

“FIRST BUT NOT THE LAST”: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EARLY CAREER, FIRST
GENERATION STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

by

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(Under the Direction of Georgianna L. Martin)

ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. To explore these lived experiences, this study used narrative inquiry and the theoretical framework of Schlossberg’s transition theory to examine the participants' narratives. Narrative inquiry and Schlossberg’s transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) worked in conjunction to provide guidance for the research questions, a framework for how time and experience are constructed, and a basis for understanding what the current research says about the transition experiences of early, career first-generation student affairs professionals.

Major themes emerged through the data analysis of the narratives shared by participants. These themes provided insight through three critical transitional periods: going to and through college, navigating graduate school, and the early career experiences of these first-generation student affairs professionals.

INDEX WORDS: First-generation college students, first-generation professional, first-generation student affairs professional, new professional, student affairs

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the first-generation professionals who have navigated uncharted territories and yet still managed to advocate for others along their journey.

This work is dedicated to my ancestors for the strength and resilience passed down.

This work is dedicated to my grandparents: Bishop Edward Coleman, Othella Ross, William Bacon, and Ira Coleman.

This work is dedicated to my great-great mother, Willie Mae Lloyd.

This work is dedicated to my uncles, Moses Trappio and Reginald Coleman.

This work is dedicated to my greatest educator, my mother, Beatrice Lloyd Coleman.

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“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“As a culture, we love a celebration. We love a first. We hold them high. We all marvel at headlines and highlight reels. But we rarely discuss the marks and scars and bruises that come with breaking through glass ceilings.” (Welteroth, 2019, p. 22)

I was first made aware of the term first-generation college student during the first semester of my master’s program. Neither my parents nor grandparents attended college; therefore, I was a first-generation college student though I had made it through my undergraduate career without having that language to define my experience. During my undergraduate career, I navigated many firsts, and while there was always emotional support, I realized in what areas I lacked support. Through my involvement and leadership on campus, I was made aware of the field of student affairs. I successfully navigated my way through my undergraduate career, and I credit the student affairs professionals I interacted with as contributors to my success. I went the traditional route into student affairs by attending graduate school to receive a master’s degree, and upon graduation, I started my first job in the field.

Since my undergraduate years, categorizing students as first-generation college students has become more common on college campuses. There are even jobs now on college campuses with the primary job responsibility of supporting first-generation college students; this is in addition to the scholarships, resource centers, and national institutes that specialize in the research for this group. My goal for the study is to highlight the lives of student affairs professionals who were the first to go to college and reveal what kind of support is needed in their early careers.

Statement of the Problem

The number of first-generation college graduates has increased (RTI, 2019). Although there has been an increase in research on the retention of first-generation college students, resources and the support this population needs to be successful (Azmitia et al., 2018; Davis, 2010; Demetriou, 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2018), there has been limited research on the early career decisions and the transition from college to career for first-generation college graduates (Ford, 2018; Harlow & Bowman, 2016; Jehangir et al., 2019; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). The limited studies suggest that first-generation college graduates face barriers that differ from their peers that had parents who graduated from college.

These first-generation college graduates enter many fields, and there is limited research to address if the same barriers faced during undergrad are present once they enter their careers. There is a dearth of research on first-generation college graduates that enter the field of student affairs. Therefore, as the number of first-generation college graduates enter the student affairs profession, graduate programs, supervisors, and national associations will need to understand any unique needs of this population to succeed in the field.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals. I am interested in the experiences of student affairs professionals who were the first in their families to graduate and their transition from undergraduate to career. A particular focus will be placed on the transition and how this population navigates transition while recognizing the barriers and support systems that have aided their success in their career in student affairs.

This study will be guided by the following overarching research questions and sub-question:

- What is the lived experience of first-generation student affairs professionals?
 - How do first-generation college student affairs professionals describe their key transition experiences from college to early career?

Overview of the Study

This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of first-generation professionals in student affairs and the life transitions that shape and influence their transition into the field. First-generation professionals have become more acknowledged as a demographic (Brown, 2019; Terry & Fobia, 2019). Many studies conducted in recent years have explored the collegiate experiences of first-generation college students (Azmitia et al., 2018; Davis, 2010; Demetriou et al., 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2018), yet there remains a dearth of research on first-generation professionals, so it is essential to understand the lived experiences of this group of professionals.

Research Methods

This study used a narrative inquiry design to explore the lived experiences of first-generation professionals in student affairs and the transitions that shape and influence their stories within the field. Using a qualitative, narrative approach allowed me to explore the unique stories of participants in my research study. I used individual interviews to collect data and then used thematic analysis to analyze the stories of the first-generation student affairs professionals. Thematic analysis emphasizes what Riessman (2008) called “the told,” which are the “event and cognitions” of the language spoken when one tells their story (p. 58). Nowell et al. (2017) provided a process (phases) of conducting a trustworthy thematic analysis that I will follow to analyze data.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, I used Schlossberg's transition theory as a theoretical framework to understand how my research participants make meaning of their lived experiences as early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. Schlossberg's theory of transition, grounded in adult development theory, has been used to assess critical transitions in the lives of college-aged students. Anderson et al. (2012) defined transitions as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). A transition's type, context, and impact must be considered to explain a transition's meaning for an individual (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg's theory defines three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. Anticipated transitions happen expectedly, unanticipated transitions are not predictable or scheduled, and non-event transitions are expected to occur but did not happen. These definitions and dimensions of transition were used to guide the interview questions for this study.

Definition of Key Terms

There will be several terms used throughout this dissertation study. I am defining these terms to allow for consistency of understanding.

- First-generation college student (FGCS): Engle and Tinto (2008) used the Federal Trio program definition in their study, which defines first-generation status by neither parent having earned a bachelor's degree; this definition includes "students who parents may have some college, postsecondary certificate, or associate's degrees" (p. 8). This will be the definition used for this study.
- First-generation student affairs professional: Someone who is the first in their family to obtain a 4-year college degree and works in a student affairs position at a college or university.

- Working-class is generally defined as “those in service worker and industrial worker households, as well [as] other marginalized workers” (Clandfield et al., 2014, p. 11).

Significance of the Study

To date, research focused on the experiences of first-generation college graduates is minimal. This study will explore the experiences of a subpopulation that is under-researched once they graduate college. This study fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of first-generational student affairs professionals. Focusing on those who are in their early career allows an opportunity to get recent experiences of undergraduate and graduate programs in addition to transitions to working in student affairs. A goal of this study is to examine the pre and post-experiences of pursuing a graduate degree for first-generation college graduates. This can inform graduate preparation programs if there are additional needs to support first-generation college graduates entering the field of student affairs.

And lastly, this research is significant because the last goal is to provide information on the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals during their early career years in the field. This information will assist professional associations in new professional training, assist direct supervisors with creating opportunities that foster belonging in the workplace, and provide first-generation professionals with language and knowledge to know that they are not on this journey alone.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. This chapter provided an overview of the who, what,

why, and how of this research study. This research study is significant because it will fill a gap in the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals. Schlossberg's Theory of Transition will be used as a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of this population. A qualitative, narrative inquiry analysis will be used to frame the research design. The following chapter will provide an overview of the existing literature on the experiences of going from a first-generation college student to a first-generation student affairs professional.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“Contrary to what many believe, first-generation status is on a continuum and follows students as they persist and matriculate into their graduate work, and later their professional lives.”

(Brown, 2019, p. 3)

The number of first-generation students attending colleges and universities is on the rise (RTI, 2019). While the demographics of this group are not monolithic, researchers have found some common themes for first-generation college students: there are barriers to success (Azmitia et al., 2018; Davis, 2010; Demetriou et al. 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008), socioeconomic status affects experiences (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Martin, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017), belonging is important (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; McClure & Ryder, 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2018), and there needs to be more career development support (Ford, 2018; Harlow & Bowman, 2016; Jehangir et al., 2019; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). Germane to this study, a literature review shows that not much is known about the lived experiences of first-generation college graduates who now work in the student affairs profession.

This study examines the transition experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals. In this chapter, I will explore the literature associated with the experiences of first-generation college graduates, including factors that affect their success and career development. Second, I explore the literature on post-graduate success and challenges for first-generation college graduates. Next, I review the literature on the critical factors that assist in the transitional success of first-generation student affairs professionals.

First-Generation College Students

In recent years, scholars have researched the collegiate experiences of first-generation college students (Azmitia et al., 2018; Canning et al., 2019; Davis, 2010; Demetriou et al., 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008). The definition of first-generation college students varies in the literature. Sharpe (2017) explored the complexity behind finding one definition for first-generation college students. Sharpe (2017) found that the definition of “first-generation college student” varies based on the following: individual college definitions, scholarship requirements, and educational associations. Davis (2010) determined that it is difficult to find an accurate number of first-generation college students due to the difficulty in finding a universal definition. Peralta and Klonowski (2017) found that first-generation college student is defined differently across studies and that a lack of a standard definition “creates difficulty in understanding the positions of researchers on the topic” (p. 630).

The Varying Definitions of First-Generation College Students

Billson and Terry (1982) defined first-generation college students as students whose parents did not go to college. Engle and Tinto (2008) used the Federal Trio program definition in their study, which defines first-generation status by neither parent having earned a bachelor’s degree; this definition includes “students whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificate, or associate degrees” (p. 8). Some universities and educational associations have recently expanded the definition of first-generation to include students with parents who completed a four-year degree at an institution outside the United States (“Defining First-Generation,” 2017).

The one common theme in each definition is the educational attainment of the student’s parent, but even that produces limitations based on how we define parent (Billson & Terry, 1982;

Davis, 2010; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Toutkoushian, Stollberg, and Slaton (2018) questioned how the term parent is defined in the various definitions of first-generation college students. They found that most definitions apply the term parent to describe the biological parents of students and posed whether the definition should be “broadened to include stepparents, foster parents, and adoptive parents” (p. 2). They also discovered that the definition of first-generation varies based on the different levels of parental education based on two things: completion status (enrolled vs. earned a degree) and institution type (two-year or four-year) (Toutkoushian et al., 2018).

There are varying definitions for first-generation college students, and it is essential for stakeholders at each college and university to be aware of the institutional definition (Davis, 2010; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017).

Why Definitions of First-Generation Matter

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the Suder Foundation created a Center for First-Generation Student Success with a mission to be “the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation student” (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017).

In a blog post, the Center sums up why it is vital to define first-generation college students:

“While defining first-gen may appear overwhelming and complicated, it is important to remember why it is important. Because identification as a first-generation college student is most often self-reported in the matriculation process, there are inherent gaps in the data. Moreover, by not having a definition, it is nearly impossible for an institution to identify these students, track their academic and co-curricular progress, pinpoint needs

for early intervention, highlight successes, measure critically important learning outcomes, and benchmark against other institutions and national data sets (“Defining First-Generation,” 2017, para 4).”

A definition for first-generation college students allows student affairs professionals to assist students and assess what first-generation students need to succeed on individual campuses.

Toutkoushian et al. (2018) explained the importance of defining first-generation college status to help students with government and private funding opportunities.

It is hard to compare studies on first-generation students because definitions vary between researchers. It is essential for a universal purpose for first-generation college students as it relates to research to ensure that the researchers are clear on what they mean when using the term. For this study, I used the definition used by Engle and Tinto (2008), the Federal Trio program definition, which defines first-generation status by neither parent having earned a bachelor’s degree; this definition includes “students who parents may have some college, postsecondary certificate, or associate’s degrees” (p. 8).

First-Generation College Student Experiences

Studies have found that a sense of belonging was a factor in student success and retention for first-generation college students (Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). Gibbons, Rhinehart, and Hardin (2019) "explored the perceived barriers and supports related to college adjustment for first-generation college students at a large public university in the southeastern United States" (p.1). Gibbons et al. (2019) used social cognitive career theory as a framework. They conducted focus groups with 15 first-generation college students and discussed their adjustment to college and college preparation. The findings recommended offering career

counseling before and during the college experience for first-generation college students; and recommended providing support for adjusting to personal change and navigating barriers.

Additional research on the experiences of first-generation college students has common themes of academic preparation, social capital, familial support, and financial implications. Ishitani (2016) found that first-generation students are likely to enter college with less academic preparation and less access to information about the college experience. Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) conducted a study of first-generation, low-income students. They found that their parents and families both heavily influenced the motivation of students on the path to college negatively and positively. Similarly, Soria et al. (2014) indicated that the decisions low-income students must make regarding their finances impact their educational experience and serve as “disruptive barriers to success” (p.15); these barriers include working longer and more hours, taking a leave of absence from school, and not retaking classes. Conversely, Schwartz et al. (2018) suggest that social capital workshops can improve the academic outcome for first-generation college students by building social capital between the students and the institution. There is a gap in research on how these barriers affect the career pathways of first-generation professionals.

Sense of Belonging and First-Generation College Students

Several researchers have examined the concept of belonging in the context of higher education and first-generation student experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; McClure & Ryder, 2018; Museus et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2018). Belonging is defined in several ways, but arguably, one of the more inclusive definitions reinforces that a sense of belonging is an individual view of one’s inclusion within a campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In the 2nd edition of the book, *College students’ sense of belonging: A key to*

educational success for all students, Strayhorn (2018) provides a working definition of sense of belonging in the college setting:

"In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4).

Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2017) studied how campus environments influenced a sense of belonging. There have also been studies on the relationship between a sense of belonging and the mental health of first-generation college students compared to non-first-generation students (Stebbleton et al., 2014). They found that first-generation college students reported lower ratings of belonging, greater levels of stress and depression, and that sense of belonging is significantly related to mental health. A limitation of Stebleton et al.'s research is that data were self-reported by participants. McClure and Ryder (2018) used sense of belonging as a conceptual lens and found that spending money significantly influenced students' social relationships in college. Additionally, access to spending money factored into students' sense of belonging or social exclusion. From findings in Museus et al. (2017), we know that financial aid awards were positively associated with a sense of belonging.

Post-Collegiate Experiences of First-Generation College Students

The previous section explored the experiences of first-generation students during college, and the next section reviews the literature on the experiences of this population after they graduate and enter the workforce or pursue graduate studies. When first-generation college graduates enter the work field upon graduation, they have different hurdles to navigate than their peers who had a parent graduate from college (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Career Development

There is limited research on general career development themes and post-college experiences of first-generation college students (Ford, 2018; Harlow & Bowman, 2016; Jehangir et al., 2019; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). Ford (2018) explained through research that "while empirical research on American first-generation college students has tracked how students move into and through institutions, researchers rarely report on post-graduation outcomes of first-generation students" (p. 2). Stebleton and Jehangir (2020) have called for career development educators to consider the career development of first-generation students a social justice cause and encourage practitioners to see this work as advocacy for equity.

Harlow and Bowman (2016) examined the career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) and career maturity of first-generation college students from four-year institutions and community colleges. They analyzed three things: generational status (first-generation and non-first generation), college type (baccalaureate, community college), and socioeconomic status (SES; low, medium, and high). The results found a noticeable difference by college type, with both first-generation and non-first-generation four-year institutions students reporting lower mean scores than community college students. One revealing finding was with first-generation students from high-SES backgrounds reporting the lowest levels of CDSE. First-generation students reported a lower level of career maturity than non-first-generation students. Another interesting finding was that community college students reported higher levels of career maturity than baccalaureate students. This research is vital as we advance the discussion of diversity within first-generation college student populations.

Jehangir et al. (2019) used photovoice as a methodological approach to understand first-generation college students' career meaning-making experiences. The study used photographs

and narratives to understand better first-generation career identity development, including the role and influence of family and shared success. Four findings emerged from this participatory action method where students captured essential aspects of their career development process: (a) extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, (b) struggles, (c) agent of change, and (d) envisioning the future. This study is one of the recent studies to research the career-meaning experiences of first-generation college students.

First-Generation Professionals

Several questions regarding the post-graduate career experiences of first-generation college students still need to be addressed. A closer look at the literature reveals several gaps and shortcomings. Most of the research follows specific fields of study or professions. There has been limited research to address overarching experiences for this group until recently.

Terry and Fobia (2019) provided a working definition of first-generation professionals: "First Generation Professionals (FGPs), or professional employees who are the first in their immediate families to hold a white-collar professional position" (p. 2). They conducted five focus groups with 29 first-generation professionals and additional qualitative interviews with 13 individuals. The purpose of this research was to "investigate whether socioeconomic status (SES) may also be a diversity characteristic for which there are barriers to inclusion for employees from low SES backgrounds" (Terry & Fabia, p.3).

The findings from the qualitative interviews and focus groups mirror the experiences of first-generation college students mentioned earlier in this literature review. In comparison, there are parallels drawn between familial support, social capital, mentorship, and lack of awareness. The study found that first-generation professionals experienced a lack of resources that correlated with socioeconomic background. These resources include (a) development programs

and internships before college, (b) educational and professional networks, (c) disposable income for social events with coworkers, (c) orientation on how to navigate office culture and advance one's career, and (d) career mentors (Terry & Fobia, 2019). Terry and Fobia (2019) found that "because they did not come from households with a background of white-collar professional workers to mentor and orient them to the white-collar professional workplace environment, participants often described being left to learn office culture and career path navigation on their own and while on the job. As a result, many participants described periods of adjustment to a white-collar professional work environment that initially felt foreign and uncomfortable" (p. 5).

While Terry and Fobia's (2019) research does not explicitly mention belonging, some themes parallel analysis discussed in the next section by McClure and Brown (2008) concerning belonging in the workplace. Other themes that emerged were adjusting to workplace culture while remaining authentic and the importance of a mentor to assist with workplace norms. One of the limitations of Terry and Fobia (2019) is that all the research participants worked for the federal government. The study should be expanded to different career fields to test the hypothesis that first-generation professionals have common themes regardless of the field.

