FIGHTING AS THE FIRST: A CASE STUDY IN UNDERSTANDING THE STRUGGLES OF

FIRST-GENERATION UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

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The purpose of this work was to understand the struggles that first-generation college students experience during their first year in a college/university setting. For the purposes of this study, I defined "first-generation college students" as those students whose parents have not completed a four-year degree. This thesis examines the many ways in which first-generation college students experience hardships during the first year of their collegiate experience (e.g. financial hardships, emotional strains, overall acclimation process, etc.).

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By

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DEDICATION

To those who are, who will be, and who would be—never forget that there must always be a

first.

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There are several individuals to whom I wish to extend acknowledgements of gratitude and thanks. First, I wish to thank my father—always pushing me to achieve greatness, to prove the naysayers wrong, and to change the world through employing intention behind every action. In times of confusion and darkness, he has always been my reason and light; he will forever be my hero.

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PREFACE

I wish to provide here an illustration that may set the scene for this piece of research and its genesis. Many years ago, I stepped onto the campus of East Carolina University as a potential student—an alumnus from my hometown, Mr. Pettaway, proudly guided me around this, his alma mater. I remember feeling the excitement during my tour, thinking "This could be my university..." A few months later, I was selecting my seat in the first class of my college career, a large Political Science course focusing on the imminent presidential elections. This experience – the auditorium, the hundreds of students in one space – was completely foreign to me. I was in no way prepared for the academic or social rigors that accompanied my first year as a university student.

Over the years, one question continued to emerge: "What does it mean for me to be 'successful?'" Most people had likened success to earning A's in all course or achieving outstanding grade point averages (GPAs) at the end of each term. For me, this did not seem to be the case. I did not want to fall between the cracks; I did not want to be reduced to a number among the masses. Explaining my success to my family was difficult—not being able to reduce "success" to my course grade or my GPA created a gap of incomprehension. It was not until much later that they became familiar with success as I knew it.

I experienced culture shock as I tried to adjust to my personal form of success. While my GPA was not stellar, at 20 years of age, I had been invited to the University of Oxford to give a talk on my research; this invitation was extended to me twice, again. Then, another offer to speak at Erfurt University of Germany about indigenous religions of Nigeria. Such offers had become slightly commonplace for me. I published research before I was of legal age to drink—now, there were people around the world who started to become familiar with my name. For me, this

was success! This was the rubric that my faculty outlined for success: research, present, and publish. Yet, not being a traditional definition of academic success, this was something that I could not explain to my family. They did not possess the necessary cultural capital to understand why this was significant.

This was an uphill battle, one that offered challenges at every turn. I was struggling academically, financially, and socially; my development was extending to "self" rather than to simple intellect. I thought then that this experience was unique to me, and that no one else in our 30,000-odd student population could relate. My experiences were not unique. I began talking with other first-generation college students about their experiences, and about the ways that they overcame adversity. For a period of time, this group became my refuge, helping me to cope with the difficulties of my first years.

First-generation students struggle to establish such explanations. The traditional metrics of success sometimes create impenetrable boundaries within the familial unit and explaining your personal "success" can be difficult. Your family wants to support you, but in truth, they do not know how. Sometimes, financial support is needed. Sometimes, emotional support is needed. Sometimes, just listening freely and without judgement is needed. But, trusting your first-generation college student is something that must happen—they know what they need, so listen with intention. Do not be too quick to judge them as unsuccessful. And, remember, every campus culture is different; so, too, are the needs that accompany first-generation college students there.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons why this topic has been selected for inquiry. To begin, I am a first-generation college student; so, too, is my brother. Yet, until my enrollment at East Carolina University (ECU) as an undergraduate student in 2012, I was woefully unaware of the significance of this distinction, as well as the challenges that may be associated with it. In a broad sense, "first-gens" face unique challenges that are not witnessed by their non-first-generation counterparts at universities. In consideration for this work, I have realized that first-generation college students are an understudied population that can provide insightful data through scholarly inquiry.

In simple terms, "first-generation college students face a number of challenges as they attempt to obtain a post-secondary degree" (Tibbetts, Priniski, Hecht, Borman, & Harackiewicz, 2018). The struggles associated with first-generation college students have attracted increasing scholarly attention over the last ten to fifteen years. Within a more localized context, however, the first-generation college student population is more recently becoming the centerpiece of some state educational policy concerns.

