There's an Identity Label for Me? Perceptions by First-Generation College Students of an Institutional Label

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Abstract

Although first-generation college students (FGCS) have been entering universities in large numbers, and even with past quantitative studies to understand this demographic, a major percentage continue to drop out of college within their first two years. Past research has resulted in an overall picture of this demographic. This qualitative study explores: (1) how FGCS perceive their social identity in relation to a college community, and (2) how interacting with support programs, such as Boise State's Student Success Program (SSP), shapes their understanding of support. In interviews with nine FGCS students, most of them did not know this first-generation label applied to them, while researchers and support programs assumed they already knew this. It was through a major event, such as failing a test, when students decided to seek help. This led to an encounter with the identity label. Perceptions about this identity label were split between positive and negative reactions. It was only after time and assistance from SSP that participants realized the significance of being an FGCS. This empowered them to continue with their education during times of hardship and/or personal turmoil.

Introduction

In the past half century, the accessibility of attending universities has increased to allow anyone—regardless of background and ethnicity—to continue to have a chance to better themselves and chase, to their abilities, the American Dream. This has led to an increased number of individuals who are the first in their families to attend a form of higher-education (Staklis, 2010). However, Engle and Tinto's (2008) study shows these individuals are "four times more likely—26 to 7 percent—to leave higher education after the first year than [non first-generation college] students." Therefore, first-generation college students (FGCS) have been in the center of university initiatives, government programs, such as the TRiO program (U.S. GOV, 1964; 1965), and research to assist FGCS throughout their undergraduate educations. Parscella et al. (2004) have nicely summarized the research, labeling them into three categories:

> [1st] compar[ing] first-generation and other college students in terms of demographic characteristics, secondary school preparation, the college choice process, and college expectations… [2nd] describe and understand the transition from high school to postsecondary education…[and 3rd] examine[ing] their persistence in college, degree attainment, and early career labor market outcomes. (Pascarella et.al, 2004)

These three areas of study focus on quantitative research with the hope of better understanding the FGCS population, and possibly even finding ways to alleviate the hurdles FGCS must go through in order to graduate.

While there have been many strides to increase undergraduate enrollment and graduation through research and support programs specifically for this demographic, there still seems to be a problem. As higher education becomes more important, the public has taken an interest in how students are faring in traditional institutions. As recently as January 2016, the *Washington Post* published an article detailing how FGCS are not succeeding at college (Cardoza, 2016). Cardoza debunks the common myth that FGCS do not succeed because of financial difficulties or constraints. The main reason they fail, according to Cardoza, is due to social and cultural factors playing against these students. Research has shown that money was not the full reason for poor FGCS graduation rates and suggests other factors are involved (Thayer, 2000; Ishitani, 2006). Despite these findings, this concept of social and cultural factors playing against the students has rarely been explored.

Terenzai et al. (1996), Pascarella et al. (2004), and Gofen (2009) introduced a paradigm shift away from these three areas of studies and focused on the cognitive and psychosocial of FGCS in and out of the classroom

compared to other students. While these and other quantitative investigations are important and can shed a great deal of light on the FGCS, the one question I always came back to was if FGCS even know of this label. As an FGCS myself, I never fully grasped this term until my accidental encounter near the end of my sophomore year. Additionally, I wondered if FGCS students know they are entitled to receive more academic support from the university than just the financial aspect provided by their scholarships and grants. I found that many research studies simply assumed that FGCS know they are FGCS. However, when looking for articles and books regarding FGCS identity, there were only a few studies on the subject; namely, Orbe (2004; 2008) and Aries and Seider (2005). Therefore, my study elucidates FGCS identity, provides a voice for the individuals who have been studied for and on, and introduces a different perspective to this dialogue.

This study tries to introduce a new perspective by asking two primary questions:

1) How do FGCS—from Boise State University's Student Success Program (SSP) in particular—perceive their social identity in relation to a college community?
2) The second question is how does interacting with the research and support programs shape their understanding of that support?