Sense of Belonging at Work

This section draws parallels between a sense of belonging as a success factor for undergraduate students and whether belonging continues to matter for first-generation professionals. A sense of belonging has also been studied through a human resource development lens (Filstad et al., 2019; McClure & Brown, 2008), focusing on belonging in the workplace. Earlier in this section, research on the sense of belonging among first-generation college students was reviewed. From this review, I found that there is limited research on the sense of belonging for first-generation college graduates, particularly the experiences this

population faces when entering the work field. Studies have found that belonging is also essential in the workplace (McClure & Brown, 2008; McBeath, Drysdale, & Bohn. 2017).

McClure and Brown (2008) conducted a phenomenological study on 12 individuals to explore the meaning of belonging at work. They investigated the questions, 'what is the experience of belonging at work?' From their interviews with the 12 participants, McClure and Brown found that belonging at work was made up of six constituents: (a) Being invited and learning to be a part of a workplace; (b) Connecting with colleagues and wanting to be included; (c) Doing work and being recognized; (d) Natural selection at work – competing and being excluded; (e) Being needed and finding myself deeply involved in my profession; and (f) Reflecting on time, work and people passing.

One theme of the first constituent, being invited and learning to be a part of a workplace, was participants discussing their first introduction to work, new positions, and the vital need to belong. One individual spoke of their first job and how their family's foundations influenced how they experienced culture at work. One emerging theme was the need to be familiar with the customs and language of the group and the work itself. This theme is essential to remember as we consider the experiences of first-generation college graduates and their experiences as professionals. There are many parallels to the experience of first-generation college students during their undergraduate experiences. There is a gap in research studying the longitudinal effects of belonging on the success of first-generation colleges once they graduate.

Early Career Student Affairs Professionals

New or early career student affairs professionals are typically the front-line staff members responsible for providing the programs, services, and initiatives in Student Affairs Divisions (Davis Barham & Winston, 2006). According to Tull et al. (2009), attrition rates for

new professionals in student affairs range from 20% to 40% within the first six years of professional practice. Tull et al. (2009) found that the following bolster new professional socialization and assist in attrition rates: quality supervision along with orientation programs and training programs, socialization initiative, mentoring, peer relationships, and professional development opportunities.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 outlined the current research on the experiences of first-generation college students and the challenges that persist after completing an undergraduate degree. The chapter started by reviewing the varying definitions of first-generation college students and then identifying what the research states as the experiences of this population. The research shows that first-generation college students face barriers and challenges that are not common to the experiences of non-first-generation students (Canning et al., 2019; Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Martin, 2015; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2018; Soria et al., 2014.)

While there is limited research on general themes of career development and post-college experiences of first-generation college students, the research shows how important career development and exploration are for first-generation college students. (Ford, 2018; Harlow & Bowman, 2016; Jehangir et al., 2019; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). Many questions regarding first-generation college students' post-graduate career experiences still need to be addressed. A closer look at the literature reveals several gaps and shortcomings. Most of the research follows specific fields of study or professions. There has been limited research to address overarching experiences for first-generation professionals until recently (Terry & Fobia, 2019). This literature review helps shape the experience of first-generation student affairs professionals and provides a

framework for the methodology of this research study. Chapter 3 provides a detailed introduction to the methodology and approach for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. This chapter outlines the methodology that was used to address the research question. First, I state my positionality, subjectivity, and experiences concerning the research topic. I then give an overview of my research design and research paradigm. This section is followed by my justification for using narrative inquiry as my approach for this research topic. I then provide a detailed description of the recruitment plan and sampling plan. Next, I explain my method for data collection and data analysis. I conclude this chapter with an outline of the plan that was utilized to ensure authentic data through traditional forms of validity such as trustworthiness. This study was guided by the following overarching research questions and sub-question:

- What is the lived experience of first-generation student affairs professionals?
 - How do first-generation college student affairs professionals describe their key transition experiences from college to early career?

Positionality and Subjectivity Statement

Preissle (2008) states that a subjectivity statement can be autobiographical by “focusing on who researchers believe themselves to be as individuals, their backgrounds, and how these are related to those they study” (p. 2). Being a first-generation college graduate and a former first-generation student affairs professional positions me as an insider to this research. I am unable to remove myself from the identities of this study because I hold a significant identity that is the basis of the study. I view having these identities as an advantage by being able to inform the

study better. Sharing similar identities will allow me to build rapport with the research participants.

My experiences as a first-generation college student influenced me to pursue a degree in higher education. I went to a large, state university for my undergraduate degree and a private Catholic university for my graduate degree. I was heavily involved in leadership opportunities, which increased my access to personal relationships with higher education professionals on my campus. This involvement led me to be nominated for NASPA's Minority Undergraduate Fellow (MUFP) program (now NUFP). The NASPA Undergraduate Fellow (NUFP) experience was created for underrepresented populations and had a mission to provide pathways into the profession. These experiences led me to pursue a graduate degree in higher education. I first became conscious of the phrase "first-generation college student" during my coursework in my master's program.

I am currently in a doctoral program and identify as a first-generation doctoral student. While my position as a first-generation college graduate makes me an insider, my position as a doctoral student makes me an outsider to first-generation student affairs professionals who are not pursuing or currently hold a terminal degree. Dixon and Seriki (2013) explained the concept of the "insider perspective":

"To make a claim for a particular position or identity, that necessitates naming the project as one premised on a particular positionality or identity, ideally, the researcher should have substantive experiences that gives him/her an "insider" perspective so as to speak with some authority on what it means to be positioned in a particular way" (p. 213).

I acknowledge that my experiences as a first-generation college student influenced my practice as an early career, first-generation student affairs professional. My work in higher education was

centered around creating transitional and onboarding experiences for first-year and transfer students entering universities. This work was done in multiple functional areas of student affairs, including housing/residence life, orientation, and transition programs. As the researcher, I acknowledge that my own experiences and biases can impact how I conduct my study and conduct my interviews with my study participants about subjectivity and positionality. One way I actively remained aware of any potential biases was to use a research journal. I used this journey to reflect after interviewing each participant and during the data analysis process.

Theoretical Framework

To understand my participants' experiences, I used a theoretical framework that guides meaning-making in an individual's life. I used Schlossberg's transition theory as a theoretical framework for this study. Schlossberg's theory of transition, grounded in adult development theory, has been used to assess critical transitions in the lives of college-aged students. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) defined transitions as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). A transition's type, context, and impact must be considered to explain a transition's meaning for an individual (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg's theory defines three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. Anticipated transitions happen expectedly, unanticipated transitions are not predictable or scheduled, and non-event transitions are expected to occur but did not happen. Context refers to the setting and relationship of an individual to the transition. Impact refers to the degree to which a transition alters daily life.

Goodman (2006) endorsed the idea of transitions having three phases, which they called "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out." People moving into a situation familiarize themselves with the new system's rules, norms, and expectations. Once in a unique situation,

individuals must learn to balance their activities with other areas of their lives as they move through the transition. Moving out is when one transition ends, and the individual is thinking about what comes next. This concept was an essential element to consider when exploring the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs in this study. The research questions focus on transitions, and the “moving out” phase is vital to understanding undergraduate, graduate school, and professional transitions.

Schlossberg’s transition theory also informed the research design by using Schlossberg’s 4-S System of situation, self, support, and strategies. The 4-Ss were used to guide the interview protocol, including question creation. The *situation* variable determines what is happening and the timing of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The *self* variable asks: “To whom is this happening?” First-generation student affairs professionals are not a monolithic population, and transition theory reminds us to think of each individual, considering each participant’s “life issues and personality” (Anderson et al., p. 61). This perspective helped guide how participants shared the story of who they were during the research process. The *support* variable determines what support is available. Knowing this helps guide the questions centered around the strategies variable that investigates how people cope. The findings based upon the strategy used by first-generation student affairs professionals during their transition in the field provide implications for supporting this demographic in the field. Using Schlossberg’s transition theory as a theoretical perspective, I explored the narratives of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals, and their lived experiences as they transitioned into careers in student affairs. Schlossberg’s transition theory was also used as a framework to add more research to understand what transitions were salient to the experiences of this group.

Research Design

This qualitative research study used narrative analysis to explore the lived experiences of early career, first-generation professionals in student affairs and the life transitions that shape and influence their stories. Using a qualitative research design over quantitative was a deliberate choice due to the narrative approach. Instead of using population-based samples, narrative techniques interrogate cases (Riessman, 2008) and offer a depth of information from participants' stories and experiences. Clandinin (2007) explained that "the turn from numbers to words as data is not a general rejection of numbers but a recognition that in translating experience to numeric codes, researchers lose the nuances of experience and relationship in a particular setting that are of interest to those examining human experience. (p. 15)." Using a qualitative, narrative approach allowed me to explore the unique stories of participants in my research study.

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) described the role that qualitative research allows the researcher:

"Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world.

Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Meaning qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 43).

Using the qualitative research design of narrative inquiry, this study illuminated how early career, first-generation student affairs professionals make meaning of their transitional experiences. These experiences included how being a first-generation student affairs professional influenced significant decision-making in their lives and how they share their lived experiences.

Research Paradigm

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. Interpretivist researchers study the experiences of individuals and attempt to explore those in an in-depth manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ontology of this study is framed within the interpretive paradigm, more specifically, constructivism. Constructivism is the epistemological approach for this study. The epistemological assumption in this study is that truth is socially constructed through interactions with others. Constructivism views knowledge as socially constructed as people work to make meaning of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Human beings construct or make knowledge rather than find or discover knowledge. Crotty (1998) found that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 43). By analyzing participants' stories, I determined how individuals construct the meaning of their lived experiences as early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. As individuals narrate their stories in this study, their values and ethics were revealed by reflecting on their transitions.

Narrative Inquiry

This study collected the stories of first-generation student affairs professionals using the narrative inquiry approach. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) defined narrative inquiry as a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through “collaboration between researcher and participants over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus.” (p. 20). The narrative researcher considers three specific dimensions during the inquiry: temporality, sociality, and spatiality. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain each of the dimensions:

- Temporality—The understanding that experiences are composed and lived over time. Narrative inquirers investigate experiences that occurred in the past and the present. They also explore how participants imagine future experiences and events.
- Sociality—Attending to the personal and social conditions. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) defined personal conditions as “the feelings, hopes, desires, and aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” of the participants and inquirers (p. 480). Social conditions refer to the cultural, familial, and institutional narratives that impact an individual’s experience.
- Spatiality—The recognition that all experiences and events occur somewhere. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) viewed spatiality as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 480).

Jones et al., (2014) explained that the analysis of narratives involves two processes: “developing an understanding of the individual life stories as well as a more holistic narrative” (p. 84).

Narrative inquiry fits within our interpretive framework of constructivism due to the roles of the

researcher and the participant or collaborator (Kim, 2016). The two work together to co-construct the story and the retelling of the story.

In this research study, I used the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's transition theory to explore the temporal, social, and spatial dimensions of the professionals' experiences. Narrative inquiry and Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) worked in conjunction to provide guidance for research questions, a framework for how time and experience are constructed, and a basis for understanding what research says about the transition experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. These data provided an understanding of what the data reveals about the experiences of being a first-generation professional.

Participants

Criteria for participation in the study included: (a) being a first-generation college graduate, (b) currently employed at a college or university in a student affairs position; (c) hold a master's or degree in college student personnel/affairs, higher education, or a related field; (d) possess over two years of post-master's professional work experience. For the purposes of this study, a first-generation college graduate means that at the time of graduating from their undergraduate institution, neither of the participant's parents/guardians held a four-year bachelor's degree from a college or university in the United States of America.

The advertisement for participants (Appendix A) was marketed through student affairs listservs, social media groups, and higher education organizations. One of the vital marketing sites for this study was the following Facebook groups: FirstGenProfessionals (2,300 members), Empowering First-Gen Students (6,500 members), and First Generation/Low-Income folks in Student Affairs & Higher Ed (1,800 members). These groups have rich conversations with

individuals who work in student affairs and identify as first-generation college graduates. I placed my recruitment graphic in those groups and received much interest. Potential participants filled out a pre-screening questionnaire for selection (Appendix B). The pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix B) assisted in selecting the participants, ensuring that those selected met the criteria for the research study. This was helpful because there was an overwhelming response to the call for participants. An additional criterion was used to narrow down the participants for those who filled out the questionnaire. In addition to the criterion, the number of years working in student affairs/higher education was added for selection purposes. This allowed an opportunity to select participants with three to five years of experience post-graduate work experience, which allowed a chance to have participants who have experienced work outside of the pandemic. Ten participants were selected based on meeting all the criteria. The final study was conducted with eight (N=8) early career, first-generation student affairs professionals (see Table 1).

Data Collection

Selected participants received a welcome email (Appendix C) containing the UGA IRB Consent Form (Appendix E) and a link to sign-up for an interview. During the sign-up of the interview, selected collaborators also provided an alias that was used from that used during the interviews and data collection. The interview protocol (Appendix E) contained semi-structured questions and prompts that allowed me to make decisions during the interview based on what stories were shared (Jones et al., 2014). The semi-structured questions explored the experiences of early, career first-generation student affairs professionals as they transitioned from being first-generation college students through their current role as first-generation student affairs professionals. Data were collected in the fall of 2021. Due to restrictions with the pandemic, all

the interviews were conducted through video conferencing; interviews were between 60–90 minutes, via Zoom, at a date and time negotiated by the collaborator and the researcher.

Data Analysis

Narrative stories are analyzed in several ways. One way is to analyze what was said, known as thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). For this study, a thematic analysis was used to analyze the stories of the early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. Thematic analysis emphasizes what Riessman (2008) called “the told,” which are the “event and cognitions” of the language spoken when one tells their story (p. 58).

The interviews were audio-recorded via Zoom. To transcribe the interviews, I uploaded the audio recordings to Otter.ai, a transcription service. After Otter.ai provided the transcribed interviews, I double-checked the transcriptions while listening to the audio. I made edits in places where the transcription had discrepancies for actual words that the participants stated. I documented my thoughts through journaling and memoing my first impressions of the transcripts as I was doing this. I then read each transcript very carefully, line by line. I then emailed the individual transcript to each participant to ensure their stories' accuracy and words.

I then went through each transcript and highlighted relevant words, phrases, and sentences. Otter.ai also provides a summary of keywords for each transcript; these were the words that appeared often in the transcript. I compared my list to the Otter.ai keyword summaries for each transcript. From this process I created codes. Initial codes may begin to form main themes, and others may develop subthemes (Nowell et al., 2017). During this phase, I reviewed the coded data extracts for each theme to consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 9). Themes are “categories or broad units of information that consist of several codes” (Creswell, 2018, p.186). I determined what aspect of the data each

theme captured and considered how the themes tell the story about the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through thematic analysis of the data, three primary themes emerged across the narratives:

1. **“Figure it out”- Discovering Hidden Curriculum:** First-generation professionals felt the impact of hidden curriculum before they started their undergraduate classes, and that feeling persisted to their first student affairs role post-graduate school.
2. **“I Found Support”- Finding a Support System:** Establishing and recognizing support was significant during the transitional experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals.
3. **“I’m An Advocate”- Developing Advocacy Skills:** The lived experiences of first-gen professionals inform their practice as student affairs professionals.

Trustworthiness

To conduct a trustworthy study, a researcher must exhibit “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). Trustworthiness was demonstrated through reflexive journaling, member checking, and thick, rich descriptions. I am an insider of the research population; therefore, I must account for any potential for research bias and the role my positionality may play in this study. In my reflexivity statement, I describe how I used a research journal throughout the process to reflect after each interview and during the process of interpreting data.

Trustworthiness of the narratives shared by participants was ensured by sending the final transcripts to collaborators following the first interview and providing an opportunity for an optional follow-up meeting. The collaborators had the opportunity to ensure the accuracy of their stories and words. This process is called member checking or verification with the participants

(Lincoln & Guba, 1995). Only one collaborator had a minor edit that was resolved via email. None of the collaborators accepted the offer for a follow-up meeting.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

“I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.” - Chimamanda Adiche

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. In this chapter, I answer the research questions by analyzing the stories the collaborators (study participants) shared with me during the interviews. This chapter will use the term collaborators in addition to participants to describe the eight professionals who shared their narratives. This study uses narrative inquiry and the interpretive framework of constructivism, which inform the roles of the researcher and the collaborator; these two work together to co-construct the story and retell the story. This clarification is necessary because the collaborators' role as co-constructors of their narrative has a more significant impact than being viewed only as participants.

These stories represent the lived experiences of the eight collaborators and focus on the key transition periods of their journeys to college, their college experience as first-generation college students, being first-generation graduation students, and their current experience as early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. The collaborators shared stories that acknowledged their individual experiences while at the same time highlighting commonly shared stories of being an early career, first-generation student affairs professional.

Organization of Findings

The findings are presented to share the more critical aspects of the lived experiences of the collaborators. Sharing both the individual narratives and the common themes provides an opportunity to gain insight into the unique experiences of each collaborator while highlighting where they shared similar lived experiences. Using Schlossberg's transition theory as a theoretical perspective, I explored the narratives of eight early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. Schlossberg's *4-S System* of situation, self, support, and strategies is the foundation for the research design. The 4-Ss were used to guide the interview protocol, including question creation. This study was guided by the following overarching research questions and sub-question:

- What is the lived experience of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals?
 - How do first-generation student affairs professionals describe their key transition experiences from college to early career?

The first part of this chapter highlights the individual narratives of the collaborators, and the second part of this chapter explores themes that emerged across the narratives.

Participant Demographics

This study's collaborators (participants) were selected based on the following criteria: (a) be a first-generation college graduate; (b) currently employed at a college or university in a student affairs position; (c) hold a master's or degree in college student personnel/affairs, higher education, or a related field; (d) possess over two years of post-master's professional work experience. I ended up with a diverse pool of eight first-generation professionals with three to five years of post-master's work experience in student affairs (see Table 1). All participants

earned a degree in higher education/college student personnel except for one who has a master's in a related field, social work.

Table 1.

