 4:	What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their social experiences during the first year of college?
Theme 1:	General conversations about college social life
Theme 2:	Champions and cheerleaders
Theme 3:	Role model for younger family members
Theme 4:	Defining appropriate boundaries

***Theme 1: General conversations about college social life***

As first-generation college students, participants shared they often struggled with social life and how to best share these experiences with their parents. As with other areas of their collegiate experiences, their parents provided limited input, but did provide support and encouragement as needed. When discussing their college social experiences, participants also discussed how experiences on campus sometimes collided with responsibilities back home. Having to manage changing relationships with their parents was shared as an area of stress and anxiety for several participants. In addition, serving as role models for younger members of their families and their communities was an important factor that participants addressed when discussing the balance between college life and life back home.

The positive relationship and open communication lines he had with his parents in high school surrounding his social life and aspects of involvement continued in college for Lawrence. He stated:

So, they were always interested in what activities I was doing as far as my social life. I wouldn't really tell them who I was dating or whatever. I felt like that was more of a private thing, so I really didn't talk about a lot of that aspect of my social life. Now, my activities in college, stuff I was doing on campus, they always asked me about what was going on in student government. And that wasn't too difficult to explain to them. Like what kinds of projects I was working on. What's like the overarching goal of student government. I don't think that was difficult to explain to them. I could see where it could be difficult for some people, but they kind of took it with whatever I said. They kind of accepted that for what it is.

While Guy's parents were unfamiliar with the American higher education system, they still provided him support and encouragement throughout his first year at State University. He said "growing up it was just expected that I would go to college. They expect me to do well and I wanted to make them proud. I wanted to lessen the burden on them." As a commuter student, he originally thought that his parents would insert themselves in all parts of his college experience,

but it has not been that way. “They will ask how things are going, but that’s about it” he stated. He was surprised they were not strict with rules and stated, “I was expecting them to be even harder...but they are like, you do your own thing, you’re a grown man now.”

***Theme 2: Champions and cheerleaders***

While some students might consider going home every weekend a bit much, Diana enjoyed getting to see her parents at the end of each week and sharing her freshman year experiences with them. She believed their bonds have strengthened since she started attending State University. She also highlighted the emotional support her parents have provided has been welcoming and valued. In terms of expectations and conversations about college life, she stated:

They just expected me to maintain my grades, A’s and B’s preferably. They wanted me to be asleep by a certain time like 10:00 or 11:00. If I had homework, they would expect me to be back at my dorm at a reasonable time so that I didn’t have to stay up late. They also expected me to still maintain my schedule I had at home so being up early in the morning and like being productive. [They wanted me to] really focus on my academics and any free time should be associated with bettering myself for academics.

She further indicated academic and social conversations were kept general and said, “they were never like, take this class, take that class.” Their concerns mostly centered on her being successful and not allowing anything outside of the classroom to distract her from her studies.

When summarizing the role her parents have played in her college experience thus far and the relationship that they have, Diana compared them to “back up dancers...They were there whenever I needed them and they would support me, no matter what.” This defined role was also mentioned by Rebekah when she described her parents as her “champions and cheerleaders...They’ve been here for me every step of the way. I don’t hesitate to call if I need anything, and they do the same.” The “back up dancer” and “champions and cheerleader” role was also felt by Lawrence, especially during the college search process. He stated, “My parents definitely read over my essays for scholarship applications. Their biggest help to me was

probably financially supporting me with anything...If I wanted to go on a tour somewhere (college campus), they would make it happen.” Lawrence’s parents also offered him advice and insight about “life” that could be used in any situation, just not college. He stated, “I mean, from the start it was always, we never went through this (college), so it’s kind of figure it out on your own, but always chase your dreams and do whatever you want.” According to Lawrence they were also there during the stressful time and provided lots of encouragement.

I would come home on the weekend, and they would send me home cooked food and packages and stuff like that, so it was always like encouraging. Getting text messages really helped me a lot. My grandparents, both of my parents, they would always text me like hope you’re having a good day? How were your classes today; I know you had a test; how did you do, did you pass? I think all of that was that was the biggest help for me during that first [semester].

### ***Theme 3: Role model for younger family members***

Serving as a role model for her siblings and other Hispanic youth in her community was discussed by Lisa as something that was salient to her and her parents. She discussed volunteering with after school programs and the significance of young Hispanic girls seeing her go to college. She stated:

My freshman year, I was a mentor for Dream Big which is a mentoring program for girls run by female students. We would go, well, before Covid, we used to go to the middle school in [our town] and we would do activities that would help young middle school girls, be empowered to expose themselves to higher education. And it was really cool to work with middle school students, especially since the majority of them were minorities, so I really had the connection with them.

Lisa also expressed the great pride she has as a representative for her family. During the interview when answering multiple questions, she said “I do this for my family.” When asked to explain, she stated, “My family is everything, I want to make them proud and never disappoint them. This will demonstrate to them that I am capable of doing whatever you want to achieve in life!” When discussing the pressure she often feels as a representative of her entire family and



wanting to give up, she stated, “You know, just every time I want to give up, you know, I always think about how my grandmother had to drop from the second grade because she had to help her parents on the farm. I also think about my dad who came here alone with no money at age 17.”

Kristina’s parents knew her involvement in extracurricular activities was very important to her and was one of the things that kept her on target with academics. She also shared due to her involvement on campus her sense of independence grew which was a priority identified by her parents that she needed to work on. She stated, “They were always just so encouraging and were worried since I was a commuter student, but they said it was all doable.” The constant encouragement has been present her entire life. She continued by saying, “I think my drive and motivation, those are the biggest thing that they’ve given to me. Making me a better version of myself!”

***Theme 4: Defining appropriate boundaries***

Brandy admitted at the beginning of her time on campus, she purposefully did not include her parents in her social life because she wanted to establish more defined boundaries with them.

She indicated,

I don’t. I rarely share a lot with [my cousins] so they didn’t really know any of my close friends. We didn’t talk a lot about things I did because we didn’t want any drama. It actually did create some conflicts because my moms didn’t like that I went out with certain people.