I propose a majority of FGCS do not know the identity label of FGCS that many institutions and researchers have applied to this demographic. This results in FGCS not seeking support until an outside factor—a teacher, student, or friend—points this out for them, or the FGCS go through a major event that forces them to make the decision of whether or not to stay in college. In addition, I propose that only after finding a support system do FGCS use this support system as a means to view the college community and their place within it.

Framework

The frameworks this study will be based on are Orbe (2008), Tajfel and Turner (1978), and Granovetter (1973). The frameworks that I will be using from each of these researchers are multidimensional identity theory of first-generation college students, social identity theory, and social network ties. Although each framework is intended for a different use than the way this study utilizes them, they work together to help explain what may be going on with FGCS. For this study, I will also use Tajfel and Turner's definition of social identity which is defined as, "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (as cited in Ortimeier-Hooper, 2010, p. 7). This definition provides a more in-depth analysis for how individuals accept a particular identity in the first place. This is important because if an individual does not accept such an identity, even though others ascribe that identity to him or her, that identity best represents the individual's character. The person, in this case FGCS, will have to intensively negotiate with others and themselves.

Orbe's (2008) framework of multidimensional identity focuses on "identity negotiation that occurs as individuals move from one culture to another." While identity negotiation happens to everyone on a daily basis, FGCS have a more intensive identity negotiation during their time at a university. Orbe suggests there are six major dialectical tensions that plays a major part in the identity negotiation of FGCS (2008):

Individual ←→ Social Identity
Similar ←→ Different
Stability ←→ Change
Certainty ←→ Uncertainty
Advantage ←→ Disadvantage
Openness ←→ Closedness

Although these tensions could be easily argued that each individual feels these particular dialectal tensions when going into any new "culture," Orbe adds two sets of six secondary tensions that happen at home and then on campus, which he argues only happen to FGCS. These dialectical tensions are the heart of Orbe's study. Throughout their undergraduate education he believes students are in constant movement between "experiences of stress and adaptation," and moving from these experiences causes an "emergent identity inclusive of both new and old selves" (Orbe, 2008).

Henri Tajifel and John Turner's (1979) theory tries to explain how individuals manage with social and organizational change, and intergroup dynamics. Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity theory, later expanded by

Turner (1991), and used by Ortmeier-Hooper (2010), had originally three variables that help an individual process their social identity in a new community; namely, categorization, identification, and comparison. Turner (1991) added the fourth piece to the Social Identity theory as self-categorization, which is commonly accepted as a part of identification. These four variables, as explained by Ortmeier-Hooper (2010), are "interrelated, like puzzle pieces, with individuals using different components in tandem to make sense of their social identity and their place in a given community." These "puzzle pieces" fit into Orbe's (2008) dialectal tensions by examining how FGCS make sense of the social changes they face during their time in college. Although FGCS go "between stress and adaptation" in order to grow, this does not accelerate until a student has a new identity that consists of both "new and old selves;" rather, this moment can only move as fast as an FGCS can make sense of their new social identity and place within the college environment, which changes and grows after each year the FGCS completes (Orbe, 2008). These dialectical tensions never truly vanish, instead appearing from time to time as a representation of "imposter syndrome," depending on the individual.

The last part of this study's framework focuses on the community these FGCS go into, and indicates the process discussed earlier happens when FGCS start college. Granovetter's (1973) theory focuses on two types of network ties that an individual can have, either strong or weak. What constitutes the strength of a network tie "is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter, 1973). An example of a weak tie is an acquaintance that a person occasionally talks with, such as in the work place, and that is the extent of the relationship. A strong tie is a family member and good friends. However, ties can change depending how much both individuals contribute to the relationship. Granovetter suggest that changes tend to happen, not through the strong ties, but through the weak ones. These weak ties form the social bridges that make innovation and change possible. In entering this new community and beginning their first classes, they are opening themselves to numerous weak ties with little to no strong ties. This lack of familiarity in community structure and strong tie connection, I propose, is the primary catalyst to introducing them to these dialectical tensions.