Participant Demographic Information

Participant Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Post-Master's Professional Experience	Master's Degree
Obi	Black or African American	Man	3	Higher Education /College Student Personnel
Emma	Hispanic or Latino/ Latinx	Woman	4	Higher Education/College Student Personnel
Jeff	Hispanic or Latino/ Latinx	Man	5	Higher Education/College Student Personnel
Xenia	Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/ Latinx	Woman	3	Higher Education/College Student Personnel
Evelyn	White	Woman	4	Higher Education/College Student Personnel
Tomas Sanchez	Hispanic or Latino/ Latinx	Man	5	Higher Education/College Student Personnel
Reyna	Black or African American	Woman	5	Social Work
Jake	White	Man	5	Higher Education/College Student Personnel

Each participant was scheduled for a 75-minute interview. The interviews took place via Zoom. The findings are first presented through a profile for each collaborator. The interpretations of the narratives are in the chronological order in which the interviews took place. Direct quotes from the collaborators are presented to support each interpretation.

Collaborator Narratives

Obi

Obi was one of the first participants to respond to the participant interest survey and sign up for a participant interview once I selected the final participants. Obi identified as a Black man and first-generation student affairs professional with three years of post-master's experience. At the time of the interview, Obi was an assistant director in a student affairs division at a large, public, R1 university in the South. Obi spoke a lot about his other identities throughout our interview.

Obi's sense of self evolved throughout his transitional periods from undergraduate to his early career experiences. He mentioned how he found a mentor doing an internship the summer before he graduated from his master's program:

I was like, oh my gosh, yes. Like, I finally felt like I made it. Like, I was like, all these Black people that I've been meeting in my life led me to you. Like they're a Black, gay man. And I'm a Black, bisexual man, I was like, yes! I finally have someone that looks and like, is like me.

While this mentor of Obi's was not a first-generation college graduate, having two salient identities that matched Obi's identities assisted in his sense of self as he moved into his second year of graduate school and his job search. I discuss more of this mentor relationship in the next section. Obi also discussed how his identity as a first-generation professional from a lower socioeconomic background impacts his work:

I'm an advocate... I think as a first-generation student, it's made me just more aware. And this like answer has levels to it. So, like I say, aware in the sense that I grew up in [a Southern state] that has a pretty high food insecurity demographic and so like, there were

times where I did go to bed, having had a nap for dinner, if you know what I'm saying like, and I remember my parents not having dinner so that I could have their last \$5 and we stopped at McDonald's. And so, as a first-generation professional, and even that, but also take it to the lens of through my housing background. I'm always asking questions of like, okay, so why do the res halls close for holiday break. That doesn't make sense to me, because we do know that we have homeless students who barely made it to get into this institution. And they maybe came from a foster care system or things like that. And so like, they're relying on this residence hall year-round, not just from the fall and the spring terms, but they are going to be here and they're going to be some of your brightest students as well.

Obi had a unique experience having his first job out of graduate school be at a university where most of the student population identified as first-generation college students. This experience was a defining moment for how he would show up in his next role. Obi shares insight into his feeling about being a first-generation student affairs professional:

I just think it's important to remember that, like, we're human beings and intersectionality is real. And so like, my first-gen experience is colorful because I am someone of faith that identifies as that way, who also happens to be queer, who also happened to grow up in a very predominantly white space. So that is not going to be the same for the next first-generation student, or professional that you meet. And so, I think with this, just keeping in mind that it's not a monolithic experience, like we're all unique and colorful and what we bring to the table and that's what makes being a first-gen person in general, so amazing.

Obi set the tone for the interviews by providing rich stories of his lived experience. Obi shared stories of how we navigated his undergraduate career as a first-generation college student. Then stories of how he survived graduate school and the job searching process. Obi then shared rich experiences working for a university that had a mission to serve low-income and first-generation college students and then how he shifted to a large SEC university in the South. Obi's narrative highlights how essential being an advocate is and how his identity informs that as a first-generation student affairs professional.

Emma

Emma was the second participant to be interviewed. Emma identified as a Latina woman whose parents immigrated from Cuba. Emma has four years of post-master's work experience. She served as the associate director for a financial aid department at a large, private R1 university in the Northeastern United States at the time of our interview. Emma explains how having others that you identify with can make a difference in feeling support and belonging:

Second year of grad school, one of my best friends who is in the same scholarship program that I was in an undergrad, also first-gen, also low income, also Cuban, became a first year in the grad program. So my second year was so much easier because I had someone who like fully knew me. And it's so nice to have a person who like, understands the first-hand experience, I didn't have to re explain, like undergrad language, like, he just always got it. So, it made from what he shared his first year, really, like he had a person there who could sort of explain everything, and it made my comfort level, especially in the job search, which is so horrible. Made it really, like, supportive, and like, I wish everyone could go through grad school with that.

Emma is close to her family and has found them very supportive. Here she shares a story of what the familial support looked like during her undergraduate and graduate school years:

Like, you know, there's so many things that I like, have thought about and being first-gen. And even learning how to communicate with my family had to change because when I would call home, I knew that I wasn't getting advice. I was calling to vent and, you know, coming from like a Latina household, everybody wants to help and have their hand in something. And I was like, I'm truly just calling you because I know that you can't do anything but like someone needs to know what's going on. So again, the support was really strong. And I knew they were always behind me. And like, when I graduated, it was for all of us, that they just didn't have the understanding, the language, that sort of know-how of what I was actually going through, which became increasingly difficult as I decided to go to grad school and applied to grad school because that was like, no, we thought the ceiling was here. Now you're going a little bit beyond.

Even though her family may not have understood why she needed to pursue another degree, the support was still substantial to her success:

My family was also super supportive. There's a language barrier with my older generation with my grandparents. So, they don't, one they don't have college going knowledge. And two, they don't speak English. So, translating this into Spanish has never been easy. They think I'm a professor. And they were like, okay, great, you're going to go to school to be a professor cool. Um, my, you know, nuclear family, parents/siblings were like, okay, cool. Like, I don't know that they understood what a master's degree was, or the magnitude of it, because I think they were like, Okay, you're gonna go to school more, when in reality, that number of first gen, low income, you know, students of color

who end up with master's degrees is so small, that telling them that information, I think made it feel a little more like, Oh, this is not easy. This is not something that everyone does. I think that helps sort of ground them a little bit, if I should say, but they were always super supportive. I have a lot of first gen friends who their families were not the same. I was really lucky that they were like, Yeah, do it, we're gonna support you, you're gonna move to another state. Okay, cool. We know how planes work. We'll see you there. Like, they were always very like you go do it. And we'll be there in your corner.

Emma shared many experiences of how her family provided emotional support and were always there to listen, whether they could offer advice or resources. She mentioned that even when she wanted to move out of state for her first job, her family supported her by saying they would fly wherever she went.

Emma also shared another aspect for first-generation student affairs professionals that come from lower socioeconomic environments, and that was the experience of sending money back home. Emma mentioned regularly sending money back home to support her family. One of Emma's strategies to succeed as a first-generation student affairs professional was curating the community she needed. She mentions how her partner, who is an engineer and not first-gen, does not “understand” all of her lived experience:

My partner is not first gen, is in engineering, and I'm like, oh my god, like the amount of learning that it had to happen to like, help this other person understand, like, why I feel certain things why imposter syndrome comes, up why I struggle with X, Y, or Z. Yeah, I, there's a reason I tend to surround myself with mostly first-gen people, because it is so much easier to breathe around people who understand you.

Another area that Emma crafted was finding a mentor. She saw this as a need, and when the opportunity presented itself, she was strategic:

I didn't really have a mentor, like I had a couple in undergrad that really helped me get student affairs, lost touch throughout the, you know, just life. So, when I graduated grad school, and started my new role, and like, in those years, I haven't really felt like there's been a person who has been that invested in my success. until about a year ago, when I started working on a project through SACSA. Through a student affairs professional organization, and sort of found this mentor who like now is one of my references for jobs is like, always checking in. Its, I always thought that I was doing fine until I had a mentor. And now I see the difference it can make when someone is looking out for you when someone is not, you know, friendtots, or those friend levels are really good because they are right there with you experiencing and they're sort of in the same mindset. But to have someone above be like, that's not a really good decision. That's not really helpful. Because that is a very different experience than supervisors, I had good support for things like professional development, I've been able to do a lot, not necessarily my current role, because I've only been here for two months but my past role. VPSA is always checking in and you know, knowing the value of being a new professional. So, I think I got what I needed. I think I sort of hodgepodged it together. But a lot of it has been this like truly hodgepodging it and finding friends who are going through it who might be a couple years older.

Jeff

Jeff was the third collaborator to share their narrative with me. Jeff identifies as a Hispanic/Latino man. At the time of the interview, he was serving as the assistant director of

conduct at a very large, public R1 university in the Southwestern United States. Jeff started by telling the story of how he moved into college alone because neither he nor his parents knew that his family was supposed to assist:

The interesting part is when I went to college I went by myself. So, like, my parents didn't go with me, I literally packed up a suitcase, a little laundry thing with some pillows and blankets. And like that was basically what I took to college. I have my saxophone because I was in the marching band. And so that's basically like what I did. And so, it was unique because like, when I then became an RA it was like I saw his parents was like a huge thing. And I was like, I never really got that. But I also don't think like I expected or knew what to expect when you go to college because again, no one went, so it was just like, okay, you're going to school, like have fun type of thing. And it wasn't like this big ordeal.

Jeff described his peers as a significant source of support during this undergraduate experience. He was in a living-learning community (LLC), and he, along with three other people, decided to take their second-semester classes together. This group was instrumental because Jeff told a story of how he did not know about the resources on campus until he became a resident assistant (RA). The RA job provided financial support for Jeff and gave him access to a mentor through his supervisor. He found out student affairs was a field and received guidance on the graduate school process from his supervisor.

One story that Jeff told focused on how the dynamic with his family changed when he went to graduate school. He talks about how dynamics changed and how some family members began to think he thought he was better than them. This caused Jeff to reconsider how he shared information or corrected his family. He shared a story about how all his family worked in

factories or in “the fields,” so having to talk with them about the student affairs job search process was challenging:

My family has worked in factories and in the fields. And so, a lot of what you where you get jobs is about who you know, it's like everywhere, like my family works like, your cousin works at blah, blah, like they can get you that job. And so, one, trying to explain to them, what I was going to do, working housing as an entry-level professional, sort of what that looks like. And like, that's what I wanted to do. I remember one of my uncles was like, Oh, so you're like a slumlord. And I was like, no, like, that's not what I'm doing.

Like, I'm not a landlord, either. Like, you know, part of my job probably is landlord ish.

Jeff received assistance from his housing graduate assistantship supervisor who walked him through the job search process. Once Jeff was offered a position, he discovered he did not know much about benefits, so he turned to his family. He described the “tension” of not only sharing about the job search process but also not having a family member to talk about his job offer with. This included trying to speak with his family about benefit options:

And then it was interesting, because trying to talk to them about like, benefits and like salary and things I wasn't to do...Going to my first full-time role to understand what benefits are and how I'm going to select these benefits and how I'm going to do this. And so, I think that was the one that would didn't even cross my mind or think about that, knowing that I was going to be in a salary position that none of my family were really in or understood, because they were/ are all hourly positions basically. And so that was an interesting thing to navigate.

Jeff illustrates feelings that others felt—having to navigate moving into a different social class than your family. He shared that there was “this tension with my family at that point, because,

they're like, oh, like, you know, better than us now type of thing because I was the only college graduate. Jeff shared additionally that he felt some guilt over this. A feeling that is common for first-generation college graduates. Jeff described how his experiences as a first-generation college student inform his practice as first-generation student affairs professional:

A lot of the students, I got to work with work were first gen, as well, too. And so it was like, for me, it was like, okay, how can I support them knowing that I'm also first-gen and like, make it like known, then I'm first-gen, so I was like, you know, I would tell them all the time type of thing, but it's like taking them out this I chatted with them, and like have that connection. I always like, oh, yeah, I'm first-gen to hear the resources for you, like hear things like to help you. And so knowing that, like, I have some of those resources my first year, that was challenging for me to understand and navigate as well, too. And so knowing that, was one thing I could do. Another thing I did a lot as a first-gen is that again, I really didn't have people to like help me understand, like how to study or like how to get ready for that first exam.

Jeff shared stories of his experience moving six hours away for college and starting off by himself. He shared stories of navigating college, becoming an RA, and finding a mentor in his hall director. Jeff shared stories of navigating being the only person in his family to have a college degree and the tension he felt this caused at family events. Jeff told stories of how his experiences inform his professional practice and advocacy as first-generation student affairs professional.

Xenia

Xenia was the fourth participant interviewed. She described herself as an Afro-Latina woman. When Xenia shared her story, she was a senior director working with scholarships and outreach at a very large, R1 university in the Northeast United States.

She started her narrative by sharing how college was always a goal for her parents. She recalled that her mom wanted her first word to be “college.” This desire from her mother led her family to move her to a different part of the northeastern city they resided so that she could go to better schools.

Family support was a significant theme in the stories shared by Xenia. She told stories of why she chose her undergraduate institution, and the main reasons were the financial aid package and the fifteen-minute proximity to her family. Xenia shared stories about her family and finances were two factors that led to her decisions even before she began college:

How am I going to afford college? Because that was the big looming thing for us as a family is: how are we going to pay for college. And it ended up paying off because I pretty much got all of it covered through like federal loans. And I ended up becoming an RA, which basically paid for room and board itself. So I got very, very lucky. But the process was just very, very difficult because the financial piece, like my peers, were able to go to any college or university that they wanted, because money was not an issue. But for me, I didn't have that privilege. And it was very obvious. And there was always like a little part of me that like always wondered, like, I wonder how my college experience could have been if I went to a smaller, private school, or if I had the opportunity to go a little bit farther away. But now that I'm older, I appreciate the choice that I made because I am in significantly less debt than my peers who decided to go to, you know, UNH or LSU, or like, yeah, a university out in California.

Xenia leaned on her support systems to ensure success in her undergraduate and graduate experiences. She recalled stories of figuring it out and finding answers about campus resources

and college life in general. She recalled a story about using her mistakes to inform other students about resources:

I googled everything; I searched everything. And I empowered myself and equipped myself with the knowledge that I needed to be able to survive. And that ended up helping me a lot. And eventually, I ended up telling a lot of my friends who weren't first-generation college students about different things that we had to do in order to like keep our financial aid and let telling them like, actually, you need to drop this course before the last drop deadline and stuff like that. So for me, it was very interesting. Like how am I the person with the least privilege in the room, also the one that is equipped with the most knowledge? So, I was very proud of myself for that fact. But yeah, I did it all alone my freshman year.

During her professional life, she has continued to lean on her mentors and peers for support. Xenia shared a story about how mentorship introduced her to the field:

My hall director, funnily enough, was the greatest mentor for me to have.... he was really helpful because he was also a first-generation college [graduate]. And he identified as a queer man. So, we both had shared identities, which made us really bond because I was an RA on his staff as a hall director during my sophomore year and that's actually how I got my foot in the door in higher education.

Xenia shares stories about how her graduate school years were critical in her foundation as a professional. She also shared how going to graduate made her the first on both sides of her family to receive a master's degree: "My mother's one of five, and my father is one of eight. And out of all of the siblings they have, including my parents, no one has ever gotten a master's before. So, I was the literally the first person in my family to get a master's, and I have an older

sister, so I was a little, a little proud of myself that I beat her to it, you know.” Xenia’s time in graduate school proved to be a very formative time for her professional identity. She shares a story of having a supervisor that she wanted to “emulate”:

I owe this man, everything, like he never made me feel inferior. And he is a white cis man. And he has never made me feel lesser than he has always challenged me to use my voice, to be unapologetic, to not be afraid to take up space. And to believe in myself, and to know someone who you want to emulate and be one day believes in you... probably more than you believe in yourself at that moment, was life changing for me. And that was when I really stepped it up a level and my competence level was just, it was out of this world.

As Xenia navigated job searching, she tried to rely on her family for support with things she didn’t know:

My mom was really, really helpful on helping me navigate certain parts of like the insurance. But she was on, she had been on disability for a very, very long time. So, she wasn't sure completely about all the things especially concerning, like HR and paperwork. So, I was like, Oh, my God, I have no idea what I'm doing. I hope that they're not going to take like, \$1,000 out of my paycheck every month or something like that.

Xenia still had her mentor, who was her undergraduate hall director, and he assisted her with her jobs search materials:

[He] really helped me. Like, he went in and like, tore my resume up highlighting everything in red. And I was like, well, damn, it probably would have been easier to just throw it out and start from scratch. But he stayed with me till the very end. And that is something that I'm really, really grateful for.

Xenia highlights throughout her stories how those mentorship relationships have assisted her throughout her transitions in higher education. When Xenia became a first-generation student affairs professional she navigated having a first job out of grad school that she described as a “toxic, dangerous environment.” She began working full-time before her last semester of graduate school was over. She took her last classes online and moved back with her mother due to her mother falling ill. She describes the feeling of not having too much choice or feeling like she could leave that job:

So as a first-gen person, because I didn't have that luxury and that privilege of, you know, falling back on, you know, my parents financial security, I took that job out of desperation, I took that job because my mom was sick. The pay was decent, and I could go back home. But if I, if my mom wasn't sick, I would have said hell to the no. Oh, no, no, no.

She defines this moment as pivotal in how she approached the job search for her second and current post-master job:

And now, as a first generation [professional], navigating the work life that is higher ed, I am much more intentional and strategic about the questions that I asked. And I am much more hypervigilant of body language, and how people interact with one another during the interview process, because I cannot afford to make a mistake like that ever again. So the same way my white peers or my non first generation colleagues can just accept a job and not really think about the consequences. Once again, I am also not afforded that luxury. So, I am so hypervigilant of like the energy that I get from people, whether they're woke or not.

Xenia shared stories about the importance of a workplace on your mental health and the feeling of not leaving a job because that's not what was modeled in her family.