This purposeful lack of communication came to an end when she realized after a while that she needed to do a better job communicating with them. Brandy shared setting boundaries was an issue they had to resolve but credits her parents for sticking to it and finding a better way to communicate with her. She stated, “I learned the hard way that lying creates problems, so now I’m like, okay I’m going to be blunt and honest, if they don’t like it...it’s their problem.”

Communication problems associated with college social life was only discussed by two participants. Both admitted not having defined expectations with their parents led to the communication issues. Other participants noted their parents were always inquiring and offering support when it came to their social experiences on campus. As with other parts of their college lives, participants admitted their parents provided constant support and encouragement throughout their time and acted as “champions and cheerleaders” as one of the participants described their parents’ role.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the qualitative study summarizing the purpose, significance, and design of the study along with data collection and analysis. Seven first-generation undergraduate students that participated in an academic enrichment program during their first year at State University served as participants for the study. I provided descriptions of all seven participants including a demographic table that described the gender, race/ethnicity, undergraduate major, and academic enrichment program of each participant.

Four research questions served as the framework for the presentation and analysis of the data: (a) role parents played when deciding to pursue a college degree; (b) role parents played in the transition from high school to college; (c) role parental involvement had on academic experiences during the first year of college; and (d) role parental involvement had on social experiences during the first year of college. Four groups of common themes emerged from in-depth interviews with the participants.

The themes related to the role parents played when deciding to pursue a college degree were participants serving as representatives of their entire family and participants relying on resources through parental connections to better understand the college environment. Participants

expressed positive and negative emotions associated with serving as representatives for their entire families, but all acknowledged the pride associated with being the first in their family to attend college. In addition, participants relied heavily on resources from parental connections to better understand the college environment since their parents were unfamiliar with this new experience. Participants expressed these resources included family friends, high school teachers/counselors, and community members.

The themes related to the role parents played during the transition from high school to college included participants experiencing culture shock, relying on emotional support from family, and navigating how they were going to pay for college. All participants agreed their parents were supportive during the transition especially when getting used to a new educational environment that no one in their nuclear family had experienced. Worries about finances and how they were going to balance college life and family life was also highlighted as significant factors related to the college transition.

Limited discussions about specifics related to academics and developing supportive relationships on campus were themes associated with parental involvement and the academic experiences of participants during their first year of college. All participants agreed that their parents were not involved in many aspects of their academic careers but did provide encouragement during stressful times and emotional support when needed. Due to their unfamiliarity with the college environment, participants shared their parents encouraged them to take advantage of campus resources including faculty and staff that could assist them in being successful on campus.

The central themes associated with parental involvement and the social experiences of participants included developing appropriate boundaries, serving as role models for younger

family members, keeping social life conversations general, and parents serving as champions and cheerleaders for their students. All participants mentioned the struggle with sharing certain aspects of their social lives with their parents. While parents continued to provide support and encouragement, it was often difficult to explain campus social experiences. Navigating changing relationships with their parents and family members was noted as a challenge for several participants. In addition, participants highlighted the important role they held as positive role models for younger family members.

## Chapter V

### Discussion and Conclusions

The relationship between parent and child is formed at the beginning of life and continues throughout. John Bowlby (1969, 1988) is credited with developing what is known as modern-day attachment theory which focuses on the relationships and bonds associated with and between individuals, especially parental figures (Bowlby, 1988). These relationships focus on exploration, discovery, skill acquisition, and the overall development of self-confidence (Ainsworth, 1982). Parental involvement past childhood and early adolescence can be healthy and are positively related to further identity development and exploration in college-aged students (Ainsworth, 1982; Samuolis et al., 2001). Appropriate levels of involvement have shown to have a positive impact on students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being (Harper et al., 2012; Self, 2013; Wartman & Savage, 2008).

First-generation college students face challenges when pursuing a college degree including risks associated with persistence and degree attainment as they tend to be less academically prepared (Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996) and lack the cultural capital from parents who have not attended college (Cataldi et al., 2017). In addition, today's first-generation undergraduate students are more racially diverse (Pascarella et al., 2004) and members of lower socioeconomic status (Cataldi et al., 2017; Choy, 2001). Students' whose parents have attended an institution of postsecondary education are better positioned to help advise their student through the myriad of issues that arise in the student's decision to attend college, transition from high school to college, and the student's freshman year academic and social life (Engle, 2007; Paulbusa & Gauvin, 2017). Parental engagement and support provide a positive impact on the academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being of college

students (Harper et al., 2012). This chapter presents an overview of the study, discussion and conclusions, and limitations. Recommendations for future research and recommendations for improved practice are also provided.

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine underrepresented first-generation undergraduate students' perceptions of their parent(s) role when deciding to attend college, transition from high school to college, and first-year academic and social experiences. The study's participants all were involved in an academic enrichment program at the selected university. The stories of these first-generation undergraduate students may inform higher education professionals on how to better support first-generation students and provide resources for their families during the college transition process and beyond.

The study examined the following research questions:

1. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parent(s) played when deciding to pursue a college degree?
2. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parent(s) played in their transition from high school to college?
3. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their academic experiences during the first year of college?
4. What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their social experiences during the first year of college?

This qualitative study used a case study research design to guide the examination of first-generation college students' experiences. This design was used because it focuses on the individual stories and experiences of participants to generate data that can be used to describe the

experiences of one person or a group of individuals with similar characteristics (Creswell, 2015). Utilizing interviews to gather stories, interpreting the information collected from the interviews and then reporting on the meanings of an individual's experiences make this type of design a critical part of qualitative research. I conducted online one-on-one interviews with 7 individuals who met the study requirements after completing their first year at State University. Participant demographics including race/ethnicity, gender, academic major, and which academic enrichment program they participated in were included in the previous chapter.

The data from the interviews were organized and then transcribed, as recommended by Creswell (2015). I utilized thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to analyze all data from participant interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) is defined as

“a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” (p. 57).

After conducting the thematic analysis, multiple themes emerged from the study. The following section highlights the four research questions that provided the framework for the study and a summary of the findings related to each subtheme that emerged during data analysis.

**Research Question 1 - What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parent(s) played when deciding to pursue a college degree?**

Research Question 1 generated two principal findings. First, the student participants believed as the first in the family to attend college they served as a representative of their family and community. As first-generation undergraduate students, all participants acknowledged the significance of their decision to attend college and the positive impact this could have on their

families. Pressures surrounding this impact made participants feel as though they were representing the dreams and desires of their entire family. Many discussed how conversations with their parents about college started at an early age and always centered around giving back to the family and to the community while also being able to find employment after college. Participants described feelings of pride and determination being experienced by them and their parents constantly.