James and Lesley Milroy (1985) used and adapted Granovetter's (1973) theory for linguistic change and innovation between micro (interpersonal groups) and macro groups (the rest of society) and suggest, "weak ties are more numerous than strong ties." They go on to mention these individuals that tend to be more mobile tend to establish a "link between each relatively cohesive group" with that individual being the person that "diffuses innovation" (Milroy & Milroy, 1985), or helps spreads innovation by relaying the innovation to the groups they are connected to. While this does make sense, this study sees FGCS having numerous weak network ties as more socially affected than affecting the individuals at college. This may cause FGCS to view themselves as outsiders. This raises the question how do FGCS integrate themselves into the college community?

Methodology

In order to investigate how FGCS perceive themselves in relation to the college community and their identity label (first-generation college student), I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured, thirty-minute interviews with nine Student Success Program (SSP) participants, ranging in age from 18 to 45. These studies took place one month after the end of the spring semester at a northwest metropolitan university. Students had to fulfill two stipulations to be interviewed. The first was to be part of the Student Success Program. The second requirement was to be a first-generation college student. SSP is only one program under the federal TRiO program umbrella that "offers academic assistance and encouragement for first-generation, and/or low-income and/or students with a documented disability" (Boise State University, 2015). I asked participants to self-identify their socioeconomic status and their ethnicity. My data has a range of socioeconomic populations from poverty to middle/upper socioeconomic class, with the majority identifying with the low/poverty class. The ethnicity of students was either Hispanic/Latina or Caucasian.

I structured my interviews to utilize Cameron (1992) and her colleagues' empowerment framework. This framework uses a dialogic interview process that employs an empowering relationship to conduct research *with*, *on*, and *for* the participants instead of solely *on* or *for* them. Cameron et al. suggest this framework "not only benefits the researched, it benefits the researcher too;…the use of interactive and non-objectifying methods enables us to gain richer insights into subjects' own understandings of their behavior, and to engage them in dialogue about those understandings. This, we believe, is to our mutual benefit." Using this framework let me "exploit the potential of [my] multiple role[s], instead of …deny[ing] it" (Cameron et al., 1992). Moreover, the framework highlights switching between multiple social identities, such as researcher to FGCS to colleague, without fear of tampering with the data. This made interviews feel like more of a normal conversation with constant negotiation of power

between the researcher and the researched. Besides helping me reflect on my own time in college as an FGCS, it also assisted participants with reflecting on their own experiences and reaffirmed their desire to finish their undergraduate education. In addition, our conversation helped them develop a firmer understanding of the support they are eligible to receive.

Results

Interview after interview, I started to notice similar themes with each participant's answers, and my own regarding our understanding of the FGCS identity label, our place within the college community, and—unknowingly during that time—why we did not become statistics who dropped out of college their first year. In order to answer this question, we must first look at the identity label associated with these students.

Identity

There's an identity label for me? At first glance, the identity label—first-generation college student—is easy to understand, especially compared to other identity labels such as nontraditional, or even underrepresented. One participant I interviewed, George[1] (a Latin American), viewed the identity label as "pretty self-explanatory" compared to the underrepresented label. However, many—if not all—of my participants did not know about this identity label when they entered the university setting for the first time. The most common response when participants encountered this label can be found in participant Sally's comment:

> Sally: I never thought about it before as being a first-generation student until I started coming to Boise State.
> Researcher: So, what's one example when you started coming to Boise State?
> Sally: Um. Well, mostly just like forms, like that I was asked to fill out. Like asked if there is- if- if I was and I was like, "Oh yeah, I am."