Evelyn

Evelyn was the fifth collaborator interviewed. She identified as a first-generation student affairs professional, white woman who came from a low-income background. At the time of the interviews, Evelyn served as an associate director of student transitions and family programs at a large, private, R2 university in the Midwestern United States.

She attended a private, predominately white institution for undergrad that she described as having a student population with a lot of privilege and many legacy students whose parents attended the institution. Evelyn described feeling unprepared when she showed up to move into the residence halls:

I just felt very underprepared. When then my roommate showed up with TVs and lamps and decorations for the room and took up like most of the closet space and drawers. And I was like, oh, I didn't know that we actually had this much space here. So just a genuine feeling of wow, I didn't even think to bring school supplies. Feeling very, very stupid. I guess that first day of this is how we're going to start things.

This experience set the tone for Evelyn's feelings of not being prepared and led to her questioning her belonging on campus. She shared stories of how her undergraduate experience as a first-generation college student has shaped her professional identity as a first-generation student affairs professional: "I think it just continues to push me not to necessarily measure myself against other people, it's to measure myself against myself, which has really been beneficial to me." As Evelyn shared her story, she came upon the revelation that she has had to

do a lot on her own: “I’ll just do it myself. And I’ll do it on my own. I think that’s my overall theme today. Do it myself.”

Evelyn found herself having to navigate many things during her undergraduate experience and eventually found some support. Evelyn told stories of receiving support from her primary caregivers, her grandparents. She mentioned that while her grandparents may not have had the answers when she called home, it was “nice” to have someone listen. She shared how her supervisor, when she was a resident assistant, was a support system for her. Evelyn describes how she felt like she flew under the radar at her small school until she needed support due to an illness her senior year. She explained that she received support that she did not even know existed. She explained how: “And then all of a sudden, all the resources were there. And everybody wanted to talk to me and make sure I succeeded. And I was on the crisis committee, radar, and all these other funny things. But like, all those resources would have been really nice before the medical stuff happened.”

Coming from a low-income background, Evelyn found ways to ensure she had an outstanding undergraduate experience. One was becoming a resident assistant. She described that experience as taking off the financial burden, having a single room, and “knowing that no matter what, I’ll have a place to stay.” Evelyn decided that she did not want to be a music teacher anymore after her health issues and student teaching experience. She mentioned some shame around sharing that information with her family: “I didn’t want to be a music teacher. I kept that to myself. Because again, that internalized shame with my family and my church family, everyone I had told,” Evelyn shared this with her residence life supervisor:

Talking to my Res Life supervisor at the time, I was like, I, I don’t want to go out in the [music teacher] field right now. I don’t know what else to do. And he said to have you

thought about this [student affairs] type of stuff. I'm like, I mean, it's fun. I like doing the programs. I like working with students, obviously. But uh, I mean, what is it. And so, on a whim, I applied to one master's program which was near my boyfriend's home at the time. So that way, again, it's that financial security. And even if I can't afford housing, I have somebody nearby I can move in with. I was waitlisted at first. Luckily, they took me in on after that first line of denials.

Evelyn's decision to attend a graduate program for higher education/ student affairs was actualized from a conversation with her residence life supervisor. Even while looking at graduate programs, she made decisions based on her identity as a first-generation, low-income student. She worked a graduate assistantship in the residence life department during her graduate school years. This allowed opportunities for additional opportunities, such as joining a committee that was created to support first-generation college students:

I was on the committee for first-gen I found that existed. It's like, oh, this is cool. I'm going to join in. But it was very much focused on we're just collecting data. Nothing was action-oriented. And so, I took myself off of that committee because that's not what I believe in. You're taking data, do something with it.

Evelyn showcases through this story that she was already thinking of how to support and advocate for first-generation college students, even as a graduate student. This passion for being “action-oriented” to help first-generation college students continues into her professional life.

Evelyn described her program in graduate school as “toxic” and that she had to do things alone. Evelyn shared a story about her experience preparing for job searching:

My second identity crisis. So again, we're coming to the end of schooling. Oh, crap, what do I do? I don't think I want to go into this field, because I've had an awful experience in

my residence life assistantship. Because no residence halls are ADA accessible. So that's a great part. So, what am I going to do? My fallback was teaching again, let's what I told everybody I was going to do. So, I did job searching in the immediate area close by for boyfriend at the time now has been... but found a semi higher ed position. So, it was the daycare on campus. So got paid for the most part pretty well. Did that for like four months, and said, this is not what I want to do. Maybe I do want to do higher ed. So again, another identity crisis, did another job search, just kind of getting my toes wet. Got a position with the same university that I did my graduate work, but at a different part of their campus, I guess. So I moved from residence life focus to now I was doing student activities. And so, it was a part-time role, literally made 15 grand, like it was very low paying for somebody with a master's degree, even a bachelor's degree. That's, that's terrible. But it was something. So I did that. And I did a bunch of odds and ends like worked at retail places. And as a bartender for a while.

Evelyn shares how being her first-generation identity played a role in how she approached her part-time student activities job:

I think as a first-generation student that I'll do it myself; I'm going to make sure to prove myself came out in a lot. So even though this first position, student activities was part time, paid crap, I gave it everything, and I was doing more work than the director. I was doing more work than the other person who held the same position as me on the other campus. And I genuinely did it because I figured, well, you have to do it, this is your job, you have to go above and beyond or else they're going to get rid of you, even though obviously, that wasn't true. And so, I think that put me in a good place. So once our director had left, I was pretty much written into that director role, which was orientation

activities and everything else, all the student-facing, and I loved it, I loved every part of it.

Evelyn's work ethic and ideals on what hard is secured her an opportunity to move into the director role. Evelyn eventually took another position at the university she is at now, working with new students, families, and orientation programs. Even in this role, Evelyn mentioned not participating in a committee focused on first-generation student experiences because she was told that the "committee is all talk and no action...so I've not joined that." This does not stop Evelyn's advocacy and work to ensure first-generation student success in her role. She described how advocacy shows up in her work:

I try to have very genuine, candid conversations with folks that I do come in contact with our team of three pro staff talk about all the time, how we're being inclusive to first gen and how we're really taking a step back, and looking at our orientation programs and saying, this is another lingo word. We don't even know what this means. Why is it in here? Or what are some other barriers that folks wouldn't know? What's the legacy? What's this? So, we're trying to do that I talk openly with my students that I work closely with about, you know, it's okay to ask questions. And I please ask questions. I'll ask questions for you sometimes because you don't know what you don't know. And so making those intentional spaces for folks to ask the stupid questions that everybody calls them, even though they're not stupid, because probably more than one person has them.

Evelyn shared stories of being raised by her grandparents and the essential emotional support she received. She also shared stories of her undergraduate experience and how the crossroads of being first-gen, low-income, and having an illness shaped her experiences. These experiences led her into the field of student affairs. Through graduate school and her professional career, she has

found a voice to advocate for all students while not being afraid to ask tough questions to her colleagues to ensure that all students have a great experience.

Tomas

Tomas was the sixth collaborator to share their story. Tomas identified as a Hispanic/Latinx male. As Tomas shared his story, he revealed that he also considered himself from a low-income background. At the time of the interview, Tomas had recently started as an academic advisor at a very large, public, R1 university in the Southwestern United States. A role he took because he felt he was burned out from his last role as an assistant director for a multicultural office.

Tomas did have an older sister who attended college, so he felt that helped his parents have some basic understanding of the college experience, but he also felt that because he was low-income, that did not change much of what he endured. He went to a college that was 40 minutes from home. Tomas shared stories about starting college and navigating that transition:

I joined Trio, which is you know, like a federal program designated for like, first-generation low-income students. So I think once I got there, I don't think I felt supported in anywhere else except for being in Trio. I think like talking to peers and other people who had similar backgrounds as me, it was super helpful. I remember, even though I did the Summer Bridge program, I still felt somewhat lost the first semester, right? Because I think it's like, alright, that was like a little training. But then, you know, once you got into it, it was like, there was just a lot, so much, I didn't know, right, so much I didn't know. And then I think just not knowing who to ask how to navigate things, things like that. That was like, super challenging for me. And I think for me, I was always a high achiever in high school. So I think for me, it was just this sense of like, oh, you're just gonna

persevere, like, you're just gonna figure it out. That was kind of like the mentality I had. And I think one hard part is I'm not used to, like relying on resources, if that makes sense. And I think because being first-generation, you're used to being around people who don't know if that makes sense, like what to do. So, you just kind of are figuring it out. So, it was hard, because I know a lot of people probably went to like tutoring or talk to their professor or, you know, did things like that, that I think for me just weren't, weren't things that I knew to do. And they weren't things that I felt comfortable doing either

Tomas shared stories about what support looked like for him during his undergraduate and graduate school experiences. He shared that most of his support on campus came from Trio support services, his peers, faculty mentors and from joining a fraternity:

I also joined a Latino fraternity. That was a huge amount of support for me. Just being like with other students who had a lot of the shared identities that I had was really important for me. And then Trio Yeah, I think Trio also. I don't know it's kind of hard to describe. It's like you don't see yourself anywhere else except for when you're in those spaces if that makes sense. So it's like, you know, every time I'm going to class or you know, walking to the Union like, like, you're, you kind of feel like you're like just different from other people, you know, and, or even hearing conversations like that things that people are concerned about where you're like, I'm just trying to eat this month, you know what I mean? Like, it's just very different, I think, experiences that people have. So for me, I felt the most support within the Trio program and also within my fraternity. I also had a couple of faculty members who later became mentors to me.

Tomas shared how the idea of mentorship was “foreign” to him. He mentioned having the thought of: “oh, like, you're interested in me outside of this class. Like, that was very, like, odd

to me, like I had never had that before.” Tomas also shared stories about how his family supported him:

Yeah, I think mostly my family members are probably the most support that I got. They were able to help me more with the emotional and moral support part of my experience. But I think it was also very hard, because I think sometimes they didn't understand how important certain things were, if that makes sense. So, I was like, if I don't pass this exam, I'm going to fail this class, you know what I mean? And like, they don't like understand that. Even though I tried to like explain, it just doesn't make sense. Like, “oh, just don't stress out.” So, sometimes it was hard to navigate. Because I think just because they haven't lived it, they don't understand that part of it.

Tomas credits Trio services for introducing him to the idea of going to graduate school. He was able to attend sponsored trips to look at graduate programs, which he described the experience: “You met with, like, professors, things like that. So that expanded my horizons; I think of like, oh, like, I can go to grad school and do so many more different things than just, you know, things that I've seen before.” Tomas had already developed a passion for assisting other first-generation college students while he was a peer leader on-campus. This led him to think about how to make this a career:

I think I was always really passionate about helping other first-gen students, you know, have a good experience in college. And I think, because I had student leader positions, one of my peer mentors was like, “well, why don't you do the higher ed program?” And like, I also didn't know, that was like a job. You know, like, I was like, oh, I didn't know that I needed a masters to do that job. So I think it was a couple of things. I think I was passionate about working in higher ed when I was in undergrad. And then also, I didn't, I

think when I was done with my, like, my last semester, I still didn't know what I wanted to do if that makes sense. I was kind of like, I didn't know what job I wanted... So for me, it was also like, oh, well, this is a good like, next step, I think let's just start this master's program. But I think that's the reason why I kind of started the higher ed program. And that's the only program I applied to was where I went for undergrad as well. And one of the main reasons I applied is because I also like knew people in it if that makes sense. So, like, even though it was something that like, I wasn't super aware of I knew people who were in the program, I knew, like some faculty members already from the program. So, it felt like I, I had at least a sense of like, who I would be surrounding myself.

Tomas attributed successfully navigating graduate school to the familiarity of the campus, engaged internship supervisors, and having other first-generation college graduates in his program. When it was time for Tomas to job search, he mentioned how intentional he was about the type of institution he wanted to work for:

I only ended up applying two jobs. So, I know, that's like weird. I knew I didn't want to stay in state, I was like, I want to apply somewhere else. And I ended up getting an interview for one of my jobs. And then, you know, I did the phone interview round. And they asked me to come on campus, so that one kind of moved quickly. The other one was moving a lot slower. So, I was very intentional about like what I wanted. At that point, I really wanted to work in fraternity and sorority life. So, I was very much like, those are the roles I'm going for. Also, I really wanted to be somewhere that wasn't a PWI. That was really important for me. So I think both of the places I applied to they were like, high commuter campus [that] had a high like racial and ethnic minority population. And like

high first-gen population as well. So, in that sense, it was easy because I knew what I wanted at that time. But I know of applying to both. And yeah, the first one, the first one moved super quickly, the second one did not. And I ended up getting an offer the next day from when I did the in-person interview. And I accepted it. So, I think at that point in my life, I really wanted to leave the city that I was in, and I wanted to just do something different. And it's really interesting, because it's like at that point like I didn't know how to like negotiate salary, like I didn't know like those types of things right to do. So, I think I was like, oh, like that's a good salary. And sounds great. Like, let's do this type of a thing. So, I definitely didn't ask too many questions. It was very much like they told me about the benefits, the starting date. So, it when I accepted, it moved pretty quickly, because I moved within like a month and started that role. So, it was pretty quick.

Tomas entered into his first job post-graduate degree. While being intentional about the type of school he worked at, he realized that not all professionals thought about the experience of students the way that he did. He describes how being a first-generation student affairs professional shaped how he viewed himself as a professional:

I always think about first-generation, low-income students and as students of color, like I think that's always whom I'm serving in my mind. That's always like what I'm thinking of, and that's very much what other people are not thinking of. So I think for me, it's like being in those in those roles. It was a lot of challenging, especially in my first role; it was a lot of like, challenging like people and being like, Well, why aren't we thinking about these students? And like, if we can make this, so they don't have to pay? Why don't we do that? Like, like those types of questions that I think many people just don't think about. So for me, it was a lot about removing barriers for students, especially first-generation,

low-income students of color. It was a lot about like, how can we make some processes that are quicker, easier, more accessible to students? So that was a lot of the work that I was doing. Especially because I worked in fraternity and sorority life, so it's kind of like a mic..., like kind of like, you know, you think about like, general society. And I feel like it's just like a mini-society within all of that because we have our culturally-based organizations. And then we have our, you know, white fraternities and sororities or historically white fraternities and sororities. And I think you see a lot of the same types of issues that you see in society, right. So, I think I was very intentional about creating more access, really challenging people, creating better processes. At all, that's really hard, honestly, because it's like, you're doing really heavy work, you're, there's managing up, you know, there's a lot of like, making sure that your supervisor isn't being harmful to students. I think it's a lot of also just working with students. And I think, in a sense, like, being there for them, which is also like another level of work that other like other professionals don't have to deal with, right, like, they don't have to deal with students, you know, being like, I'm a person of color, and I, you know, there was a microaggression that happened in my class, and because like, I know what that feels like, [students seek me out] to talk to me about it.

Tomas shared other stories about burnout and how it has affected his career. He communicated very candidly why he took his current job as an academic advisor after previously being in fraternity life and an assistant director of a multicultural center. Tomas shared that first-generation professionals get burned out because of the passion for the work:

A big thing is burnout. Like, that's really big. I don't think anyone teaches you how to have boundaries. It's kind of like, you just gotta, you know, I think, because I had that

lens I identified a lot more problems that other people weren't or like gaps, other people weren't, weren't identifying. And it was very much like; I think I had the I was very proactive about addressing them. But no one ever taught me when to stop. Makes sense. So there are a lot of lessons learned from my first job for sure that I think now I have healthy boundaries when it comes to my job and then my personal life.

Tomas goes on to describe his second job and how he continues to learn about the intersection of passion and boundaries working in his student affairs roles:

It honestly came more to me and my second job, because when it comes to doing, you know, like, Latinx programming, you're, it's a very heavy job. It's a heavy job. It's a lot about, like, you know, societal injustices, a lot about like racism, you know, navigating institutional racism. It was just really, really heavy. And thankfully, I was surrounded by a lot of really amazing people in my job, and I think a lot of us were committed to making a difference. And I think what happened was that we, all of us, all people, myself, got burnt out towards the end of it. And I think for me, it was like I felt burnout. You know, manifest more physically, right. And like, it was more like affecting my physical health, not even just my mental health. So I think at that point is when I realized like, I just need to have a different type of job, like, you know, like this is, this is doing too much to me mentally and physically. And to be honest, we don't get paid that much. So let's just talk about that. We don't get paid that much to be working, you know, these really like intensive jobs, right? So I think I just made a personal decision where like, you know, going into any role, I'm going to have better boundaries, I'm going to, you know, like, know, what are some limits? And I think just, you know, doing some things, like, you know, like checking your emails on the weekends, you know, like, over committing

yourself, like, like, you know, like, volunteering for things, because, you know, you'll do it, you'll do, you'll be more effective at it than other people, right? I think it's like knowing that about yourself. And then also, I believe the pandemic shifted a lot of things like it put some things into perspective for me personally, around how much importance I was given to my job and not to other parts of my life. So I think there was a very, like, internal shift that happened for me. And now that I started this new role. I was very; I was very intentional about having good boundaries and intentional about getting a job where I felt supported. And thankfully, I am. I feel really supported in the role.

Tomas explains how vital support is and how maintaining his boundaries is as he navigates transitioning into his new role. He had insights from his lived experience on how he feels first-generation students affairs professionals' experiences differ from their peers experiences:

There's a lot of exploitation, I think of like, first-gen students and first-gen student affairs workers that I don't think we like talk about. I think that sometimes I think when you have a first-gen mentality, you have something to prove, and you feel like, you know, you're going to do whatever it takes. And I think many institutions and offices take advantage of that, you know, and they make you do work that you shouldn't be doing. Like, that's not your job, you know. So, I think for me, I think that's something that would be good to kind of talk about more is like, what is the exploitation of work looked like, for first-generation student affairs professionals.

Tomas shared stories about his journey of being first-generation but having a sibling that attended college. His stories showcased how his identity of having the intersecting identities of being Latinx, first-generation, and low-income influenced his experiences from undergrad to his professional life.