Another finding that emerged from the data was while their parents were not able to provide direct insight into what to expect in college or how to navigate application/scholarship processes, participants all discussed how their parents provided emotional, financial, and affirmational support throughout the process. Their parents were also able to guide them to others who could assist them with questions and concerns including other family members, friends, coworkers, and community members more familiar with college or had attended college themselves. Several participants also participated in pre-college programs that provided them and their parents with invaluable guidance and insight as they were deciding to attend college.

**Research Question 2 – What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that their parents played in their transition from high school to college?**

In addressing the study's second research question, three themes emerged as important factors that contributed to the high school to college transition: culture shock, emotional support from family, and being able to pay for college. The transition from high school to college was stressful, exciting, humbling, and confusing for all participants. Being in a new environment and not having direct knowledge about what to expect created stressful situations for participants but all agreed their parents provided them with needed assistance throughout that time. Support and



constant encouragement from their parents allowed participants to feel more comfortable in their decision to attend State University.

Several participants discussed how not seeing many people in their classes and on campus that looked like them was surprising and challenging at times. These experiences contributed to their initial “culture shock” on campus. Conversations with their parents about safety, security, and fitting in were shared as significant for students during this time. Even with experiences associated with “culture shock,” all participants agreed they were excited to be on campus and looked forward to new experiences at the institution.

Being able to pay for college was a major topic also discussed with their parents during this time. Several participants knew from the beginning one of the major challenges they would have to face at State University was being able to pay for college without creating financial hardships on their families. Applying for multiple scholarships and working on campus was discussed as a way participants tried to lessen the financial burden on their parents.

**Research Question 3 – What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their academic experiences during the first year of college?**

The study’s third research question was addressed through the inquiry’s findings, which revealed two main tenets: parents having limited discussions about academics and parents encouraging participants to build supportive relationships on campus. All participants noted discussions with their parents about their academic experiences were limited. Discussions about academic majors and the types of employment they could acquire after graduation dominated these discussions. Parents did inquire about tests and classes, but nothing was specific, and

inquiries always centered around ensuring their child was maintaining the needed grades for financial aid and scholarships.

When participants encountered hardships with assignments in their courses, parents encouraged them to seek assistance from faculty and staff who could help them on campus. Several participants mentioned that their parents' unfamiliarity with their academic experiences was challenging because when sharing challenges and successes they knew their parents did not truly understand what they were discussing. Support and encouragement were maintained even with unfamiliar academic topics. All study participants relied heavily on campus support from staff associated with their academic enrichment programs, especially when it came to understanding academics at the institution. As a first-generation college student, participants all credited these programs as significant factors that impacted with experiences during their first year of college.

**Research Question 4 – What role did first-year, first-generation undergraduate students report that parental involvement had on their social experiences during their first year of college?**

In addressing the study's fourth research question, four themes emerged: (a) parents served as champions and cheerleaders for their students, (b) participant students served as role models for younger family members, (c) students only had general conversations with their parents about their college social life, and (d) students began to set appropriate boundaries with their parents. Participants all shared they often struggled with how to explain social experiences with their parents. Although they did provide their parents with updates about what they were experiencing on campus, participants kept conversations general in nature and did not involve

their parents in specifics. Managing this everchanging relationship with their parents was indicated as challenging at times by all the participants.

Several participants stated the significant role they played in their family as role models for younger siblings and family members. Being the first in their families to attend college was an important and celebrated accomplishment. Their parents looked to them to provide guidance to younger family members who could follow in their footsteps by pursuing higher education. Even though relationships with their parents changed during this year and new boundaries were created, their parents continued guidance and support was needed and appreciated.

### **Discussion of the Findings and Conclusions**

This study offers empirical research to assist in understanding parental involvement with first-generation undergraduate students. With an increasing number of first-generation undergraduate students entering higher education each year, this research provides a timely examination of their experiences (Cataldi et al., 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004). This section presents a discussion of the findings by research question as they relate to the existing research examined in the literature review. In addition, conclusions drawn from the study are presented.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

##### ***Research Question 1***

The process by which each participant decided to pursue a college degree ranged from having early childhood dreams of attending college to wanting to go to college just to get away from home. Both positive and negative feelings were discussed by participants when deciding to pursue higher education. Participants were asked about family relationships and how their parents contributed or did not contribute to their early thoughts about attending college. All participants felt that their parents did play a role in their decision to attend college. Paradigms of

attachment theory were identified as participants relied heavily on the influences of their parents throughout this process especially when it came to nurturance, guidance, and emotional support (Bowlby 1988; Wright & Lyon, 2019). Although the roles their parents played during this process varied for each participant, parental engagement and family aspirations were noted as important contributors to the early college exploration process which aligns with findings from Chapman et al. (2018) which concluded parents have one of the strongest influences in the student college choice process.

Parental involvement during the college exploration and decision phase included parents participating in tours and attending college fairs, parents utilizing their social networks to get questions answered for their child, and parents providing the emotional support needed to navigate the college exploration process. Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019) reported three out of four parents were “very involved” in their students’ college search process. In addition, the Hossler-Gallagher (1987) model of the college choice process identified three stages with parental expectations and encouragement being a key component of the first phase in the process.

When discussing specific guidance or insight that their parents provided, participants acknowledged much of the insight was in the form of general “real world” advice that could be used if they chose to pursue a college degree or not. Specifics about college expectations and experiences on campus were not discussed formally since all parents were unfamiliar with higher education and the formalities of pursuing a college degree. The unfamiliarity and unknown of the collegiate experience were both emphasized as stress inducing factors by multiple participants.

According to Sy et al. (2011), high levels of emotional support from their parents contributed to students having lower levels of stress. Involving their parents in decisions about college was a top priority of all participants. Participants reliance on involvement from parents

with major life decisions aligned directly with the characteristics of individuals in the emerging adulthood phase of development. Arnett (2007) stated even though individuals are working towards greater self-reliance in decision making, they still rely on parental figures to assist them with certain tasks. Findings from this study align with conclusions from Pizzollato and Hicklin (2011) which determined almost half of students involved their parents in any kind of important decision during the emerging adulthood phase of development.