It is with these "forms," such as scholarships, the FASFA application, and the school's application process, FGCS first encountered this identity label. While there have been large and small studies throughout the decades concerning this demographic, it seems researchers assume these students already know about this identity label. This is not the case with Sally's comment and from my own personal experience. I only learned about this label through a chance encounter with the McNair Program when I went into their office to ask what the program focuses on, and whom they help.

Positive reaction. Once students learn about this identity label, there are various ways they view it. My participants seem to have a positive, negative, or a mixed reaction. The positive reaction can provide an immense amount of encouragement to FGCS, change their perspective of the college community and receiving support. Penny's was the most salient example of my participants' understanding of the identity label. Penny is a nontraditional student entering college for the second time while raising her children. After hearing how she learned about the first-generation identity label (which I will present later in the article), I asked her what she thought about being described as a first-generation college student.

> Penny: Um, ((slight pause)) I..wasn't quite sure at first. But now…I asked my mom about like ((inhales)) was there any females that ever went to…college. […] And so, when I started looking back like generations…um…it meant more to me than just my parents not going to college. It more- It was more like I'm the first girl in my family, for generations, to go to college and ((voice is becoming shaky)) I'm going to GRADUATE this next December.

Realizing that she is the first woman in her family to attend college is still powerful hearing. This gave her the confidence and encouragement to finish college instead of dropping out like she previously did her first time attending. This identity label has transformed from a roadblock, keeping her from the college community and the

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[1] All participants referenced in this study have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

support it provides, to a banner of pride and encouragement—even during the rough times she experienced, like her father's death. She graduated from Boise State in the winter of 2015.

Not all of my participants had such an impactful understanding as to what the FGCS identity label meant. However, it did affect them positively in some form and gave them encouragement during challenging times in their undergraduate education. This label also made them feel important and more likely to seek assistance from programs provided by the university.

Negative reaction. While some FGCS view this identity as positive in some degree, not all do. It seemed a large amount of my participants had a negative reaction toward this identity label believing it can add unnecessary pressure to the student because participants expressed there was an expectation pushed on them that they need to succeed which made any failed test or poorly marked assignment a major blow to their self-confidence. These setbacks on grades would even cause students to question whether they belonged in college at all. Jasmine and Becky expressed these pressures more saliently than the other participants as they discussed how they felt when they first entered Boise State.

> Jasmine: Um, I think towards the beginning I, uh, I was very… I was scared. I didn't want to fail. I didn't want to fail my family. I wanted it, you know, you know first year people usually go crazy like, "oh new place, I'm free, you know? Let's party. Let's do that." I was the complete opposite. I was like, NO, I need to get really good grades, and I wanna- I want to prove to everybody that I can do this.
> Becky: I guess sometimes it makes me more intimidated, 'cause I feel like I have to impress everybody else cause I am the first one. So, I feel like everyone's watching me. Is she going to fail? Is she going to pass? Is she going to succeed, do WELL. More or less if I'm actually gonna finish up and get a degree.

Both Jasmine and Becky's comments have similar external motivations using fear of evaluation/failure from others to prove that they belong. Jasmine and Becky have this struggle between the individual and the community. In a culture that is based on individualism and achievement, how do we, as an individual and as a society, acknowledge the need to be individuals and do everything without help, while recognizing the need for community support and to support the community? FGCS make this tension more evident. It can be seen in both Jasmine's comment where she does not want to fail the family since, as she mentioned earlier in the interview, they have supported her so much by helping her with paperwork and costs. Becky, on the other hand, feels pressure from the community and feels as though she is being watched. Both are trying to find their own balance to this individual/community tension we currently have in the United States. They both seem to rely on fear in order to work hard. Because of this external pressure and/or this internal fear of failure, this prevents them from seeking help because they need to prove themselves to their family, this new community, and/or to themselves that they belong in college.