Reyna

Reyna was the seventh collaborator interviewed for this research study. Reyna identified as a Black woman. When sharing her story, Reyna worked as a student affairs coordinator for an academic college at a large, public, R1 university in the South (that she also attended for her undergraduate and graduate studies). Reyna was the only participant to have a degree with a non-higher education degree, and she obtained a Master of Social Work degree with a plan to work in student affairs. Reyna had a unique situation because she had great-aunts who had attended college, but neither her mother nor father attended college. Her aunts were rooting for her to attend the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) that they attended, but she chose to go to a predominately white institution.

Reyna describes her family as her support system. Her great-aunts were helpful with providing overarching ideas to her parents, such as attending everything, reading everything, and signing up for everything. Though they were older and attended a different institution type, she still felt the void of not having her parent have that experience. Reyna mentioned her mother's support: "I felt like I was supported well enough, not because my parents knew everything, but it's because my mom knew this is what I needed to do. And she was always attending any like parent nights or things like that to find out information, and we all just work together to figure it out." Reyna mentioned that most of the family support was still emotional support. She shared an example of that: "my parents were a great resource as far as like praying for me and my grandma, and all the people back home and my home church."

Reyna explained why she pursued a degree in social work, even though she knew she wanted to work in higher education:

I focused on higher education; all of my professional work experience has been in college access. So, the job that I had right after undergrad was working at a high school with this program ran through AmeriCorps called the Carolina College Advising Corps. And I worked with them for two years at a rural high school who didn't have many resources. And I worked as a guidance counselor of sorts, but focused on college access. And through that experience led me to see wow, these students are just like I was; they don't know what they don't know, they need more exposure to things. What can I do to help expose the students to bigger and greater, and I was going to get a master's in higher education. But then I discovered, oh, wow, if you do social work...It's such a broad, diverse master's...I can do tons of things... I can be in education, I can work with policies, I can do nonprofit work.

This led Reyna to looking into jobs specifically related to college access once she graduated with her master's degree. She only wanted to work with college access programs, but having a master's in social work led to Reyna having to make the connection clear for interviewers. She describes that experience here:

I was interested in higher education and college access. So at the time, I was only looking for College Access related positions, or at least positions where I would be around students. So within social work, my concentration is community management and policy change. So that opens you up to background, helping you with, like, bigger picture, societal issues. And with a job search with me having, I guess, you would say a non-traditional degree in the higher education space, but 100%. related. And, you know, 100% has prepared me more than enough to do well, in a space; I found myself having to explain a lot and help people connect the dots to how my degree was relevant. I distinctly

remember interviewing with a community college, and the structure of this position was for me to work at a local high school. And as I was interviewing with the principal, he was like, um, you know, we have a school social work position open here. And here, let me tell you about this. And I'm like, No, sir. I'm here for this position, which is the college liaison role. And so I feel like I just kept having to over-explain what my, you know, my training background is related to this higher education experience. So that proved to be a bit more difficult than I expected, because everybody you know, it just didn't, it didn't translate well on paper...The actual function of searching, applying, and interviewing networking, that part wasn't a problem at all. And I was able to get a position before I graduated, and I started a couple of weeks after I graduated. So that worked out perfectly, and I was able to actually work. My first job after my master's program was at a community college and I was working with a college access program there.

After two years, Reyna left that job to return to work for the master's of social work program that she graduated. There was a vacant role of coordinator of student affairs, and it was a role that she “admired” as a student and knew would have an impact on the student experience. Reyna describes how being a first-generation student affairs professional influences her work:

I feel like I am the person in a room that is always speaking up about the student experience. And I'm the person, that's probably the one that's always advocating for a little bit more hand holding for our students than other people might, you know, for example, if we have some documentation on the website on steps to register for classes or steps to do XY and Z, I always encourage the extra step Hey, can I make a quick video or record a PowerPoint for students who, so they can understand a little bit better? Because

I'm thinking about first-generation college students? Like they ain't got nobody, that they can call and be like, hey, can you explain this to me? So I feel like I'm always being the student, you know, thinking more about the student experience.

Reyna finds that it also allows her to connect with students differently. She described how being a first-generation student affairs professional enables her to do this:

I get to serve as a student advisor in my role; I am able just to help students cut the fluff and just help them get to the heart of the issue. And like, hey, yeah, I used to, I was struggling on this too, but you really can't do it. And here's how I help them with those practical things that when I will call my family members that I would hope people would say, but then you know, I'm able just to go ahead and tell them upfront.

Reyna has also found support for navigating being a first-generation student affairs professional from other Black women in her department:

I have received great mentorship from other Black professionals at my job. I feel like they have come and take me under their wings and helped me navigate a lot of unspoken things that you don't know about, especially when you work in white spaces. So I've had plenty of times where the elders have pulled me into their office and said, hey, no, you don't sign that petition. Hey, at this meeting, you don't speak up about that, um, or, hey, this is how you approach your supervisor about this issue. When on paper, it seems cut and dry. It's like, I need to get this done. But they're like, no, you got to play the game, so they have helped me.

Reyna shared stories about her journey from undergrad into the field of student affairs. She was the only collaborator not to have a degree in higher education/student affairs but shared stories on why she decided to pursue a degree in social work. Her career has been centered on college access

and student success positions. She attributes her family, mentors, and utilizing resources as contributing to her success. She shared meaningful stories about how her identity as a first-generation student affairs professional influences how she advocates for students.

Jake

Jake was the last collaborator to share his lived experience for this study. Jake identified as a white man from the South. During the time of his interview, Jake served as the assistant director of orientation programs at a very large, public, R1 university in the Southeastern United States. His parents did not attend college. By the time Jake went to college, his father had retired from the army. Jake shared stories about his transition to and through college and into his first roles. Jake had an older brother who started college but did not complete his first year. Jake shared stories of being from a rural background but not being concerned about money. He described that he and his parent's lack of knowledge about resources caused him to miss out on financial aid assistance such as using his father's G.I. Bill to pay for his tuition; he ended up taking out student loans to pay for his education. He describes his understanding of being a first-generation college student:

I don't think I knew what a first-gen student was until I was an orientation leader. As an orientation leader, like, when I started working in admissions, like, definitely like, that's when we're like, oh, well, this is what it means to be a first-gen student. And this is what it means to be a first gen student at my [university]. But I think again, it goes back to like, I don't know that I could tell you resources that were available for first-gen students at [university], like, I know they existed. And I know that they were there. But I think in my mind, like I wrote a lot of them off. Because I think from like, my parents, like, I think

this is something that my parents, I don't know how to like, put it out, like we just don't ask for help. Like, that's just not how we were raised...you just don't ask for help.

Jake found significant support in his student leadership positions and through joining a fraternity. His orientation leader role provided him with mentorship, and his fraternity provided excellent resources for career development. Jake shared stories of getting involved with professional organizations such as the Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention (NODA) during graduate school and continuing involvement in his professional career as a significant source of support through networking.

“And then I was fortunate that I was able to network really well professionally and meet a lot of people. And so that support network, I think, really tied me into wanting to work in Student Affairs wanting to work in orientation, and like, keep those connections going strong.”

Jake shared stories about his job search during graduate school, which he described as different because he was only searching for orientation jobs:

I think the job search was different for me, so I was the only orientation grad in my cohort and the only person searching for jobs in orientation after graduation. And so you're familiar with this field, like we're not trying to get into June and host a search like we're trying to have someone literally walk off stage and right into their office. And so I just remember, the grad before me had gotten a job in November like she had started applying for a job then And so I just remember, like, there was a lot of pressure not from her, but from like my office and from my supervisor to like find a job before graduation. But on the flip side, my program is saying, we'll tell you when it's time to start applying for jobs, to which I said, unless you're going to pay me, when I don't have a job in May,

then you're not going to tell me when to apply for jobs... way I applied for a job in December, got it in march started in June. And so that worked for me. But I also went into my job search knowing that like, moving back into my parent's place was not an option for an array of reasons. But I just knew that that wasn't a route I could take. So I had some added pressure on me to find a job, and my supervisor was supportive of me getting a job. And so, it generally was a good, albeit stressful, process.

Jake had an experience at his first job out of graduate school, where he felt he was the only person in his department advocating for students. He felt like their work was for “show” and did not connect to what students needed. He shared a story of that experience:

And so, my first job out of college was at a flagship PAC 12 institution which had just transitioned to a fully online orientation model with a supplemental Welcome Week. And like, the framework was there, like sure that that's fine, but like, the supports weren't in place.

He immediately began to job search and knew he wanted to work at a place that valued student experiences and where advocacy was real and not “performative.” He shared how this experience made him feel not feel like he was “fighting” and constantly being the only one advocating on the student’s behalf:

I think being first-gen...I think I developed this over time...when I returned to the [my graduate institution] as a professional I had a supervisor that really pushed me to think critically about some of this, but I think being first-gen like I always kept in the back of my mind, how are we supporting our, like our students who aren't? Well, mom and dad and grandma and grandpa went to college. And so like, I know what it's like to be this student...I felt like I had to advocate less. Because it was the expectation...They were

already doing the work for the students. And so, anything I did was supplemental, like, it's just above and beyond. And so that was a nice, really nice feeling.

Jake's experience illustrates how important being an advocate and speaking up for student experiences is for first-generation student affairs professionals. Jake was willing to go on the employment search again less than a year after being in that role due to his experience. When Jake was asked how being a first-generation student affairs informs his practice he shared:

It informs the work that I do from like an advocacy perspective, like being able to advocate not just for first-gen students, but for students coming from other underrepresented groups or students that have those invisible identities that you can't pick up from looking at them or from their application. So, making sure we do not forget a student based that may need more support. So, I definitely think it keeps me on my toes and keeps me thinking about things like that. I think my being first-gen, one of the things and thinking about is how we make these processes work for first-generation students has also really gotten me on like the accessibility train. So how are we making sure our programs are accessible for students? Whether that's language that's friendly for first gen students making sure online and resources are easy to read for first, not just for freshmen students, but like if you need a screen reader, you have a disability or anything like that. And so, I think that being first-gen really opened up my passion, as my interest in like, creating accessible programming and making sure our resources are accessible. Am I perfect at it? No, but I am better than many people in our field are about doing these things.

Jake was candid that this was his final role in student affairs. In his own words, “this will be my last job in student affairs, like after this, I’m out.” He explained that being first-gen has informed his decision to leave the field:

So I think that being first-gen in has definitely contributed to like my desire to make the next move. I also feel like I said Student Affairs is just an emotionally draining field and we tell our students all day long to make the decision that's best for them look out for themselves take care of themselves. But as a professional, when you're making the same decisions, you're making the best decisions, you're taking care of yourself; whether that's I'm drawing boundaries about what it looks like for me to interact with you or what it looks like for me to interact with students. I'm drawing boundaries around my time.

You're punished for it, almost like you're made to feel bad for it.

Jake shared stories of his time of transitioning from going from first-generation college student to first-generation student affairs professional. During his undergraduate experience, he credits his student leadership positions and fraternity for leading him into student affairs. His experience working in new student and orientation programs has allowed him an opportunity to advocate for all students. He shared stories about how his identity as a first-generation student affairs professional has informed his advocacy and how he supports students.

Summary of Collaborator Narratives

In this section, I provided profiles to highlight the stories told by the collaborators/ participants. These stories highlighted the transitional experiences of the first-generation student affairs professionals. Some narrative profiles may be longer than others due to different storytelling styles. The lengths are not an indication of the impact of the stories told. The following section will discuss common themes across the narratives shared by the collaborators.

Themes Across Participants

In this section I present the common themes that emerged from the stories shared by the collaborators. To honor the stories that were told, I use longer quotes in this section to allow the full voice and the exact words of the collaborator to be heard. The stories shared by the collaborators represent their lived experiences as first-generation student affairs professionals. Through thematic analysis of the data three primary themes emerged across the narratives:

1. **“Figure it out”- Discovering Hidden Curriculum:** First-generation professionals felt the impact of hidden curriculum before they started their undergraduate classes and that feeling persisted to their first student affairs role post-graduate school.
2. **“I Found Support”- Finding a Support System:** Establishing and recognizing support was very important during the transitional experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals.
3. **“I’m An Advocate”- Developing Advocacy Skills:** The lived experiences of first-gen professionals inform their practice as student affairs professionals.

Theme One: “Figure it out”- Discovering Hidden Curriculum

The most common quotes from the participants were “you don’t know what you don’t know” and the idea of having to “figure it out.” Stories about “not knowing” were universal and spanned the collaborators’ experiences of getting to and starting college, all the way to their current role as a professional. To fully understand how these experiences shaped participants' transitions, we start with the journey of preparing for and starting college. It was during these moments that the participants first experienced a *hidden curriculum*.

Navigating College: “I Was Really Navigating This in the Dark”

For many, hidden curriculum appeared before they even set foot on campus. Participants shared stories of navigating the admissions process while figuring out financial aid and other preparation needed to get to college. Xenia shared this about her experience: “I was really navigating this in the dark. So, a lot of it was research. A lot of it was staying up late at night googling stuff, going to the library googling stuff... So a lot of it was like financial obstacles that were really tripping me up.” For others, this started with bridge programs that happened before their first semester. Moving into the residence halls was another place where being a first-generation college student and not knowing information left participants feeling “othered” before the first day of class started. Evelyn shared a story of her experience of moving into the residence halls:

Um, so the first day of college. It was a residential campus. And as we know, like, never experienced college before: parents, grandparents, this is all new. I showed up with two suitcases of clothing and supplies, and two instruments because I was a music major. And that was it. I had nothing in terms of school supplies, because who thinks she need that for college. I had no winter clothes, but also hadn't planned on going home for those. And we have a change of seasons. And so, I just felt very underprepared. When then my roommate showed up with TVs and lamps and decorations for the room and took up most of the closet space and drawers. And I was like, oh, I didn't know that we actually had this much space here. So just a genuine feeling of wow, I didn't even think to bring school supplies. Feeling very, very stupid. I guess that first day of this is how we're going to start things. And I have one weekend to get everything put together and put on that cheery face; I'm going to do fine...kind of my motto.

Evelyn was not alone in these feelings during move-in. Jeff shared a similar story about his move-in experience:

It was a unique experience for me. And I think also like that the interesting part when I went to college is that I went by myself. So, like, my parents didn't go with me, I literally packed up a suitcase, a little laundry thing with some pillows and blankets. And like that was basically what I took to college. I have my saxophone because I was the marching band. And so that's basically like what I did. And so it was unique because, like, when I, became an RA, it was like I saw his parents as a huge thing. And I was like, I never really got that. But I also don't think like I expected or knew what to expect when you go to college because again, no one went so it was just like, okay, you're going to school, like have fun type of thing. And it wasn't like this big ordeal. Now working higher than they see where it's like that's a family thing. Everyone's sort of coming and they're helping you move in there decorate is like I learn how to do decorations. I brought clothes...enough for clothes for a week.

Other participants discussed hidden curriculum in other aspects of their transition of to college. For example, Tomas shared a story of feeling of how he started college and there was so much he “didn’t know”. He attended a summer bridge program and still felt like there was so much he didn’t know once classes started:

Even though I did the Summer Bridge program, I still felt somewhat lost the first semester, right? Because I think it's like, alright, that was like a little training. But then, you know, once you got into it, it was like, there was just a lot, so much, I didn't know, right, so much I didn't know. And then I think just not knowing who to ask how to navigate things, things like that. That was like, super challenging for me. And I think for

me, I was always a high achiever in high school. So I think for me, it was just this sense of like, oh, you're just gonna persevere, like, you're just gonna figure it out. That was kind of like the mentality I had. And I think one hard part is I'm not used to, like relying on resources, if that makes sense. And I think because being first-generation, you're used to being around people who don't know if that makes sense, like what to do. So you just kind of are figuring it out.

Participants shared stories of how not knowing the social norms and expectations of college impacted their first semester of college. For example, Xenia shared a similar story to Tomas on what the effect of “not knowing” had on her first-year of college:

The anxiety really, really got to me my first semester my freshman year, because there were these so many unspoken rules and social expectations that were supposed to happen during your first semester, your freshman year. And I just, it just wasn't clicking for me. And that really like transferred to like my grades. And it wasn't until like midway through this semester, where I'm just like, I, I need help. I don't know how I'm going to get it, but I'm going to figure it out. And I bet...eventually, I did.

Most of the participants shared stories of navigating the unknown of their first year of college. Many of the participants relied on peers (friends or residents assistants) to ask questions or gain the information they lacked. This feeling of not knowing inspired many participants to get involved on campus, with many of them becoming resident assistants or orientation leaders. In return for serving in these campus leadership roles, they learned more about campus resources because of the training for the campus leadership positions. These skills and an attitude of “I’ll figure it out” also served as a strategy for the participants navigating their graduate school experience. Unfortunately, the participants just didn’t experience discovering hidden curriculum

in educational settings; they all shared stories of having a similar experience while looking for jobs.

Navigating Job Searches: “That Was a Rookie Mistake”

Navigating job searches was a common challenge shared in the stories of participants. Not having a parent to turn to for advice or knowledge left many collaborators having to “figure it out” or rely on mentos for information. The common challenges shared in participant stories were the hidden curriculum of negotiating salaries, choosing benefits, and knowing how to understand taxes when starting a new job. Tomas shared his experience in a story:

And it's really interesting, because it's like at that point, like I didn't know how to like negotiate salary, like I didn't know like those types of things right to do. So I think for me, I was like, oh, like that's a good salary. And sounds great. Like, let's do this type of a thing. So, I definitely didn't ask too many questions.

This theme highlighted how “hidden curriculum” is often associated with undergraduate experiences for first-generation college graduates. Still, the participants' stories suggest that this concept extends into graduate school and professional careers. Though the participants had to navigate uncertainty and lack of knowledge in areas where they felt their peers did not, there was an underlying theme of being resilient and “figuring it out.”