As first-generation undergraduate students, participants utilized family members outside of their homes, teachers, counselors, and members of their communities to gain insight about college as their parents were unable to provide details about the experience. Over half of the participants were also members of pre-college programs that assisted them in navigating the college exploration process. These programs provided participants and their families with guidance on completing admissions and financial aid applications, selecting academic majors, and understanding the overall costs associated with a college degree. In addition, individuals that participated in a pre-college program also had the opportunity to take college-level courses during the summer prior to their first fall semester.

During the interviews, participants also discussed the feelings they experienced as they navigated the college search process. These feelings were felt by both them and their families. Feelings of pride and determination as a first-generation college student were shared by all participants when discussing the idea of going to college. The participant's feeling of "self-determination" mirrors the feelings expressed by Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) when they stated most first-generation college students "remain steadfast" (p. 599) even when faced with hardships. Being the first in their families not only came with positive feelings, but many also discussed the stress and pressure associated with carrying the torch for their entire family. Some

participants shared the pressure felt from their parents both directly and indirectly contributed to their feelings of isolation and worry about serving as representatives of their entire families during this process. Similar attitudes about aspirations for the entire family coincide with findings by Rondini (2016) that concluded these students “took on the role of “aspirational proxies” for their parent, carrying the hope to achieve socio-economic mobility that had eluded the previous generation” (p. 108).

### ***Research Question 2***

After deciding to attend State University, participants and their parents began the transition process. Participants described this step in the process as stressful, exciting, challenging, and rewarding. A highlight for many participants during this stage was the overall feeling of accomplishment they felt as being the first in their families to attend college. The participants not only felt a sense of accomplishment, but this feeling was also experienced by their parents and other family members. Many shared that their roles switched to now being a role model for younger siblings, cousins, and other younger family members.

During the transition participants realized they were not only going to college to better themselves, but also going to college to better their entire families. With this came hopes, dreams, and aspirations for everyone, especially their parents. All the participants had conversations with their parents, during the transition, about this new and uncharted experience facing the entire family. Continual support and encouragement were experienced by all participants when discussing this stage in the college going process. In agreement with findings from Sy et al. (2011) and Kenyon and Koerner (2009), the continual emotional support from their parents assisted participants in managing their stress levels and positively affected their emotional well-being during this transitional period. Although parents did not know or

understand specifics about college, the limited guidance they provided was needed, wanted, and appreciated. Bergerson (2009) concluded during this transition process, parental involvement was more of a powerful influence than parents' educational level.

When discussing expectations and advice they received from their parents during this time, most participants stated the top expectation was to be successful. Success could be measured in terms of excelling academically to making sure they stayed within their budgets. All knew they needed to succeed in this new environment, and they did not want to let their parents down. And although participants received scholarships and loans to pursue their degrees, some did express their parents secured additional employment to assist with college costs, so they wanted to ensure they met all expectations. Compared to continuing-generation college students, first-generation college students received more financial aid assistance and were more likely to share costs with their parents instead of parents paying for all college costs (Ma, 2009; Rondini, 2016).

Aligning with previous research on underrepresented students on college campuses (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; McCoy, 2014; Strayhorn, 2006), participants experienced "culture shock" and had many conversations with their parents about being members of underrepresented populations on campus and how to navigate the environment of a predominately White institution. As noted by Inman and Mayes (1999), "culture shock" was a major concern for both participants and their parents. Not knowing what to expect and how to handle new situations contributed to participants often feeling overwhelmed. As members of underrepresented populations on campus, most participants stated their parents also had concerns about their overall safety and security. While most never experienced overt racism towards them, they did

experience racial isolation and microaggressions that contributed to their feelings of loneliness which concurs with findings from McCoy (2014).

Effective communication with their parents was also voiced by many participants as crucial during this time. Sharing details about this new experience was one way that participants stayed connected to their families and involved their families in the experience. While some students struggled with communicating with their families, others shared some form of communication via phone, text, or facetime occurred every day. Staying connected to their families and keeping abreast on things happening back home was a challenge that multiple participants expressed was a concern for the parents. One participant personally struggled with the transition because her family relied on her to assist with communicating as English was not their first language. An additional participant stated there were multiple instances when she did not effectively communicate with her parents and them having strong attitudes about her future enrollment at the institution. After talking with a counselor on campus and staff in her academic enrichment program, she realized how her parents were feeling and was able to develop a plan with them on when and how they would communicate going forward. Instances like this demonstrate the strong connections that parents still desired with their children during this process and how communication must be a top priority as parents and students navigate a new and everchanging experience (Chlup et al., 2018). Wang (2014) also concluded communication during this time was crucial for first-generation students being successful as attention shifted from home life concerns to school life. Findings from this study coincide with the five themes identified as important for first-generation students' communication with their families including: (a) remembering family, (b) focusing on family, (c) counting on family, (d) not worrying about family, and (e) setting a good example for family (Wang, 2014).



As documented by Arnett (2000), individuals during the emerging adulthood phase of development still rely on parents for assistance and still want them involved in making significant decisions. Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) described this process as a balancing act between parents and students with both parties giving and taking at different periods. Pizzollato and Hicklen (2011) concluded almost half (44.3%) of participants in a research study reviewing parent-child interactions, involved their parents when it came to making important decisions during this phase of development. Even though participants were excited and ready to start their transition to the institution, all still relied heavily on their parents for guidance. The findings of this study, in relation to individuals in the emerging adulthood phase of development, are consistent with prior research about this population and their continued need for support and encouragement from their parents when entering new educational environments (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Pizzollato & Hicklen, 2011).

### ***Research Question 3***

The academic adjustment to college can be a challenging experience for anyone, however this experience can be more challenging for first-generation college students unfamiliar with the college environment and the tools needed to be successful (Self, 2013). Participants stated parents were concerned with many aspects of college life. While the overall academic experience was noted as important, participants received the least amount of guidance from their parents in this area. This was an uncharted process for all participants and their parents because none of them had been through it before. Entering this experience as a first-generation college student was challenging, stressful, and difficult but also rewarding and provided participants with feelings of accomplishment they then used to combat the negative experiences that accompanied their transition at State University.