This type of mentality is detrimental to their education and to their well-being by adding too much stress and anxiety. Jasmine has mentioned that she would stay up studying the night before a test to make sure she got a good grade. I have also shared both fears that Jasmine and Becky had throughout my undergraduate education, but it tended to shift between fear of failing the family and not meeting my expectations. However, I tend to have the community-centric pressure, which caused me to believe I needed to prove to myself I was capable of doing the work on my own. This caused me to reject many of the services that I did know about, like the Writing Center and Math Tutoring. My other participants have also mentioned similar reasons why they did not utilize these services. They also alluded to this being the reason why they do not attend office hours since they need to know the answer and/or know how to do a math problem before they ask their professor. It is not quite evident how FGCS arrive at this negative perception, but I propose this negative perception is one of the major reasons students drop-out of college.

Alienation

Referring back to Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (1982; later added onto by Turner, 1991), individuals need to have contact with this specific community and then, through their time spent in the new community, gauge where the other members' roles are in this community and measure where they are within their new community. However, this contact with the FGCS community at Boise State is currently limited and this identity label is hard to encounter. Not because of lack of programs. Boise State has two programs that help students during their undergraduate education, with no expectations that the students move on to graduate school. These programs are the Student Success Program (this is a TRiO program also known as Student Support Services, or SSS)

and the First Forward Program. I will discuss these programs in more depth and the importance they have for FGCS later in the community/family section.

However, as Fischer (2007) points out, FGCS are restricted in their engagement within the college community because a majority of them live off-campus and work either part or full time. This affects FGCS negatively which may contribute to why these students drop out of college within their first two years. Kaylee told me how she felt her first weeks at Boise State when I asked her if she has ever felt out of place during her time in college:

> Kaylee: "Um, I think just college in general for like the first two weeks… I honestly did not know what to do with myself. Because I'm.. the type of person I- like I use to never be ALONE. (deep breath) So, I was like what do I DO, and I just remember I use to sit over by the um Student Union Building outside on those benches, and I would just like watch people. And, I'm just like this is- WHY am I watching people!? WHY does it matter that they're with a group of people and I'm not. It really doesn't. Like I've really- I've gotten ok being by myself but the first couple of weeks I just like felt so out of place and I was like what do I do? Do I look WEIRD?

Kaylee, before arriving at college, seemed to be grounded as to who she was and how she fit in in her old community. It is widely known by researchers that FGCS choose community colleges or schools near their family over selective universities (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). There are various factors as to why. The main two reasons that I have read in the literature, the participant transcriptions, and data confirming the findings of previous studies is because of financial and family reasons. Of these two reasons, the most important factor, for the majority of the students I interviewed is family because their family, and the community surrounding their family, has been the primary community—or network—they have known. While family is important to non-FGCS, FGCS (as well as low-income students) tend to depend on and, in turn, support their family.

In having such a dependency on their family, once the students arrive at the new college community they have a hard time navigating the community due to upholding their previous responsibilities to their family community. In saying this, FGCS still try to be active participants within the college community, even if it is only for the duration of their classes, which may be why Kaylee and a few other participants felt alienated in some form during their early beginnings of college. However, they still need their own community that holds significance and feels familiar to them. Many of my interview participants join and rely on these programs because the community it fosters reflects the qualities of family when they encounter turbulence in life.

College "family"/community

Although the FGCS identity label can be a catalyst to seek assistance or a form of encouragement for FGCS, this demographic needs a community they can have as a safety net to help provide them with advice or immediate help during challenging seasons in their education. Even if they know they're doing something for the family, that's not enough support, and so they still need something more to substitute for that feeling of connectedness. It is still tempting to quit school to deal with the immediate problem instead of fixing the root of the problem. Astin (1984), Tinto (1997), and many more have mentioned that being part of the college community, whether it be a learning community or club, is important and helps FGCS stay in higher education to finish their degree. Yet, I feel this is only partially correct. Looking at Orbe's (2008) dialectical tension, it seems my participants are more so at the individual side, separating themselves from the support and overall college community their first two years. What helped them was not merely being part of this general college community, but a smaller, selected community. This is where support programs play an important role.