Theme 2: “I Found Support”- Finding a Support System:

Participants shared different experiences, yet they all found the most support in their transitions in their families and through peer connections. Overwhelmingly, the stories they shared included other first-generation students and professionals. All participants shared stories about how their families provided support. And most participants shared how they “found support” through leadership and professional development opportunities.

Family Support: “They Were Always There for Me”

Many stories were shared by the participants about the support from their families. The most common story shared was a story of emotional support. Whether it was relatives, partners, or chosen family, each participant shared how the individuals may not have understood to assist due to lack of knowledge but that the emotional and motivational support helped them succeed during their transitions.

Many participants shared stories of calling home and knowing that the support was present. Reyna shared how her family always provided motivational and emotional support on phone calls home:

I think mostly my family members are probably the most support that I got. Like I mentioned, they were able to help me more with like, the emotional and moral support part of my experience. But I think it was also very hard because sometimes they didn't understand how important certain things were.

Evelyn, who was raised by her grandparents, shared about calling home for support when she was having challenging time in college:

I was actually raised by my grandparents. And so, my grandparents were very, very supportive when they could be. It just meant a lot of late-night phone calls when I'd be breaking down over assignments at like 2 am, which is hard for them because they're older. But just like, I don't know what to say to you or where you need to go. But I'll listen. So that was nice to have at least someone to answer the phone calls.

Tomas explained how his family provided emotional support:

I think they supported me in similar ways that they did in my undergrad, you know, I think a lot of them obviously they really wanted me to succeed and they were always you

know, there if I needed to like vent. I think even if they didn't understand it. They were in to like, help me process, you know, give me some emotional support. Also, I think it's interesting because sometimes when you're kind of in that bubble, and you talk to people who aren't in that bubble, it's, it's very much like kind of grounds you, if that makes sense. So, it's very much like, I feel like this exam is like, you know, really high stakes. And then like, they're like, but it's not, you know, like, you're like, it's not, it's not gonna kill you, you know what I mean? Like, you're like, you'll be okay. So, I think for me, that was really helpful sometimes, just to help, you know, like, bring perspective, again, because it is so easy to kind of get sucked into it and just be surrounded by it all the time, that it's nice to sometimes talk to people who aren't in it, and they're able to kind of, you know, bring you some clarity sometimes when you're like spiraling and stressing out.

Navigating family support was not always easy for the participants. There were stories of language barriers and cultural differences. Being the first in the family to attend college, go to graduate school, or work a white-collar job proved challenging for some participants. Jeff described an experience he had when he went home for Thanksgiving during graduate school:

It was the biggest challenge for me, was that when I went home, I want to say it was Thanksgiving, there was like this, like tension with my family at that point, because of more of like, they're like, oh, like, you know, better than us now type of thing because it's like, I was the only college graduate, I'm now getting a master's degree. And I had to learn when to correct them and when not to correct them. And like, just continue with the flow type of thing. Because then there was like, just weird dynamic at first of like, just navigating that, that one of the cultural differences with them, because it's a big cultural thing. But then also, I think it's the first thing because, like, none of them again, went to

college and understand are all of my family are factory workers basically. And so, they worked in a factory, they worked in the fields basically. And so, for me, it was like I'm in going to begin an office job, I'm going to be doing this and stuff like that was a unique dynamic for them to understand. But then again, for me to explain to them what I'm doing, like working wise, but then also when I'm learning and what I'm doing in school.

The participants shared varied stories about support from their families, but a constant thread amongst the stories was that emotional support from family was essential during key transitions. Participants shared multiple stories that emerged from the interviews on how their family influenced the behavior of “just figuring it out” because it was modeled at home. For example, Jake shared a story about how he learned that you “don’t ask for help” at home:

I think this is something that my parents, I don't know how to like, put it...like we just don't ask for help. Like, that's just not how we're raised. Like we, you know, you just don't ask for help.

For some participants, race/ethnicity also added to the idea of learning how to “figure it out” from family. Xenia shared a story about growing up in a Hispanic household and witnessing members of her family model how to “figure it out” on your own:

And I think part of that has to do with the cultural expectations you have growing up, especially for me, like, in a Hispanic household, you're very much taught to be autonomous. And you're supposed to hold your pride very close to your chest and not ask for help. Because, you know, if, if I could, if I could walk a mile and back to go and wash my clothes in the river, then you can suffer in silence and figure out how to do it on your own. Because if I did it that way, you could also do it, so figure it out. So, for me, it wasn't like a figure it out with someone's help. I had to figure it out by myself, on my

own. And that's what I ended up doing. I googled everything; I searched everything. And I empowered myself and equipped myself with the knowledge that I needed to be able to survive. And that ended up helping me a lot.

Having family members with limited college knowledge also made it difficult for the first-generation student affairs professionals to explain their jobs to their families. And even with this challenge, the participants felt the support from their families and knew they could lean on them for emotional support.

Peer Support: “A Lot of the Support I Got Were from Peers”

Support from peers was illuminated in every participant's story. Participants recalled how peer support was instrumental in their success during their undergraduate and graduate school experiences. Often this support led to the introduction of on-campus resources and services. Some of the peer connections were formed through formalized programs, summer bridge programs, support programs specified for first-generation college students, or support programs specific for low-income college students.

For many of the participants, peer support has also been a strategy of success for navigating being a first-generation student affairs professional. Tomas shared a story about how peer support was so crucial for him during his undergrad career:

For me, a lot of the support I got was from peers. So, I also joined a Latino fraternity. That was a huge amount of support for me. Just being with other students who had a lot of the shared identities that I had was really important for me. And then Trio also. I don't know it's kind of hard to describe. It's like you don't see yourself anywhere else except for when you're in those spaces, if that makes sense. So, it's like, you know, every time I'm going to class or you know, walking to the Union like, like, you're, you kind of feel

like you're like just different from other people, you know, and, or even hearing conversations like that things that people are concerned about where you're like, I'm just trying to eat this month, you know what I mean? Like, it's just very different, I think, experiences that people have. So, for me, I felt the most support within the Trio program, also within my fraternity.

Peer support also assisted participants in navigating being a first-generation graduate student. Participants told stories of finding support in graduate school cohort members, affinity spaces, professional organizations, and social media. Obi shares how he found peer community through virtual connections from hashtags and Facebook groups:

I think online is probably where I found my biggest support. Um, your boy likes to tweet. And so, I want to constantly talk about my experiences and the hardships, and even to this day, I do because I like transparency. And I want to feel like I'm not just going through things alone. And, like the internet can make you feel close to people, even whenever you're 1000s of miles away. And so I would say a lot of my support came from the hashtag #SAPro, um, that that's a good one, and then even the #BlackSAP. So that's like Black student affairs professionals. Those were hashtags that I had in my bios for a while, while I was in grad school because I wanted that support. I was also involved in, like, the placement exchange. So like TPE, I was an ambassador for that. And then finding myself and other professional associations within the student affairs, higher education realm. I found myself being supported in different Facebook groups, such as Millennials in Student Affairs, and things like that, overwhelmingly supportive. And I would also say, like, not just a safe space, but a brave space, because I think over the years is gone from people being timid to say what they feel to being very vocal and

unafraid and unapologetic, to take this stance and be like, yo, like, we shouldn't be having to put up with this or like, here's what my institution is doing well. And I want the same for y'all. So like, lookout. And so, I always say those aspects of just being online in the social media presence has been super, super helpful.

The stories shared showcased how peer support was essential to the successful transitions for first-generation student affairs professionals. There was also a connection between having peer connections with those that shared similar lived experiences. This type of connection was necessary for the professionals, and they found them through existing relationships with their graduate school cohorts, connections made through associations, and social media connections.

Other Sources of Support: “I Didn’t Know Any of These Services Sort of Existed”

This theme discussed the importance of support systems from the institution throughout the transitional experiences of FGSAPs. From the timeline of their journey to college and into their early career, the participants expressed how it felt unnatural or “weird” to ask for help or seek resources. Still, they each, in their way, curated support and resources to be successful.

Tomas also found support from faculty mentors, which he first found as “odd”:

I also had a couple of faculty members who would later become mentors to me. But that was also an interesting journey because, like I mentioned, I just never had that type of mentorship before. So, it felt foreign to me, like, oh, you're interested in me outside of this class. Like, that was very, like, odd to me, like I had never had that before.

Jeff recalls an experience from his first semester when he earned a “D” in a class. He mentions how he did not know there were resources and services on campus to assist with tutoring or if there were any Trio/support services:

I didn't know any of these services existed because no one told me these services existed. So, I just kind of picked myself up. I was like, I have to get through this. That's the only way I knew how to do things. I didn't realize that there were places that could help me, support me, and teach me how to study and stuff like that.

Five out of the eight participants shared stories about receiving support from housing/residence life staff during their undergraduate experience. For some participants, this relationship was due to the person being their supervisor, which turned into a mentor/mentee relationship. For some, that support was the pathway to the profession; for others, it was the support they needed during undergrad, and for some, it was the support they needed while working assistantships in graduate school.

Support systems were a common theme shared in all the participants' narratives. There were common stories of how important family was for emotional support; even if they did not know how to assist, there were reoccurring stories of how just being there was necessary for essential transitions.

Theme Three: "I'm An Advocate"- Developing Advocacy Skills

One common theme among the collaborators was how their lived experience had shaped their early career experiences as first-generation student affairs professionals. One of the benefits of studying early professionals is that they were not too far removed from their transitional experiences of getting to college, going to graduate school, and starting their first full-time role in student affairs. These three key transitional periods were highly influential in the participant's narratives and informed the practice of the professionals.

All the collaborators were currently in their second or third full-time professional role post-master's degree during the interviews. This was very beneficial to their stories because I

could hear stories that compared workplaces, institutions, and supervisors. The shared stories were pathways to the student affairs profession, supervisor knowledge is essential, first-gen status affects job searching, and advocacy is top of mind for first-generation student affairs professionals.

Mentorship: “I Just Never had that Type of Mentorship Before”

Mentorship as a pathway to the profession was a common shared experience for participants. The introduction to the field of student affairs came from unofficial and official mentors that were working in those roles. Many of the participants told stories about supervisors, many of whom were hall directors, that saw something in them and opened their eyes to student affairs as a field. Mentors also filled in the gap when first-generation student affairs professionals had questions about which they could turn to their families or friends. Emma shared how mentorship introduced her to the field of student affairs: “the career exploration was, I think, really driven by mentors; I had people saying, oh, you want to do this here is, here's how.”

Obi still has the same two mentors (one from college and one from his graduate studies) that he can still count on for support and guidance, even though one does not work in student affairs anymore. He shares his experience of having mentors and how he values the relationships:

My mentor is still very present in my life today. I actually have two mentors one is in the field, and one is an ex-pat, as we like to say in the field. And I value having two; I value having two mentors, where one was in the field and is no longer in the field. Because anytime I'm going through something, their approach to how to handle it is always very different. And I'm like, of course it is because one of y'all got out and one of y'all is still

here, so I would expect nothing less, but it's cool because that support is with me. And I know that they're never gonna leave me high and dry.

In contrast, Emma shares a story of how she sought out mentorship after feeling like she had no one in a position above her to ask questions. She shares some of that story:

Like there were just all these things that I felt like other friends of mine, even salary negotiation or asking for professional development like others had people to go to, and I didn't necessarily, especially because my sort of core group or either at the same level as me or below because the one thing that I have never really had is a mentor in student affairs. I feel like I just recently got one. So, I didn't have someone above me that I'd stayed connected to really well.

Social Class: “I Don’t Have That Luxury”

Social class and socioeconomic status did not just affect the participants while pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees. Participants shared stories of how social class and socioeconomic status still affected their career decision-making and pursuing other job opportunities. The participant stories varied on how their first-generation status affected their job searches. Those who held multiple identities of first-generation and low-income shared narratives on how this impacted decision criteria around jobs, where to search, and staying in a role longer than they should have. Xenia describes a story of experiencing this:

So as a first-gen person, because I didn't have that luxury and that privilege of, you know, falling back on, you know, my parent's financial security, I took that job out of desperation; I took that job because my mom was sick. The pay was decent, and I could go back home. But if I, if my mom wasn't sick, I would have said hell to the no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Reyna also described how her first-generation identity and social class both play a role in her career decisions:

And also thinking about, you know, other first-generation students just knowing that, oftentimes, we don't have that luxury to explore like, okay, just go quit my job tomorrow, because I'm like this anymore, you have to read the articles about the great resignation in higher education, I'm like, what, how is your life set up so that you can just quit your job because of the pandemic.

Relationships with Colleagues: “A lot of My Coworkers Are Not First-Gen”

When participants were asked how their lived experience of being a first-generation student affairs professional shows up in their current job role, there were similar stories of advocacy, support, and ensuring that first-generation college student experiences are being thought about in all processes. Obi shared a story about how being a first-generation student affairs professional affected his relationships with his colleagues at his institution and how he uses the opportunity to educate others:

But I also think it's also made me more kind and caring towards my coworkers, because, oh, I'm getting emotional. Because I realized that at the institution that I'm at now, a lot of my coworkers are not first gen. However, at the last institution that I was at, several of them were first-generation, and they were alums of that same institution. And so, there was a culture there where they knew what to look out for, they understood and had this bond with the demographic of students just because of how the institution was versus where I'm at. Now, a lot of my coworkers are not aware, because this is not their lived nor shared experience. And so, I take it upon myself to say like, if I am going to be in this space, I want to educate my colleagues about what this transition can be like. And I think

I'm in a pretty amazing office to do so because I work in an orientation office that deals with transition.

Emma shares her perspective on noticing a difference between professionals who are first-gen and those who are not:

We know how to do that for students, but we don't do it for professionals. I think, thinking about the intersection of first-gen and so many other identities, like, there were just always, things were always more complicated for me, like I, you know, with pay, like, I still send money home to my family. There's still familial, like ties and obligations that are really significant to me, that are probably not for other student affairs professionals that are not first-generation. So there's all these like little pieces that I feel like only my first-gen student affairs professionals understand, which has been really interesting to share.

The first-generation student affairs professionals shared stories about their experiences at work and with colleagues and supervisors. They shared stories about shared experiences making a difference in relationships and how they are continually educating others. The next section discusses how the study participants expressed being an advocate as a component of their professional identity.

Advocacy in Action: "I'm An Advocate"

Overwhelmingly, the participants shared how they advocate not only for first-generation students but all students. Having the experience of being a first-generation college student creates an awareness of the barriers and challenges that all students face. This quote from Obi highlights how much of an asset it is to have first-generation student affairs professionals on staff:

I would say an advocate. I think another way is that I see through the lens of bullshit. Like, I sit in meetings sometimes. And I ask aloud, I used to just ask in my head, but I asked aloud now like, whom does this serve? And how does it reach other populations? Because oftentimes, we never think about the first-generation students, we always assume that they have someone in their family or someone who's or mom and dad that went to college and is helping them fill out these forms or is helping them read this website, when it's like, here are the dates, here's the deposit, you got to pay, here's when you're expected to be here. And so, I ask like, who is this serving? And are we making sure that it's understandable? Because it does you no good to produce programming and information and people don't understand what they're consuming. And then lastly, I think as a first-generation student, it's made me just more aware. When I see students that are struggling with their meal plans, or I know should have a meal plan, or not eating the way that they should, it makes me aware to be like, okay, do they know about the food pantry that we have on campus, who has told them about the food pantry, um, it has made me more selfless, and it has made me more compassionate towards students.

Jeff shared stories about how his experience as a first-generation college student heavily influenced his first job out of school. He wanted to ensure that students knew the tools that were available to them to be successful academically. As a conduct officer, he worked to make sure that first-generation college students understood the process and even took it a step further to educate families on the conduct process. From his experiences, Jeff noticed disparities in family involvement for students. He shared a story of this experience:

A lot of the times, the parents who call me and complain and understand everything, are the parents who have gone to college and who understand how to navigate how to talk to

the administrator and stuff like that, where those that are first-gen, they still have some of that support their parents want them to, you know, the best of them. Still, they don't understand how to navigate the bureaucracies and the administrative processes out of university. And so, it's like, how do I accurately explain this to someone, again, who doesn't have that support, who doesn't have even siblings or parents or things like that help them understand, like, this is what it's like to...to go through this, or this is what it's like because you did this. And so, trying to it, I think, again, that kind of goes back, like it helps everyone, it doesn't just help for them. But I think, it's like if someone who's first-gen goes through this process, hopefully, they can understand what it's like and how we are there to support them. But then also, they can have their parents get involved, they kind of also understand what it would be like to support their child through that even though they don't have any experience or understand what it is to go through this process or attend college.

Evelyn also shares how she advocates for first-generation college students in her role:

I try to have very genuine, candid conversations with folks that I do come in contact with our team of three pro staff talk about all the time, how we're being inclusive to first-gen and how we're really taking a step back, and looking at our orientation programs and saying, this is another lingo word. We don't even know what this means. Why is it in here? Or what are some other barriers that folks wouldn't know? What's the legacy? What's this? So, we're trying to do that I talk openly with my students that I work closely with about, you know, it's okay to ask questions. Please ask questions. I'll ask questions for you sometimes, because you don't know what you don't know. And so making those

intentional spaces for folks to ask the stupid questions that everybody calls them, even though they're not stupid, because probably more than one person has them.

Evelyn shared how she intentionally creates space for first-generation college students through her work. She shared another story about how she joined a university committee that had the purpose of supporting first-generation college students, but after addressing these concerns with the committee, she felt like it was performative, with no real work or conversations happening, so she left the committee. Being an advocate showed up more narratives; for example Tomas shares his story of advocacy within his roles:

I think for me, it's highly influenced it because I always think about first-generation, low-income students and as students of color like I think that's always who I'm serving in my mind. That's always like what I'm thinking of, and that's very much what other people are not thinking of. So, I think it's like being in those in those roles for me. It was a lot of challenging, especially in my first role, it was a lot of like, challenging like people and being like, Well, why aren't we thinking about these students? And like, if we can make this so they don't have to pay? Why don't we do that? Like, like those types of questions that I think a lot of people just don't think about. So, it was a lot about removing barriers for students, especially first-generation, low-income students of color. It was a lot about like, how can we make some processes that are quicker, easier, more accessible to students?