Two of the study participants completed multiple college courses prior to their start at the institution. One completed an associate's degree and another completed a certificate program at their local community college, while simultaneously completing high school. Both expressed that these experiences prepared them for what the initial college academic adjustment would entail. While they were unfamiliar with the academic environment at State University, they did have experience and knew about important campus resources due to their time on other campuses.

Participants revealed that parental involvement during this time, in relation to academics, was limited but still beneficial. When discussing academic majors and the reason for choosing their academic majors, many participants stated their majors corresponded with things they enjoyed doing like helping others or situations that impacted their lives. One participant shared her academic major was chosen because of a family member's medical condition which required her to assist with translations at the hospital. She stated this experience not only changed her life but gave her the courage to pursue a degree that could help others and help her family. Explaining her academic major choice to her parents was easy because they all had experienced this life changing situation with the family member.

Another participant noted his family had everything to do with his academic major choice. Having grown up on a farm and being around agriculture his entire life, he always knew he wanted to go to college and pursue a degree that could assist his family with their farming business. Choosing a major that corresponded with something that his parents understood and could help the entire family was an easy choice for him. He mentioned his academic experiences at the institution, coupled with his family's real-world experiences on the farm, would help him become a better student and future leader in agriculture. This type of connection was important

for him because even though his parents did not have formal education in agriculture, they were involved in his college academic experience and provided him with guidance and encouragement.

All participants shared while their parents did express concerns about their academic career at the institution, most of the concern was kept general and not related to specifics including class schedules or class choices. Overall parental involvement was limited during this time. This type of limited concern was also consistent with findings from Wolf et al. (2009) and concluded, while parents had high academic expectations for their students, there was less concern over what courses or majors their student pursued and more concern with them just being successful on campus. In addition, Cullaty (2011) also determined in a research study about students, academics, and their parents' role, that students felt their parents provided support and encouragement with academics from afar and were not concerned with particulars. Cullaty's (2011) findings mirrored the present study's research findings.

When discussing other aspects of their academic experiences and roles of their parents, participants mentioned not sharing all specifics with their parents because of their unfamiliarity. Specific topics including campus resources, tutoring, or advising were noted as areas where participants did not want to bother their parents with the details. The worry these topics might create for their parents was a stressor participants wanted to minimize for them and their families. With all participants taking classes during the spring semester of their freshman year remotely, they did share this experience was an eye-opening time for their parents because they were able to see for themselves the amount of time and energy it took for their students to be academically successful. Some communicated while they were home taking courses, their parents did participate in some class lectures and offered insight on some assignments. The

emotions associated with wanting to help their students in stressful times are consistent with research on behaviors associated with attachment theory and parents wanting to provide guidance, reliable assistance, and emotional support for their students (Wright & Lyon, 2019).

#### ***Research Question 4***

With a large amount of the collegiate experience taking place outside of the classroom, parents had a major interest in this realm as well. While parental interest and involvement varied for each participant, all indicated their parents did play a role in their social experiences during their freshman year. Wolf et al. (2009) concluded over half of student participants in a University of California study agreed or strongly agreed their parents asked about their friends and non-academic activities. Findings from this study also indicated parents do want to know about life outside of the classroom and new individuals becoming part of their student's college experience.

As first-generation undergraduate students, participants referenced knowledge about college social life being based on things that they discovered on tv and in popular culture. Many stated while they knew some things to expect, they were astounded by the amount of "free time" they had and all the things they could do. This contributed to their feelings of "culture shock" when arriving on campus. The initial "culture shock" of going to college and exploring the new academic and social environment was a major concern of first-generation college students (Inman & Mayes, 1999). An important factor highlighted during the study was conversations participants had with their parents about expectations. These expectations were discussed formally and informally. Multiple participants shared their parents wanted specific details on what they would be doing when they were not in class. Harper et al. (2012) also concluded parents did want to know about their student's experiences outside of the classroom, but also

provided them room to explore their new environment. Whether it be participating in student organizations, getting a job, or meeting new people, parents wanted and expected to know what was happening.

In addition to expectations, consequences were also discussed between participants and their parents. Two participants revealed they were highly involved in high school and sometimes over-involved in extra-curricular activities their parents felt negatively impacted their academic performance. Both shared their parents expressed concern when it came to being over involved in college extra-curricular activities and not concentrating on their courses. Consequences of over-involvement included failing courses and not maintaining scholarship grade-point-average requirements which was very important to their parents.

Finances were also discussed as an important part of the social experiences of the participants. Half of the participants had part-time or on-campus employment requiring them to balance coursework, social life, and their jobs to assist with college expenses. Being able to effectively balance all aspects of their new college life was discussed by all participants especially when it came to life outside of the classroom and expectations from their parents. Participants also noted they felt that they did not get the “real” freshman experience due to the Covid-pandemic and all classes for the spring semester of their first-year pivoting to online instruction and campus involvement opportunities coming to a halt.

All participants expressed positive feelings associated with their parents wanting to know what was happening in their lives outside of the classroom. Some participants stated they did not share all personal details about their experiences but did share enough to involve their parents in the process. According to participants, their parents just wanted to know what was going on and how they could support them if needed. The need and desire to support their child could be seen

as “helicopter parenting” but none of the participants felt their parents aligned with tendencies of parents wanting to be over-involved in their college experience as noted by previous research on over-parenting or “helicopter parenting” as discussed by Segrin et al. (2012).

## **Conclusions**

As the research from this study suggests, parents of first-generation undergraduate students want to be involved in their student’s college experience, so institutions must adapt to include resources for students and their families throughout the college search and transition process. Based on the preceding findings, several conclusions were drawn from the study.

1. Parental involvement was perceived to positively contribute to first-generation undergraduate student success. Overall parental encouragement and support remains consistent as students contemplate attending college. Parental encouragement and support are also present during students’ transition from high school to college and during their first-year on campus. Postsecondary institutions need to understand the value of the parent-child relationship during this transition period and develop ways to assist parents supporting their students. Workshops facilitated by institutional representatives can be developed to assist in this process. Workshops should be conducted in-person, online, and available in multiple languages to serve students and families from diverse backgrounds and varying needs.
2. Parents need to understand the importance of utilizing their networks including family members, co-workers, and community members (school and church) to assist their students in understanding the collegiate environment. First-generation undergraduate students and their parents need resources to learn about scholarships, student loans, part-time work activities, and the ins and outs of campus life and academics.