In the fall of 2016, the newly-appointed President of the University of North Carolina System, Margaret Spellings, delivered an inaugural address that briefly discussed the implications of being a first-generation college student in North Carolina. She further highlighted the System's commitment to educating this population – as well as other special risk populations – through college accessibility and affordability throughout the State's public universities (Spellings, 2016). Chancellor Cecil Staton's installation speech in 2017 further emphasized the importance of first-generation college students at the University and within the System (Staton, 2017). While administrators have articulated the concerns that surround first-generation college

students – and while some investigations have been mounted to more thoroughly understand their needs – the first-generation student population at our university continues to grow in an exponential fashion. As this population continues to expand, the university must address its needs more thoroughly—this should be done to guide the creation and implementation of new success measures and resources for this special risk population.

First-generation college students have become a focal point of University and System level administrators in recent times. Directives for the success of this population have been included in the System's Strategic Plan which strives to provide educational access for all underserved populations seeking higher education opportunities (University of North Carolina General Administration, 2017). This statement specifically captures first-generations college students, a traditionally underserved student population in North Carolina. This commitment at the System level, however, does not insure success for this population at each respective campus. To create a strategy for success among first-generation college students, each campus's first-gen population must be intimately understood by its administrative body. From this understanding, campus-specific models for success may be generated and implemented.

This research further serves to demonstrate that, because of the unique difficulties of first-generation college students at our institution, universal solutions to first-generation college student success may not always be applicable. The findings may further be applied to establish university-specific measures that seek to improve first-generation college student success. In addition to the contribution that this work makes to the general body of literature concerning first-generation college students, this thesis further identifies a series of recommendations based upon collected data.

1.1 Defining First-Generation College Students

Within higher education literature, various definitions of the term "first-generation college student" are found. The definition being used in each respective study will influence the segment of the student population that is being referred to or queried (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Generally, however, there are two accepted definitions for first-generation college students within higher education literature. Definition one may be outlined as "neither parent has any postsecondary education (narrow definition)," while definition two can be outlined as "neither parent has completed a four year degree (broad definition)" (Campion, Corbin, & Tuchmayer, 2017).

The Higher Education Act of 1965 received amendments in 1998 which outlined two defining caveats. The term means: "(A) An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B)…any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree." These stipulations specifically relate to the broad definition for the term "first-generation college student;" that is, those students whose parents have not obtained a four-year undergraduate degree are considered "first-generation college students" by federal agencies. It is noteworthy, however, that the application of the broad definition captures students whose parents may have attended a community college for an associate's degree or technical certification.

In 2017, Campion, Corbin and Tuchmayer reported that in the 2014 cohort of students attending East Carolina University, 55% were identified as first-generation college students in accordance to the broader definition; that is, students whose parents have not completed a four-year degree. Though the parents do not possess a four-year degree, they may have attended a four-year institution for a period of time; they may have also earned an associate's degree or

technical certification from a two-year college. This population of first-generation college

students may possess forms of social and/or cultural capital that have been imparted to them vis-

à-vis their parents. Because such reports indicate higher numbers of first-generation college

students at ECU when considered under the broader definition, I argue that its employment for

this study is more apt to producing useful and insightful data

CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Authentic research possesses the ability to contribute to the existent body of literature surrounding any topic of inquiry. The current literature surrounding first-generation college students suggests the quantitative elements associated with their status. Little research in the way of qualitative inquiry regarding contemporary narratives has been conducted. This thesis intends to bridge the gap within the existing literature by providing an insightful qualitative investigation contributes to our understanding of first-generation college students.

Not discounting the importance of quantitative inquiry, it is imperative to note that such approaches do not always capture the nuanced humanity existing within subjective experiences of the human condition. For example, a quantitative study of first-generation college students may thoroughly identify socioeconomic variables that influence attendance rates. However, it would neglect forms of discrimination that may be associated with first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic households, a critical factor that has been expressed as necessary for understanding first-generation college student populations (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Historically, the literature surrounding first-generation college students has produced information which discusses retention (e.g. grade point average), post-graduate career success, and overall college acceptance rates (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). There is also a focus on precollege and post-college assessments among the first-generation college student population which has sought to understand the financial aid needs and post-graduate needs (Jackson & McCabe, 2016). It has been suggested that precollege characteristics of first-generation college students are often compared to characteristics of non-first-generation college students (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

To briefly continue a discussion of the literature surrounding first-generation college students in relation to parents' attitude, a study from 2014 suggests that this population of students suffers often from "family achievement guilt" (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). This guilt is broadly outlined by Covarrubias and Fryberg as the "…realization that family members did not have the same change of attending college (i.e., that inequalities exist in society), and that family members were struggling at home while they experienced more privileges and pursued more opportunities in college" (2015). A further explanation of this concept would suggest that first-generation college students are left to feel both proud of their academic success and concerned about the impact leaving home has had on their familial unit (Priorkowski, 1983; Whitten, 1992).