Advocacy continued to be a theme throughout the shared narratives. Jake described the impact that his identity as a first-generation student affairs professional has had on his professional identity:

I think it informs the work that I do from like an advocacy perspective, like being able to advocate not just for first-gen students, but for students coming from other underrepresented groups or students that have those invisible identities that you can't pick up from looking at them or from their application... I think my being first-gen access, like one of the things and thinking about how we make these processes work for first-generation students has also really gotten me on like the accessibility train. So how are we making sure our programs are accessible for students? Whether the language that's friendly for first-gen students making sure online and resources are easy to read, not just for freshmen students, but like, if you need a screen reader, you have a disability or anything like that. And so, I think that being first-gen opened up my passion...my interest in creating accessible programming and making sure our resources are accessible.

This theme discussed how the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals shape their professional identity as advocates. There were common subthemes of advocacy, awareness, education, and empathy. Throughout the participants' stories, a common thread was that their undergraduate experience played a significant role in addressing their work and ensured that no student's experience was ignored. The stories highlight that advocacy showed up in meetings, policy reviews, teaching, and student interactions. Illuminating how being an advocate is imprinted into the professional identities of first-generation student affairs professionals.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of these eight early careers, first-generation student affairs professionals. The themes highlighted in this chapter were the results of the stories participants shared in this narrative inquiry study. Through thematic analysis of the data,

three primary themes emerged across the narratives that include direct quotes from the participants: “Figure it out”- Discovering Hidden Curriculum, “I Found Support”- Finding a Support System, and “I’m An Advocate”- Developing Advocacy Skills. The key findings from this study suggest that the pre-career transitional experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs have a significant impact on how they identify and operate as a professional.

The stories highlighted shared that discovering a hidden curriculum is not just an undergraduate experience but still an experience the professionals felt in graduate school and their professional positions. The stories shared perspectives on how essential support systems were throughout the transitions for the participants. All the participants shared how their families provided emotional support and constant support during their transitions. And most importantly, the stories shared illustrated the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals.

The participants also shared stories that provided more context than just barriers and challenges of being a first-generation professional. They also shared stories of perseverance, determination, and advocacy for others in their professional careers. The following chapter discusses the implications and meaning of the findings presented. In addition, I also provide recommendations for practice and ways to further research on first-generation student affairs professionals.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

“I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.” - James Baldwin

Introduction

This narrative inquiry research study examined the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. This study explored the experiences of student affairs professionals who were the first in their families to graduate and their transitional experiences from starting college to their post-collegiate careers. I used Schlossberg’s 4S model of transition theory as a theoretical framework; this theory guided the study by providing the framework for the overarching research question: What is the lived experience of first-generation student affairs professionals? And the sub-question research question: How do first-generation college student affairs professionals describe their key transition experiences from college to early career?

Utilizing transition theory through a narrative inquiry lens provides an opportunity for student affairs professionals, support systems, and researchers to gain insight into the journey of first-generation student affairs professionals from undergraduate to their early careers. In this final chapter, I provide an overview of the findings from the study, comparing them with existing literature and studies. Then, I offer implications for student affairs practice, policy, and future research. In the final section, I reflect on my experience conducting this study and my hopes for the student affairs profession.

Discussion of Findings

First-generation student affairs professionals like Emma, Evelyn, Jake, Jeff, Obi, Reyna, Tomas, and Xenia work at colleges and universities across the United States. This study explored the lived experiences of these eight early careers, first-generation student affairs professionals. In this section, I share findings from the research study and connect the results to existing (and emerging literature) in this area. The participants shared vulnerable stories of navigating transition while recognizing the barriers and support systems that have aided the success of their journey from being a first-generation college graduate to an early career, first-generation student affairs professional. Through thematic analysis of the data, three primary themes emerged across the narratives:

4. **“Figure it out”- Discovering Hidden Curriculum:** First-generation professionals felt the impact of the hidden curriculum before they started their undergraduate classes. That feeling persisted to their first student affairs role post-graduate school.
5. **“I Found Support”- Finding a Support System:** Establishing and recognizing support was significant during the transitional experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals.
6. **“I’m An Advocate”- Developing Advocacy Skills:** The lived experiences of first-gen professionals inform their practice as student affairs professionals.

These major themes also highlighted shared experiences interwoven throughout the participant narratives. Narrowing in on these experiences gives more context to the lived experiences of the professionals while also adding insight into how I formed the major themes. Participants in this study shared stories of navigating transitions during their undergraduate experience, discovering student affairs as a career, surviving graduate school, and how these transitions influence their

professional identity. This next section interprets the findings, connecting the results to current literature and research.

Theme One: “Figure it out”- Discovering Hidden Curriculum

Research shows that first-generation college students face barriers and challenges that are not common to the experiences of non-first-generation students (Canning et al., 2019; Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Martin, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Olson, 2014, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2018; Soria et al., 2014.) This study confirmed that those barriers and challenges impact the lives of first-generation college graduates not only while they are pursuing degrees but also once they enter their careers. One of those challenges that the findings revealed is that discovering hidden curriculum is not just an experience that participants felt during their undergraduate transitions but also during their graduate school and career transitions as student affairs professionals.

The experiences of two participants from my research study described arriving at move-in by themselves and not knowing what items to bring, or that family should have accompanied them. The stories from participants highlighted that the feeling of not knowing the norms started before classes even began. This feeling followed in the stories shared about transitioning to graduate school and starting their careers.

Overall, these student affairs professionals shared how their transitional experiences were more challenging because they had to rely on themselves to seek out the information instead of receiving knowledge passed down from family members. An example of that is the participants who shared that they did not know anything about salary negotiations or benefits. Igniting the same feelings of “not knowing” they experienced when transitioning into their undergraduate

experience, reiterating that navigating a hidden curriculum does not end when a first-generation college student graduates from college.

Theme 2: “I Found Support”- Finding a Support System

Family Support

Some studies (Olson, 2014) suggest that first-generation college students are less likely to succeed due to not having the same level of parental support as their non-first-generation peers. Contrary to these findings, the students in this study understood that parental support was more than knowledge or financial support. The results note that emotional support is the primary type of support shared through stories. The participants all noted that while their families may not have explicitly understood what they were going through, the support from their families was a significant source for them throughout their transitions. This support looked different than the other support systems in their life. Participants told stories of the motivation they received from phone calls, having a place to vent, and the encouraging messages they received from their families. Similar to McCulloh’s (2020) findings on rural student support, one participant who identified with a rural upbringing shared how community support was essential to him.

Peer Support

Peer-to-to peer connections were an important theme throughout the lived experiences shared by participants. One of the major themes that emerged was that peer connections were crucial for the participants transitioning from undergrad to graduate school. Many of the participants shared stories of how their cohorts and friendships formed from their cohort were factors in their success in graduate school. For many, these friendships were with other first-generation graduate students.

Similar to the study conducted by Means and Pyne (2017), many of the participants felt a sense of belonging when they connected with an identity-based center organization during college. Many participants used this strategy to find similar groups in graduate school and affinity spaces during their careers. Tull et al. (2009) found that peer relationships and other opportunities bolster new professional socialization and assist in attrition rates for new professionals.

The findings confirmed that peer relationships were essential as the first-generation professionals navigated their early careers. Many participants shared how they have built community with other first-generation student affairs professionals and how these connections make them feel seen. Obi shared how finding peer connections on social media was a great benefit. He found community through Twitter and Facebook—utilizing those connections to ask about student affairs-related issues, concerns, or general questions within a safe space. Evelyn mentions how having a group chat with other first-generation professionals has been a great source of community and a place for resource sharing.

Mentorship Matters

The findings highlight how vital unofficial and official mentors are for undergraduate success and, most notably, introducing the first-generation student affairs professional to the field of higher education/ student affairs. Unofficial and official mentors filled in the gaps for the first-generation student affairs professionals in this study. They often provided context for any hidden curriculum and assisted in professional success. All the participants shared how they pursued a career in higher education/ student affairs. Most of the participants shared stories about a student affairs administrator who “saw something in them” and asked them if they ever thought of pursuing a career in student affairs. This inquiry was the launching pad for additional guidance on the next step for getting into the field: obtaining a degree.

Theme Three: “I’m An Advocate”- Developing Advocacy Skills

The findings highlight how vital undergraduate and graduate transitions were for career exploration and development for first-generation student affairs professionals. The participants in my study told narratives of struggles with choosing a career and a major, which led to internal struggles for many of the participants when they changed their majors. These findings are similar to the study conducted by Gibbons et al. (2019) on first-generation college students and their adjustment to college and career preparation. Gibbons et al.’s findings recommended offering career counseling before and during the college experience for first-generation college students; and recommended providing support for adjusting to personal change and navigating barriers.

The participants in my study mentioned stories of not having much career guidance or knowing about the career resources on-campus. The findings showed that most participant conversations around career came from student affairs professionals, particularly those who were also their supervisors in campus leadership positions, which highlights a contrast to what research has stated about first-generation student involvement.

Each participant shares a story of how influential their undergraduate leadership roles and student affairs professionals were for them by introducing them to the field of student affairs/higher education. During undergrad, relationships with student affairs professionals influenced the participants to join the field and these same mentors inspired graduate program to attend. Collier and Morgan’s (2008) study on first-generation student involvement highlights how family and work obligations contribute to limited campus involvement due to difficulty with time management skills and a lack of free time; this was not the participants' experience in my study. While individuals in my research did have to work, they were leaders on campus through student leadership positions, and organizations, and three of them were in fraternities. Many of

the participants found opportunities to combine work with campus leadership opportunities. Four out of the eight participants were resident assistants during undergrad. This study focused on early career professionals, and prior research indicates how important the experience of new professionals is for their retention in the field (Tull et al., 2009).

Social Class and Socioeconomic Background

The findings displayed that socioeconomic background was a determining factor in how several participants made decisions. During the participants' transitions, social class consciousness was a factor in where they went to school, how they decided where to work, or even how they had conversations with their support systems. Even though Martin's (2015) study focused on white, low-income, first-generation college students, my research study found similar findings on participants gaining an awareness of their social class when they began college. All the participants who identified as low-income shared stories about how they realized the social class differences between them and their peers in their first semester.

Terry and Fobia (2019) conducted a study of five focus groups with 29 first-generation professionals and additional qualitative interviews with 13 individuals. The study found that first-generation professionals experienced challenges that correlated with socioeconomic background. Terry and Fobia (2019) found that "because they did not come from households with a background of white-collar professional workers to mentor and orient them to the white-collar professional workplace environment, participants often described being left to learn office culture and career path navigation on their own and while on the job." (p. 5). These findings are similar to the conclusions of my study, where participants described having to figure out work environments on their own. Some participants received assistance navigating these workplace

environments through unofficial mentors, others through affinity spaces, and most through peer connections.

Professional Organizations

Professional organizations are a cornerstone for providing opportunities for professional development, mentorship, and community (Tull et al., 2009). Several of the participants described their involvement with professional organizations as a source of support for first-generation student affairs professionals. One participant talked about how being a National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Undergraduate Fellow (NUFP) allowed them a formal mentor at her institution and an opportunity to explore the field of higher education/ student affairs through programming.

Others described that joining professional organizations during graduate school provided opportunities for community and support that they still lean on as a first-generation student affairs professionals. One participant even presented on being a first-generation professional at a national conference. Professional organizations also are an excellent opportunity for formalized mentorship programs. Every participant spoke about mentorship and how it has been a significant factor in their success. One participant described not knowing how to get a mentor and how by attending a student affairs institute, she was paired with a mentor that is instrumental to her career.

Advocacy and the Anti-deficit Achievement Framework

The stories shared by participants have overarching patterns of resiliency, grit, tenacity, and overcoming obstacles through their transitions. The initial research did not seek to understand the participants' experiences from an anti-deficit approach or identify asset-based characteristics. After coding, it became apparent that I must discuss these two frameworks in

interpreting the findings to highlight the stories shared by participants. To keep the interview questions neutral, I did not have any questions about barriers or challenges. As shared in the findings above, the collaborators faced obstacles and challenges throughout their different transitional experiences. And yet they met these transitions by telling themselves, “I’ll figure it out.”

Using the anti-deficit framework by Dr. Shaun Harper (2010), I want to explore the findings by focusing on the barriers and the challenges and how these student affairs professionals overcame them to arrive at how they defined success. Prior research (Canning et al., 2019; Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Martin, 2015; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2018; Soria et al., 2014.) focused on the barriers and challenges but stopped there. Harper (2010) challenged us to operate in a strength-based perspective by having participants name the persons, resources, and experiences they attribute their achievements instead of only identifying barriers to persistence and success. Throughout the findings, participants mentioned student affairs staff, mentors, peers, and their families as those sources of strength.

Our lived experiences shape who we are and how we view the world. An important finding was that all the participants found themselves advocating for first-generation college students. All the participants shared stories of making sure that the experiences of first-generation students were mentioned when in meetings, on committees, or leading programs. When asked how being first-generation student affairs professional shows up in their career, every single one of the participants shared stories of being an advocate. The participants shared stories of filling in the knowledge gaps for others, educating coworkers on accessibility, and some shared stories of frustration when they felt that the work campuses were doing was performative.

At the time of the interviews, all participants were at least on their second job post-masters. The majority of the participants shared stories of making sure while job searching that the next university they chose to work at was a place where they did not have to carry the burden of being the most vocal person advocating on behalf of first-generation college students. This study highlighted that first-generation student affairs professionals are the most passionate employees on college campuses. The stories highlighted how they want to remove any barriers one might face on their journey from being a first-generation college graduate to starting their career.

Boundaries & Limitations of the Study

The boundaries of this research study center around demographics and geographic location. One boundary of this research study is that the demographics of the narratives are limited to four race/ethnicity demographic groups. In the recommendations for the research section, I explain how this is one area of future research to expand the findings. Another boundary is that no participants from this study attended or currently worked at a school on the west coast, though there was western state representation. Not having this representation is a boundary for the study because many schools in California have initiatives for first-generation students so that experience could add narratives from a different perspective. A limitation to the research study was the ability to meet face-to-face for interviews due to concerns regarding COVID-19.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The following section uses the findings of this study to offer recommendations for policy, practice, and support based on the experiences of the first-generation student affairs professionals who participated in this research study. The following information is summarized

to assist those who support, counsel, and supervise first-generation student affairs professionals. This study demonstrates how influential the undergraduate and graduate transition periods were for these professionals; therefore, the information presented in this section will also benefit those that support first-generation college students during their undergraduate and graduate studies.

Undergraduate Transitions

The findings showcased that there were varying undergraduate transitional experiences for the participants. From the experiences of navigating college, the major themes highlighted that hidden curriculum or not knowing language, culture, and norms was common amongst participants. Systems of support was also a central theme that came from the research. The following recommendations are for higher education/ student affairs administrators to consider assisting first-generation college students with better support, resources, and programs for success.

Undergraduate Admissions Process

The findings highlight the lack of knowledge about resources on campus for first-generation college students. Knowledge of resources should start during the college application process. Having a clear definition and asking if an applicant will be a first-generation college student will allow a record of which students identify with that demographic. Universities should then use that data to alert students of resources specifically for first-generation college students. One study participant mentioned how she was alerted about a program specifically for first-generation college students by her university and how that program also provided financial assistance. Being informed about the program was significant for the student to know about the program. First-generation college students must learn about the resources available to them during their transition to college.

Pre-Orientation/ Orientation Programs

A key opportunity is using pre-orientation and orientation programs to inform first-generation college students about opportunities by helping to dismantle the hidden curriculum of the college. New student orientation is mandatory for all incoming students on most college campuses, providing a significant opportunity to use orientation programs to uncover hidden curriculum for all students; this includes introducing language specific to universities and key terms that students should know. Also, using this opportunity to inform students about university housing move-in

Pre-orientation programs include summer bridge programs and extended orientation programs before the student's first semester. These programs should have a wrap-around component that connects students to additional resources and opportunities to build community during the fall semester. First-year seminars and living-learning communities are a great way to continue resources for first-generation college students. A first-year seminar course made up of a cohort of first-generation college students, with a curriculum based on the specific needs of this population, would allow students to have access to a faculty member for support. Living-learning communities for first-generation college students allow community to be curated, with peer support in the resident assistance, guidance from a student affairs professional supervising the community, and programs tailored specifically for this student population.

Pre-orientation and orientation programs could also be used to assist with financial education. Understanding the actual costs of college and financial aid packages was a stressor for participants in this study. Having additional knowledge about options or more information about GI Bills, etc., will assist first-gen students in having more information. The financial implications of an undergraduate degree still affect student affairs professionals, so ensuring

proper financial education early will have long-term benefits. There are additional recommendations, but the ones mentioned above are significant opportunities for the success of first-generation college students. Starting one's undergraduate career with knowledge of resources, unspoken rules, and financial education will jump-start first-generation students to feel more prepared for what to expect.

Parent and Family Programs

Universities with parent and family programs should create initiatives that focus on supporting families and support systems with the hidden curriculum. The findings highlight how the students' majority of support was emotional support. Providing opportunities for parents to learn more about the university calendar around midterms and finals could assist in the support that is already being received. Being involved with the parent and family programs will also allow support systems to feel more connected to their students' collegiate experience.

The findings from this study showcased that the families of the first-generation participants wanted to offer support for starting a white-collar career. Still, they lacked the experience or knowledge to assist. There is an opportunity for family programs and career services to collaborate. Through programming, they can offer additional ideas for how parents can support their students during their job search process.

Peer Mentorship Programs

Peer-to-peer connections are essential for undergraduate success, but they are an even stronger indicator of first-generation student success (Demetriou et al., 2017). Institutions should ensure formal programs for students to be connected to upper-class students. These programs could be related to the previous recommendation for pre-orientation and orientation programs by having those leaders connect with students. Many campuses have peer mentorship programs for

first-year students that are opt-in programs. The biggest thing to remember is to make sure these programs are advertised so that students know they exist and make sure the process to join is accessible.