3. Participation in pre-college programs provide first-generation undergraduate students with guidance and resources needed to successfully understand and transition to the college environment. Study participants that were members of a pre-college program all agreed participation in these programs provide a better understanding of expectations and the mindset needed to successfully transition to an institution of higher education. Involvement in these programs also give students the opportunity to take college level courses prior to matriculation and spend time on college campuses which provide insight into campus life and the demands associated with being a college-ready student.
4. Parents have a vested interest in their first-generation college student's overall success and ability to navigate the new educational environment. This transition period requires students and their parents to establish new boundaries associated with communication and expectations. Parents and students need to discuss expectations for each other and determine how they will share experiences happening on campus and back home. As new boundaries are developed and tested, students and their parents can create ways to effectively communicate as the student progresses through college.
5. First-generation college students from underrepresented populations can experience "culture shock" as they transition to large predominately white, public institutions. Feelings of isolation, unfamiliarity with the college environment, in addition to not being able to seek direct assistance from parents contributes to the initial shock experienced by these students. Institutions must acknowledge this phenomenon and provide students with resources that directly address their needs as a member of an underrepresented population on campus. Targeted mentoring programs and outreach activities can assist these students in acclimating to a new educational environment.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine first-generation undergraduate student perceptions of the roles their parents played when deciding to attend college and during the college transition processes. As the study progressed several new limitations arose.

1. This study only examined seven first-generation second year students of color who participated in an academic enrichment program during their first year at one four-year public land-grant institution. An unforeseen issue that limited my ability to include more participants in the study was the lack of initial responses from students in the identified academic enrichment programs. I contacted participants via email multiple times, but responses were finally acknowledged after participants received emails from staff members associated with their academic enrichment program seeking personal assistance with the study. Once study participants were identified, all mentioned they did not recognize my name being associated with their enrichment program which led them to not respond until enrichment program staff members personally contacted them. Due to the scope of this research study, the results may differ for participants not belonging to an underrepresented student population, not participating in similar academic enrichment programs, and not attending a similar institution type.
2. Multiple participants were previously involved in pre-college programs while they were in high school. Participating in these programs provided students with the opportunity to take college level courses at a local community college or university campus. Students and their families also received college coaching from program staff and participated in workshops that provided information about the college going process. These students and their parents did have some insight into the college going process which other first-



generation college students might not receive. Taking college courses prior to matriculation is atypical of most first-generation college students.

3. The first-year experience for all participants was impacted by the Covid pandemic. During the second semester of their first year, all participants received instruction online while the campus site was closed. The campus closure required participants to return home and complete their first year at State University remotely. Remote instruction and the elimination of most campus activities may have impacted the academic and social experiences of study participants since they were mostly delivered online. Additionally, parents were able to observe classroom instruction since courses were delivered virtually. This may have increased student-parent conversations that might otherwise not have occurred.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on the parental involvement experiences of first-generation underrepresented students that participated in an academic enrichment program during their first year at one public research institution. While this body of research provides insight into the needs of this important population, there are many opportunities to expand upon this scholarship.

1. Studies could be conducted with students that did not participate in an academic enrichment program prior to matriculation to State University. The parental involvement experiences of students with no experience with an academic enrichment program may differ from those with targeted outreach and assistance from staff associated with an academic enrichment program. For example, a quantitative study might be developed that examined the differences in parental involvement between the two groups.

2. Studies could be conducted with different subpopulations of first-generation college students. Utilizing demographic segmentation factors like race, sex, academic major, socioeconomic level, and family structure could provide institutions with more data to design programs and initiatives to better understand the varied needs of first-generation college students.
3. Since this study was conducted at one four-year land-grant institution, it could be duplicated at other types of institutions. By conducting the study at other types of institutions including community colleges, vocational colleges, private institutions, regional institutions, Hispanic serving institutions, and historically Black colleges and universities, a broader awareness of students' perception of parental involvement could be produced. Conducting the study at different types of institutions would also provide research into the needs of first-generation undergraduate students and their families that do not attend four-year public land-grant institutions.
4. A similar study could be conducted with the parents of first-generation underrepresented students who participated in an academic enrichment program serving as the participants. While this study focused solely on the perceptions of the student, further research focusing on parents' perceptions of their role may yield research that provides additional perspectives into the first-generation college student population and their needs preparing for and during the first year at a postsecondary education institution.

### **Recommendations for Improved Practice**

Most higher education professionals shrill at the thought of parents being involved in their child's college experience. In my role in the division of student affairs, I am responsible for

parent and family programming and outreach for my institution. I understand the important role parents can play in their students' educational career and this topic has always been of interest to me. Over the years, I have come to learn if you do want a student to remember something or find out about a new resource on campus, sometimes all you must do is tell their parents. Higher education professionals can utilize the following recommendations to aid first-generation undergraduate students and their families:

1. Napper et al. (2016) stated that providing quality information to parents about specific college topics allows them to develop key references to share with their students. This practice can be deployed to discuss topics including academics, alcohol usage, budgeting, involvement, and others that might be difficult for college students, especially first-generation students unfamiliar with the college landscape. This information could be presented at orientation programs and when talking to high school families about postsecondary aspirations. Communicating not only with the student, but the parents as well, is a way to ensure that important information is retained.
2. Findings from this study highlight the impact of pre-college programs on first-generation undergraduate students. All study participants that participated in a pre-college academic program sponsored by their high school or local college/university, agreed their participation in these programs positively influenced their success on campus and provided their parents with important information related to the collegiate experience. Institutions should work with high schools to create pre-college programs with the goal of ensuring first-generation student success inside and outside of the classroom. More importantly, these programs must consider broadening the

- focus beyond the student experience and consider the important and everchanging role that parents will play in their student's collegiate experience.
3. This body of research is also significant for executive university administrators, as they set the tone for institutions. If an institution is seen as wanting to “work with” the parents of first-generation undergraduate students and not against them, the concept of parental involvement will not be seen in such a negative way (Self, 2013). Administrators should be available during recruiting and orientation programs to communicate to parents that the entire institution is committed to their student's success.
  4. Developing comprehensive manuals explaining transition topics and ways parents can assist their first-generation student throughout college is a practical way institutions can help guide this process. In addition, programs should share resources and manuals with parents like *College Ready – Expert Advice for Parents to Simplify the College Transition* (Petree, 2021) and *Out to See – A Parents' Survival Guide to the Freshman Voyage* (Radi, 2016), that can provide guidance on what to expect as their child begins their higher education career.