As mentioned before, Boise State has two programs that help FGCS throughout their education. The first program is the federally funded TRiO Student Support Services, which Boise State refers to as Student Support Program (SSP), and the second is the school's First Forward Program. The only problem concerning these programs is the most well-known program—Student Support Services—uses an application-based system. This is understood for financial reasons; however, FGCS also need to compete for these spots with other students who may or may not be first-generation but who also need the assistance. This then causes students who really need the support to be on the wayside. The other program is an open-based system; yet, since the program is still young, students and faculty rarely know it exists.

Besides the application-based system, every participant referred to the SSP program as a type of family. The concept of family and the importance of family support to student success in college has been discussed and examined in depth (Gofen, 2009). However, these studies do not thoroughly explain what is happening with FGCS

once they are in a program such as SSP. During its time of helping FGCS, SSP seems to have been a replacement for the immediate family support and/or comforting community many of these students essentially lack throughout their college education. This may be apparent to FGCS, like in Amy's case when, during our discussion on why it is difficult to use resources provided by the university, she mentions:

> Researcher: Yea beginning was really, -really hard- going to one of those programs.
> Amy: Yea… Especially when...your support system like, YOUR FAMILY.. is there but they've never been through it. So, it's- You kinda are on your own so it's hard to find a group of people that… makes you feel comfortable, so…

Amy specifically points out family and difficulty to find a group she is comfortable being a part of. She later discusses how she relies on SSP for everything regarding academic and social aspects of college. This college family does not fully replace the purpose and support of the FGCS family. This could be seen in each student's response on how they perceive the identity label: FGCS. The most salient example, again, is Penny's response:

> Penny: So ((breathes out and voice is back to normal)) and I look at my kids, and I'm like, I'm going to change it for my kids. Cause guess what, they're not going to be housewives. They're going to see their mom graduate from college. Their dad graduate from college, and so that puts my children in a higher… rate of maybe going to college themselves, and I hope they do.

Just like Penny, many of the participants had some varying degrees of duty or goals to help their family. This assisted them through their education by giving them some form of encouragement during the rough and/or lonely times. Therefore, the idea of family for FGCS seems to be broken into two forms of support.

The first form of family support is immediate "family" and/or community support, which highlights the degree all the participants talked about SSP. I considered SSP to take this role—that I call a *college family*. This study defines *college family* as a group of people not related to one another but providing emotional, social, academic support, and overall betterment of the university student(s). However, this raises the question is there more than one college family on any given university campus, or something that is equivalent? The second part would be periodic support provided by the FGCS's actual family. This support, as mentioned above, only occurs when the FGCS is experiencing a challenging time in their education. This type of support is one reason behind the FGCS tenacity not to quit since they have a group to believe in and do not want to fail. Both of these supports work in tandem for the student. In utilizing these supports the students can make connections between college, their family, and where they fit in both of these communities. This suggests that once they enter a community that provides a type of sanctuary and unique familiarity for the FGCS, they will more easily recreate their identity which "leads to an emergent identity inclusive of both new and old selves" (Orbe, 2008).

The fluid nature of identity

As Orbe (2008) discusses in his article, identity is fluid and can ebb and flow from one end of these dialectical tensions to the other end. Gee (2000) goes more into depth on this fluidity and argues that identity in itself is fluid and anyone can be perceived as any type of person, such as a gang member to an activist, through interactions with others. This can change "from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable" (2000, p. 99). Gee introduces four different ways to view identity. The first view is Nature Identity. This type of identity view is when an individual or society has no control over this identity because it is governed by nature. An example Gee provides is being an identical twin. However, these 'natural identities' as Gee argues, "can only become identities because they are *recognized* by myself or others" and gain their power through "institutions, discourse and dialogue, or affinity groups…" (Gee, 2000, p. 102). The next is Institutional Identity. This is when an identity is placed upon an individual by an institution such as a university and/or a religion. The third is discourse identities. This is where identity becomes understood and negotiated in normal interactions with other "'rational individuals'" (Gee, 2000, p. 103). The last, is the affinity identity, or fan clubs or special interests. Instead of genetics, a governing institution or day-to-day interaction, affinity groups are not concerned about the people and their unique culture since these groups can be "[made] up of people who may be dispersed across a large space" (Gee, 2000, p. 105). Rather, the content is the highlight and concern of these groups. A good example of this is the fan groups focused around the cult classic Star Wars.