First-Generation Resource Centers

Most colleges have decentralized student support systems. Decentralization is a challenge for all students to navigate, but our findings show that first-generation students are more likely to not ask for help in finding the resources; they will figure it out independently. The last recommendation is for universities with large populations of first-generation students to create a resource center specifically for this student population. These centers would be the hub of programs and resources for first-generation students, connecting all the essential resources in one place.

Graduate School Transitions

In this section, I focus on the implication of the findings on participants' experiences transitioning to and through graduate school. Several major themes emerged that impact financial considerations, internships, and job searching. One of the major themes that emerged was that peer connections were crucial for the participants as they transitioned from undergrad to graduate school. Many of the participants shared stories of how their cohorts or friends made from their cohort were tremendous in their success in graduate school. It is crucial that if graduate programs do not have a cohort model that, they have a buddy/peer connection program. All graduate programs should have a buddy/ peer connection to pair a first-year graduate student with a second-year graduate student. These programs assist first-generation graduate students with having someone they can go to for support. For many of the participants, it was about being connected to someone who knew what they were going through.

Another opportunity is for the graduate school at each campus to have resources for first-generation graduate students. This includes having the following for first-generation graduate students: new graduate student orientation programs, workshops, and opportunities for first-generation graduate students to connect across disciplines, ensuring that the graduate students are knowledgeable about programs and resources and the campuses' hidden curriculum.

My final recommendation is for higher education/ student affairs graduate programs to be more intentional about assisting with career exploration. The participants in this study provided varying stories of how their graduate programs prepared (or did not prepare) them for job searching. Still, the one consistent thing across the stories was that there was angst about the job search. For many first-generation professionals, obtaining a graduate degree was already something their families could not understand, so the pressure of finding the right job was high stakes. In addition to the job search, there need to be opportunities to discuss negotiations and benefits packages. These would be an excellent opportunity for graduate preparation programs and career development offices to collaborate. Providing the first-generation professionals with more knowledge and resources will help them go into their first role post-graduate school more prepared, confident, and knowledgeable.

Professional Transitions

In this section, I focus on the implication of the findings on professional practice. Several of the major themes have implications for supervision and training, professional organizations, and professional identity. This section is essential for those who supervise, create programs or work for professional organizations that make development opportunities for student affairs professionals. There were common themes of the first-generation student affairs professionals

feeling like they were extending extra energy to advocate for first-generation students. This section offers resources and strategies to support first-generation student affairs professionals.

Advocacy for First-Generation College Students

Advocacy for first-generation college students should come from more than first-generation student affairs professionals who have that lived experience. The findings highlighted how many participants felt they had to advocate or speak up for all student identities. Student affairs divisions must equip professionals to think about the needs of all students. With the number of first-generation college students on the rise, there must be education on how to support the success of these students. An audit must be done on the programs mentioned in the Undergraduate Transitions sections (pre-orientation, orientation, parent/family programs, etc.) to ensure that programs under the division are not creating any additional barriers to first-generation college student success. Student affairs divisions should also lead initiatives on their campuses to ensure that all faculty/ staff know resources for first-generation college students.

Supervision and Training

Supervision plays a vital role in student affairs work and is a factor in retaining new professionals (Tull et al., 2009). Supervisors need to be equipped to work with diverse populations. Knowing first-generation professional needs allows the supervisor-supervisee relationship to have a foundation of understanding and empathy. The findings showed that first-generation student affairs professionals feel like they always had to speak up about the voices missing from the table, which was often no one mentioning the experiences of the first-generation college students. This is an essential consideration as it allows supervisors to understand better what first-generation college students currently need and why first-generation professionals are such strong advocates for the needs of this student population.

Professional Associations/Organizations

Higher education/ student affairs-related professional organizations and associations have an opportunity to offer additional resources for first-generation student affairs professionals. Professional associations with job placement fairs should add other resources on job offers and compensation packages. Many graduate students use these jobs fairs/ placement exchanges to find employment, and they often provide additional opportunities for mock interviews. Adding other resources to assist with understanding the job offer process, including benefits and salary negotiations, would benefit early career, first-generation student affairs professionals.

Other opportunities for early career or new professionals should be strengthened by adding outcomes specific to the professional socialization of first-generation professionals to new professional institutes. Several of the participants described having a chance to feel belonging, find a mentor, and attend education sessions as beneficial to their success as a professional. In addition, they were using the national conferences of these opportunities to provide opportunities for first-generation professionals to connect and by sponsoring workshops for new professionals with an emphasis on first-generation professionals.

Another opportunity is for there to be more formal mentorship programs. Several participants described being placed with a formal mentor through professional organizations. One participant described NASPA's Ubuntu Institute as the first time having an official mentor and how life-changing it has been for her professional career. This can be done through professional organizations, but student affairs divisions can also create opportunities for those who want mentorship by pairing a new professional with a senior administrator.

In this section, I used the findings of this research to offer recommendations for policy, practice, and support based on the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs. The

suggestions are essential for student affairs departments and higher education/ student affairs graduate programs. The following section will focus on recommendations to further this line of research.

Implications for Further Research

There is an excellent opportunity to conduct future research on this topic. Each participant in this study named at least one of their intersecting identities during the interviews. These multiple or intersecting factors included gender identity, race, ethnicity, class (past and present), religious belief, and sexual identity. This research can be expanded to include narratives and voices while considering how the multiple or intersecting identities of the participants shape their transitions. One way to do this is to broaden the demographic questions and add more opportunities for participants to list their identities.

The type of institutions that participants went to for undergraduate and graduate school, and the types of institutions they worked at, were not central to this study but conducting a survey based on this information may yield some additional findings. We know from research that environments (Museus & Saelua, 2017) are a significant factor in success for first-generation college students. Homing in on the type of institutions that first-generation student affairs professionals worked at could add additional findings.

This study focused on early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. Expanding this to mid-level and senior professionals will provide an opportunity to see if there are any differences between those experiences and those of early career professionals. The findings from this study could also guide those first-generation professionals looking to move up to the next leadership level. Results from this study could add to the research on the persistence

of first-generation student affairs professionals and add to the literature on how to support first-generation student affairs professionals beyond the first five years of their careers.

Researcher Reflection

The goal of this research study has always been to move the field forward by highlighting the experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals. From my own experiences, I knew there was a need for others to understand the experiences of these professionals. When I started this study, I was a first-generation student affairs professional. By the time I conducted participant interviews, I was not working on a college campus or in the higher education field. I had to reconcile my experience of being an outsider with stories that mirrored my journey. I did much journaling on how this shift felt for me. I had to hold back when one participant very candidly admitted that he was looking to leave the field at the end of our interview. I stifled “amens” under my breath as I watched collaborators tell bits of my own story.

Being an outsider assisted me in fully hearing their stories. This research has reminded me how special student affairs professionals are and how transformative student affairs professionals are in the lives of college students. I am reassured by creating first-generation centers on college campuses and by the work of centers and committees of student affairs professional organizations. There is a responsibility to preserve the field by ensuring that within the first five years of a new professional’s journey, we remove barriers and challenges that research has proven are present in their roles. And this research study shows that there are additional barriers and challenges when those student affairs professionals are first-generation professionals. For those first-generation student professionals who may read this, I want you to know I see you, I am proud of you, and this research is to make it better for those behind us. You may have been the first, but we will not be the last.

Conclusion

I just think it's important to remember that we're human beings and like intersectionality is real. And so, like, my first-gen experience is colorful because I am someone of faith that identifies as that way, who also happens to be queer, who also happened to grow up in a very predominantly white space. So that is not going to be the same for the next first-generation student or professional you meet. And so, I think with this, just keeping in mind that it's not a monolithic experience like we're all unique and colorful and what we bring to the table and that's what makes being a first-gen person in general, so amazing.-

Obi

I must end this research with an important reminder from Obi, one of the collaborators/participants for this study. Support for first-generation college students has grown in the last fifteen years. This support is shown through the efforts of universities and national organizations working to dismantle barriers for this population. In recent years there has been a significant discussion on what happens when these students become first-generation college graduates. There is emerging data (Terry & Fobia, 2019) on supporting first-generation college graduates as professionals. This study homed in on a sector of first-generational professionals: first-generation student affairs professionals.

This study explored the lived experiences of early career, first-generation student affairs professionals. To explore these lived experiences, this study used the narrative inquiry approach to collect stories along with the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's transition theory. Narrative inquiry and Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) worked in conjunction to provide guidance for the research questions, a framework for how time and

experience are constructed, and a basis for understanding what the current research says about the transition experiences of early, career first-generation student affairs professionals.

Through the data analysis of the narratives shared by participants, some major themes and subthemes emerged. These themes provided insight through three critical transitional periods: going to and through college, navigating graduate school, and the early career experiences of these first-generation student affairs professionals. The goal of this research was for the collective stories of the participants to offer new possibilities and support for first-generation student affairs professionals. I would like to thank those first-generation student affairs professionals for providing their stories to achieve this goal one last time.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Materials

A.1. Recruitment Materials

Hello,

My name is Donald Coleman Jr., and I am a doctoral student at the University of Georgia in the Student Affairs Leadership program. I am seeking participants in my dissertation research study that examines the experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals. This study will utilize qualitative methods to gain insight from current student affairs professionals that were the first in their family to graduate from college. I am seeking participants that meet the following criteria:

- Be a first-generation college graduate
- Be currently employed at a college or university
- Hold a master's degree in college student personnel/affairs, higher education, or a related field.
- Currently within 0 to 6 years of post-master's professional work experience in student affairs/ higher education.

Based on you meeting the inclusion criteria and agreed involvement in the study, participants will:

- Complete a demographic survey (5 minutes).
- Participate in a 60 to 90-minute audio recorded interview.

*This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia. If you are interested in participating, please visit this [**link**](#) to complete the interest form. For more information, please contact me by contact Donald Coleman at (470) 809-6249 or Donald.Coleman@uga.edu or Dr. Georgianna Martin at glmartin@uga.edu.*

The Lived Experiences of Early Career, First- Generation Student Affairs Professionals

**CALL FOR
PARTICIPANTS**



Criteria:

- Be a first-generation college graduate
- Hold a master's degree in college student personnel/affairs, higher education, or a related field
- Be an early career (0 to 6 years) student affairs professional currently employed at a college or university

Participants will be asked to:

- Complete one virtual interview (60-90 minutes).

Fill out the interest survey:

TinyUrl.Com/FirstGenProfessional

Or by QR Code:



For More Information, contact:
Donald Coleman (Co-Investigator)
Dr. Georgianna Martin (Principal Investigator)
Donald.Coleman@UGA.edu

Appendix B

PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Qualtrics Link:

*Thank you for your interest in participating in the study titled **The Lived Experiences of First-Generation Student Affairs Professionals**. The purpose of this survey is to help the researcher to identify eligible individuals to participate in this research study. All information provided in this survey will be treated confidentially.*

Please complete the following pre-screening survey used to determine the eligibility of study participants.

First-Generation Student Affairs Professionals

1. Name
2. Please provide an email address.
3. Please provide a phone number.
4. Please list your ethnicity.
5. Gender: How do you identify?
 - Woman
 - Non-binary
 - Man
 - Prefer to self-describe:
 - i. Self-describe
6. Did either of your parents hold a bachelor's degree from a college or university in the United States of America when you graduated from college?
7. Do you currently hold a master's degree in college student personnel/affairs, higher education, or a closely related field?
 - If you selected a closely related field, please enter your degree.
8. Please list how many years of post-master's professional work experience you have in student affairs/ higher education.
9. Do you currently work at a college or university in student affairs/ higher education?
10. What is your current position title?

Appendix C

Email to Selected Participants

Greetings [NAME],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research focusing on the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals. I am excited to learn from you! As a participant in this study, I am asking you to complete the following three tasks by **[DATE AND TIME]**:

- I am including in this email the IRB consent form (as approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia). Please send back a signed copy of the IRB Form (scanned and emailed or faxed).
- I am requesting the completion of a demographic survey that will provide me with some information prior to our interview. Since I am only allowed to use the information collected from the demographic survey with your consent, some of the questions posed here may be similar to what was previously asked in the pre-screening questionnaire. The link to this survey is **[SURVEY LINK]**.
- You will also be asked to indicate your preference for a phone or virtual/online interview. Please be sure to indicate your preference in the survey.
- Please complete this calendar scheduler <insert link> to let me know a time and date that would work best to call you for an interview.

Again, thank you so much for your willingness to take part in this study. I look forward to learning from and with you. As a reminder, please complete the listed tasks above by **[DATE AND TIME]**. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Kind regards,

Donald Coleman Jr.

Doctoral Candidate, Student Affairs Leadership

Donald.Coleman@uga.edu

(470) 809-6249

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Greetings! My name is Donald A. Coleman, Jr., and I am a doctoral candidate in the Student Affairs Leadership Program at the University of Georgia. This interview is designed to explore your experiences of being a first-generation student affairs professional. The questions are intended to be broad, and there is no right or wrong response. Only share what you are comfortable talking about and know that I genuinely seek to understand your lived experiences truly.

Interview Questions

Starters

1. Please state your pseudonym.
2. First, let's confirm the information you submitted for the demographic questionnaire.

Questions

3. Tell me a story about your journey to college.
4. Tell me your story of being a first-generation college student at your undergraduate institution?
 - a. From whom or where do you receive this support?
 - b. What support is within the institution and what is outside?
 - c. Tell me about the support, if any, you received for your career exploration and development?
5. What motivated you to pursue a master's degree in [student affairs, higher education, or related graduate major]?

- a. Tell me about the reception you received from your family and other support systems when you told them you were pursuing a master's degree?
6. Can you share a story that highlights your experience of transitioning from a first-generation college graduate to a first-generation graduate student?
 - a. From whom or where do you receive this support?
 - b. What support is within the institution and what is outside?
 - c. *Can you give an example of a time when you felt supported in your transition as a first-generation graduate student?*
7. Tell me about your job search during/ after graduate school?
 - a. Tell me about the support, if any, you received for your career exploration and development?
8. How has your identity as a first-generation professional influenced the way you navigate your current job?
9. What support have you received as first-generation student affairs professional?
 - a. From whom or where do you receive this support?
 - b. What support is within the institution, and what is outside?
 - c. *Can you give an example of a time when you felt supported in your transition as a first-generation student affairs professional?*
10. What career advice would you give to a first-generation college graduate interested in pursuing a career in student affairs?
11. Knowing that goal of this research is to examine the lived experiences of first-generation student affairs professionals, is there anything else you want to tell me that I might not have thought to ask?

Probing Questions

- Can you give me an example or tell me a story that demonstrates what you just shared?
- Describe what that was like.

Interview Wrap up

After the discussion, I will stop the recording and check in with the participant to ask how they feel. I will end by letting them know that I will schedule a follow-up meeting in the coming months to share data analysis notes and the initial findings.

APPENDIX F

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

Researcher's Statement

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: *Georgianna Martin, PhD*
Associate Professor
Department of Counseling and Human Development Services
Glmartin@uga.edu

Co-Principal Investigator: *Donald Coleman Jr.*
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counseling and Human Development Services
Donald.Coleman@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of student affairs professionals that were the first in their families to graduate from college (first-generation student affairs professionals). This study will be guided by the following overarching research questions and sub-question:

- What is the lived experience of first-generation student affairs professionals?
 - How do first-generation college student affairs professionals describe their key transition experiences from college to early career?

Criteria for participation in the study include: (a) being a first-generation college graduate, (b) currently employed at a college or university in a student affairs position; (c) hold a master's or degree in college student personnel/affairs, higher education, or a related field; (d) possess over two years post-master's professional work experience. For the purposes of this study, a first-generation college graduate means that at the time of graduating from their undergraduate institution, neither of the participant's parents/guardians held a four-year bachelor's degree from a college or university in the United States of America.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are interested in participating in the study, please read the additional information on the following pages, and feel free to ask questions at any point.

Study Procedures and Time Commitment

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a 60–90 minute interview either in-person or via Zoom at a date and time negotiated by you and the researcher.
- Recall and share stories from your experiences as a first-generation professional.

Risks and discomforts

This study will ask participants about their lived experiences, emphasizing their experiences in school and at work. The risks and discomforts associated with this study are as follows:

- Some questions may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.
- Social impacts such as embarrassment, stigmatization, or economic impacts such as employability.
- Audio recording of interviews will be used in this study to ensure an accurate account of interviews. Recordings will be kept until they are transcribed.

Benefits

Because minimal research has been conducted within this field, the contribution of your insight and experiences as a first-generation student affairs professional can help further this field of research. By doing so, future researchers can build upon this study to better assist first-generation student affairs professional that follow your chosen path. There is no compensation or incentives associated with participation in this study.

Confidentiality of records

Every attempt to protect your confidentiality will be made for the purpose of this study. Any reference to you will be by a pseudonym, including any direct quotes from your responses. This document and any notes or recordings that might personally identify you as a participant in this study will be kept in a locked place that only the researcher will have access. Only the researcher and the faculty advisor might know who has participated in this study. Three years after the completion of this research study, all personally identifying information will be destroyed.

This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed. Security measures will be utilized on the Zoom software by locking the room to prevent anyone else from joining the meeting and allowing the participant to list their pseudonym as their Zoom participant name. Transcriptions of the interview, which will be sent to the participant for editing and accuracy purposes, will be password protected and sent electronically to the same e-mail address the participant used to consent to the interview. Researchers will not release identifiable study results to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Participant rights

The leading researcher conducting this study is Donald Coleman Jr., a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. If you have any questions, you may contact me at Donald.Coleman@uga.edu or at (470) 809-6249 or my faculty advisor, Dr. Georgianna Martin, at glmartin@uga.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Donald Coleman Jr.

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.