As this study highlights, parental involvement for first-generation undergraduate students can have positive impacts on the collegiate experience (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Students and parents should discuss expectations of each other so developing boundaries remain appropriate. Higher education professionals must acknowledge the parent-child relationship is something that will continue into college and can play a vital role in student success if maintained at an appropriate level (Self, 2013). Programs and services should be created to assist first-generation students and their parents in making a successful transition into higher education institutions.

Targeted outreach in high school to potential first-generation students and their parents can yield positive results in terms of establishing social capital, increasing college understanding, and reducing stress related to the college transition (Nichols & Islas, 2016). According to Self (2013), “continuing to see parents as a nuisance to be avoided and mocked with terms such as helicopter parents, lawnmower parents, or snowplow parents, does not serve students, as it inhibits the involvement of students’ biggest source of support and guidance – their parents” (p. 8).

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the role parents played in underrepresented first-generation undergraduate students’ decision to attend college, transition from high school to college, and first year academic and social experiences. In this chapter I concluded the study by providing an overview including the purpose, research questions, data analysis procedures, and themes that emerged through participant interviews. Four research questions guided the study and provided an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. When analyzing each research question, I provided context related to previous research that supported findings from the study. The chapter also included limitations experienced with the study and concluded with recommendations for future research and improved practice.

This research complimented existing literature highlighting the important role parental involvement can play in a student’s decision to attend college, transition from high school to college, and their academic and social experiences during the first year of college. Paradigms of attachment theory associated with exploration, discovery, skill acquisition, and overall development of self-confidence were all discussed as contributors to the parent and child relationship during the first year of college (Ainsworth, 1982). In addition, the study concludes

parents can be a key source of support and encouragement for their first-generation undergraduate students even though they lack the social and cultural capital with campus life and college processes.

While informational support from their parents related to the collegiate experience is limited, parents can provide emotional support, tangible support, and financial support which are all needed to guide first-generation undergraduate student success. Colleges and universities need to develop programs that not only support first-generation undergraduate students, but also provide information and guidance to their parents and family members as they play an important role in the student's overall development and success while in college.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval



**To:** Quincy D Spencer  
 ARKU A688  
**From:** Douglas J Adams, Chair  
 IRB Expedited Review  
**Date:** 12/02/2020  
**Action:** **Expedited Approval**  
**Action Date:** 11/30/2020  
**Protocol #:** 2010289579  
**Study Title:** Examining First-Year, First-Generation College Students' Perceptions of Parental Involvement  
**Expiration Date:** 10/22/2021  
**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

**Adverse Events:** Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: John W Murry, Investigator

## Appendix B

### Participant Pre-Survey

Dear (student),

Congratulations on completing your first year at the University of Arkansas. This is a huge accomplishment! You are now on the track to see your name on Senior Walk in no time. As a member of the Razorback Bridge – Academic Enrichment Program, you have been selected to participate in an interview to help us learn more about your parents role in your decision to attend college and your transition to the University of Arkansas.

Your voluntary participation is part of a study to examine the role that parents of first-generation college students played when you decided to attend college and during your transition to the institution. I am conducting this study as part of research for my doctorate in higher education administration at the University of Arkansas.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please [click here](#) to complete a brief survey. A 45-minute interview will be conducted with each participant chosen for the study.

*Quincy Spencer*  
*Doctoral Candidate – Higher Education*  
*[qspencer@uark.edu](mailto:qspencer@uark.edu) – 479-387-4620*

### Survey

#### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study about first-generation college students' perceptions of their parent(s) involvement when deciding to attend college, selection of higher education institution, transition from high school to college, and initial academic and social experiences. You are being asked to participate in this study because you were a member of an academic enrichment program as a freshman and a member of an underrepresented student population on campus.

#### **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

*Who is the Principal Researcher?*

Quincy D. Spencer – cell phone: (479) 387-4620, email: [qspencer@uark.edu](mailto:qspencer@uark.edu)

*Who is the Faculty Advisor?*

Dr. John W. Murry – office phone: (479)575-3082, email: [jmurry@uark.edu](mailto:jmurry@uark.edu)

*What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose of this study is to examine first-generation college students' perceptions of their parent(s) involvement when deciding to attend college, selection of higher education institution, transition from high school to college, and initial academic and social experiences.

*What am I being asked to do and how long will it take?*

Your voluntary participation will require you to discuss your perceptions as a first-generation college student and the role that your parent(s) played when deciding to attend college, selection of higher education institution, transition from high school to college, and initial academic and social experiences. This will include completing the survey below to determine eligibility. Survey responses will be used to determine eligibility for participating in the interview portion of the study. If you are not selected to participate in the interview portion of the study, your responses will be destroyed, and no further action will be needed.

Selected participants will participate in a 45-minute online interview via Zoom. In addition to the interview, you will be asked to review your interview transcription to ensure accuracy.

*What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?*

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. A decision to withdraw will not result in any negative consequence or penalty to you.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the University's Human Subjects Compliance Coordinator, at 479-575-2208 or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

**(Buttons on Qualtrix survey)**

**I Agree (proceed to survey)**

**I Disagree (end survey)**

***Survey***

Are you currently enrolled as a full-time student at the University of Arkansas? (Yes or No)

Did you start your first year at the University of Arkansas immediately after graduating from high school? (Yes or No)

Did you complete your freshman year at the University of Arkansas with a minimum of 24 credit hours? (Yes or No)

Did you participate in the Academic Enrichment Program during your freshman year? (Yes or No)

Do you identify with one of the following underrepresented student populations at the University of Arkansas? (Yes or No)

African American

American Indian/Alaska Native

Asian

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Hispanic

Two or more races

Did your parent(s) ever attend college? (Yes or No)

Would you be willing to participate in a 45-minute interview about your experiences as a first-generation college student and the involvement of your parent(s) when deciding to go to college, selecting a college, transition from high school to college, and your academic and social experiences?