With these four different views of perceiving identity (Nature, Institution, Discourse, and Affinity), Gee makes an important point that these four are interrelated, but for the sake of this article I want to only focus on

Institutional and Discourse identities. As discussed in the framework, social identity must be learned and understood by the individual in that community. Concerning Institutional Identities, these identities are bestowed upon individuals because higher powers, in this case a northwest metropolitan university, has the "*authorization*; that is, laws, rules, traditions, or principles of various sorts allow the authorities to 'author'[…] its occupant in terms of holding the rights and responsibilities that go with that position" (cited as is in Gee, 2000). This can be seen with FGCS, but the "rights and responsibilities" concerning this identity are ambiguous. Through dialogue, which falls under Gee's Discourse Identity, these identities can continue to have some sort of power.

It is through the discourse that institutional identities are upheld and make such institutional identities fracture into two possible outcomes. Identity can be gained through achievement and on-going accomplishments, or through ascription through clear signs, the institution puts in place. ADHD is a clear example of ascription, and being a movie star or professor is that of achievement. As Gee pointed out an ascribed identity can turn into an achievement through personal "constructing and negotiating," which in turn takes this particular identity away from the institution and reshapes it. This relates to FGCS programs, such as SSS, where they are making this identity first known to these students, and helping them to have a positive outlook, and an achieved mentality that they are in college. This process of reshaping the FGCS identity label away from ascription and into achievement should be one of the goals current and future programs aim for when assisting these populations.

Where to Go from Here?

Although the findings discussed in this article represents a small subset of first-generation college students that are in support programs, their responses offer valuable insight on how they and, possibly, other FGCS view their social identity in relation to the college community. Additionally, this research suggests that support programs focused on helping FGCS can help them fully comprehend what the FGCS identity label means on an academic and personal level. This study also suggests there is a crucial timeframe to reach out to these students before they encounter the major event that makes them choose to get help with their studies or dropout because they believe it is too much for them to handle.

In saying this, multiple questions have formed and remained from this study due to various restraints. The main question I am most interested in is whether there is a difference between people who seek support and those that do not. If it wasn't for my chance encounter with the McNair Program, my undergraduate career would have been done with little assistance, outside from going to the Writing Center. I have also encountered other FGCS that did not go to other programs such as SSP, and will be graduating as I would have been. What sets them apart from students that need such programs as SSP? Another question is why do these students drop out of college? There could be various reasons, such as a lack of proper documentation on the institution's part, or students being unsure about this identity label.

The last question that is important to ask is what kind of connection to faculty do students have, and what connections are there between faculty and the first-generation programs? Campbell & Campbell (1997), Thayer (2000), and more researchers have accounted that mentorship is important for FGCS since they do not have someone to lean on and to show them the ropes. That is why it would be interesting to see if faculty were connected to these first-generation programs, would the students fare better? More research is needed.

We must first understand that money helps alleviate hardship this demographic faces, but will not ultimately fix the problem—as noted by Cardoza (2016). During a time of growth in FGCS attendance, it is imperative to begin the conversation about being first-generation, or at least having students encounter the identity label a little bit more than just on applications. As much as I would like to say there is one simple solution to this on-going problem, I cannot. If we make support programs have a more family feel, make these and future programs more transparent and open, and actively reach out to these students in or before their first semester, first-generation college students will be able to chase the dreams that they feel are worth chasing.

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