If yes, please provide your contact information (name, email address, cell phone number)

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

#### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Quincy D. Spencer

Faculty Advisor: Dr. John W. Murry

#### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about first-generation college students' perceptions of their parent(s) involvement when deciding to attend college, selection of higher education institution, transition from high school to college, and initial academic and social experiences. You are being asked to participate in this study because you were a member of an academic enrichment program as a freshman and a member of an underrepresented student population on campus.

#### WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

*Who is the Principal Researcher?*

Quincy D. Spencer – cell phone: (479) 387-4620, email: qspencer@uark.edu

*Who is the Faculty Advisor?*

Dr. John W. Murry – office phone: (479) 575-3082, email: jmurry@uark.edu

*What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine first-generation college students' perceptions of their parent(s) involvement when deciding to attend college, selection of higher education institution, transition from high school to college, and initial academic and social experiences.

*Who will participate in this study?*

The anticipated number of participants will range from 8 – 12. The participants will all be second year students that participated in an academic enrichment mentoring program as a freshman. Participants must have completed 24 credit hours their first year and be a member of an underrepresented student population on campus. In addition, participants' parent(s) must have not attended any institution of higher education.

*What am I being asked to do?*

Your participation will require you to discuss your perceptions as a first-generation college student and the role that your parent(s) played when deciding to attend college, selection of higher education institution, transition from high school to college, and initial academic and social experiences.

*What are the possible risks or discomforts?*

There are no risks or discomforts anticipated for any participant.

*What are the possible benefits of this study?*

Benefits to participation in this study could include a better self-awareness of participants experiences as a first-generation college student and a sense of empowerment they may feel as their input could assist with institutions better understanding the needs of first-generation college students and their relationships with their parents.

*How long will the study last?*

Participants' involvement will consist of about a 45-minute interview and review of the transcripts and themes for accuracy.

*Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?*

You will not receive any monetary compensation for participation in this study.

*Will I have to pay for anything?*

There is no cost associated with your participation in this study.

*What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?*

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. A decision to withdraw will not result in any negative consequence or penalty to you.

*How will my confidentiality be protected?*

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. All the data will be stored securely. The researcher will select pseudonyms to identify each participant in written and oral reports with no references linking your identity to the study.

*Will I know the results of the study?*

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. John W. Murry at (479) 575-3082 or [jmurry@uark.edu](mailto:jmurry@uark.edu) or Principal Researcher, Quincy D. Spencer at (479) 387-4620 or [qspencer@uark.edu](mailto:qspencer@uark.edu). You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

*What do I do if I have questions about the research study?*

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Quincy D. Spencer, (479) 387-4620 or [qspencer@uark.edu](mailto:qspencer@uark.edu)

Dr. John W. Murry, (479) 575-3082 or [jmurry@uark.edu](mailto:jmurry@uark.edu)

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.



Ro Windwalker, CIP  
Institutional Review Board Coordinator  
Research Compliance  
University of Arkansas  
109 MLKG Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201  
479-575-2208  
[irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

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## Appendix D

### Interview Guide

#### Part 1 – Background and Participant Information

1. Introduction – Describe my background and interest in the parental involvement and first-generation students
2. Purpose of the Study – The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine first-generation college students' perceptions of their parent's involvement when deciding to attend college, selection of higher education institution, transition from high school to college, and initial academic and social experiences.
3. Participant Introduction – Participants asked about background and reason why they decided to participate in the interview
4. Review of Interview Process
5. Review of Informed Consent Form

#### Part II – Interview

##### *Pursuing a college degree*

1. When did you first think about going to college and why was it important for you?
2. Can you tell me about the relationship that you have with your parents?
3. How did you bring up going to college with your parents?
4. How often did you talk about going to college with your parents?
5. If you couldn't talk to your parents about college life, who and where did you get information about college?
6. What things were important for you when you were deciding which college to attend?
7. What role did your parents play when you were deciding which college to attend? How did they help you - applications, financial aid, scholarships, campus tours or visits?
8. What guidance or insight, if any, did your parents give you when talking about going to college?

9. If you had any questions about college life, who would you ask?
10. How did you feel about being the first in your family to go to college?

*Transition from high school to college*

1. What did you do to prepare to come to the university?
2. What did your parents do to help you get ready to come to the University of Arkansas?
3. What expectations or advice, if any, did your parents discuss with you as you prepared to come to the university? Was it helpful?
4. Were there any skills that your parents talked about you having to be ready for college?
5. How often did you talk to your parents during your first few weeks on campus and what did you talk about?

*Academic experiences during the first year*

1. Thinking back to your first semester, how was it adjusting to the classes coming from high school?
2. What were some of things that you had to adjust to in terms of academics and how did you talk to your parents about these adjustments?
3. How did you talk to your parents about your major? Did they offer any insight?
4. What role, if any, did you parents have in selecting your classes each semester?
5. How often during your first year did you and your parents talk about academic related issues?
6. What did your parents tell you to do if you ever had issues in class or with a particular course?
7. How comfortable did you feel talking with your parents about academics...class, professors, etc.?
8. How was it when you had to go back home during the spring semester and finish your classes remotely?

*Social experiences during the first year*

1. Thinking back to your first semester, what types of things did you do when you were not in class?
2. Tell me about the conversations you and your parents had about college social life...clubs, meeting new people, Greek life.

3. How did you discuss expectations and consequences?
4. What role, if any, did your parents have on you deciding if you were going to participate in any clubs and activities?
5. How often did you talk to your parents about what you were doing outside of class?
6. When you were not in class, what did you tell your parents that you were doing when they asked?

#### *Closing Questions*

1. Overall, how would you describe the role that your parents have played in your college career thus far?
2. Do you think this experience would have been different if your parents would have gone to college themselves and had more knowledge about college life?
3. Is there anything else that you want to share that I didn't ask you about?

#### Part III – Closing

1. Participant Acknowledgement – Thank participants for participating in the interview
2. Next Steps – Inform participant about transcription that will be sent back to them by email for review in the next week
3. Final Thoughts - Are there any other thoughts that you have about you being a first-generation student and the role that your parents have played in your college choice and transition process?
4. Conclude Zoom Interview