Further research suggests that some first-generation college students feel like "survivors" after deciding to leave home for college attendance; this position is witnessed in lower income minority households (Day & Newburger, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Leaving homes in which alcoholism, financial struggles, physical violence, etc. exists has been alluded to in some reports as explanatory for feelings of survival (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). A conclusive, empirical study led by Austin, Clark, Ross, and Taylor found that this form feelings positively related to depressive indicators among African-American college students who were designated as first-generation students, as well (2009).

Because of such findings regarding the psychological aspects of first-generation college students during their matriculation process, various avenues of scholarship regarding first-generation college students have identified them as an "at-risk" or "special-risk" population (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger , Pascarella, & Amaury, 1996). This work contributes the

distinction to risks associated with persistence and degree attainment. In 1982, Billison and Terry noted that this risk association with persistence and degree attainment is responsible chiefly to lower levels of academic and social integration (Billison & Terry, 1982). Regarding overall persistence and achievement in higher education settings, the parents' educational level was identified early on as the primary critical predictor variable (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975; Pantages and Creedon, 1978).

A 2012 study notes that "there are many factors that affect first-generation students' preparedness and confidence as they enter college, including some noncognitive variables…" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). This study further highlights social class, culture (institutional and familial), and race and ethnicity or group identity as factors that influence the readiness and assurance of students within collegiate environments. Stephens, et al. (2012) submits that expressions of students' cultural models of self within the college setting are heavily informed by social class backgrounds. This study within the existing literature argues that differing forms of independence/interdependence are expected as part of identity within varying groups. We may, therefore, expect a different expression of independence from students who understand norms from middle-class traditions than from students who understand norms from upper-class frameworks. A later study suggests that U.S. institutions promote mainstream norms and, as a result, institutions unconsciously perpetuate inequality by generating obstacles that hinder the performance of underrepresented groups (Stephens & Townsend, The Norms That Drive Behavior: Implications for Cultural Mismatch Theory, 2015).

One qualitative study of interest discusses the ways in which first-generation college students are enabled to break intergenerational cycles associated with not pursuing post-secondary education (Gofen, 2009). Gofen's research suggests that parents' attitudes towards

education is critical in attendance decisions and overall academic success. Educational inequality within the familial unit is often set aside by parents who realize that higher education lends to more stable employment and dependable income (Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

The Congressional Committee on Education and the Workforce further note that, to better address the needs of first-generation college students, universities must "adapt programs to recognize the state, regional, and local context and characteristics of [the] students served," (Improving College Access and Completion for Low-Income and First-Generation Students, 2015). This report argues that universal approaches to first-generation college students' needs may be futile. This is due, in part, to institutions discounting the significance of indigenous impact on student populations. This is of interest given East Carolina University's location within the State, established in a region that is heavily challenged by socioeconomic barriers.

The previous studies contracted by the Committee on Education and workforce – and, more specifically, Dr. Laura W. Perna of the University of Pennsylvania – may address quite adequately the concerns raised by Stephens and Townsend in the Cultural Mismatch Theory. In this study, the institution must understand more thoroughly the unique needs of its student population, as well as the factors that influence those needs; these necessities are heavily informed by features of the locale and its population. First-generation college students attending college in Pitt County possess needs distinctly different than first-generation college students who attend college in Wake County, a more affluent county.

To illustrate this point, the UNC System Office identifies Pitt County's educational attainment at 42%, while Wake County is ranked at 60% ((University of North Carolina General Administration, 2017). To understand the exclusivity of each first-generation college student population's needs, this research captures narratives of first-generation college students of East

Carolina University during their collegiate career. For example, we may see that racial and ethnic differences influence first-generation college student experiences at East Carolina University in a staggering way when compared to first-generation college cohorts in larger counties of the State (Shouping & St. John, 2001).

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Pierre Bourdieu is known for his work regarding the sociology of the academic profession. His lengthy studies of universities revealed theories on four types of capital in educational settings: social capital, symbolic capital, cultural capital, and economic capital (Fowler, 1997). I have identified two primary theories that have guided the conception and completion of the study: Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, and Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory. These theories specifically have been linked in the literature to projects concerning higher education.

3.1 Bourdieu's Social Capital

The task of defining both social and cultural capital clearly and concisely has long perplexed both sociologists and scholars of higher education for years (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This may be due, in part, to the fact that social and cultural capitals are concepts rather than easily quantifiable claims. These forms of capital – unlike many other forms of capital – represent elements of the human condition and experiences within it. Some scholars have suggested that the concept suffers from an "acute definitional fuzziness" (Foley & Edwards, 1999). For this reason, assigning numerical or quantifiable values to the concepts is problematic.

Pascarella et al. succinctly defines social capital as "…a form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources" (2004). Social capital is gained by the expansion of an individual's network—as the network expands, the general access to resources and knowledge expands, as well. This is furthered by Bridget Fowler who describes social capital as the "…power gained by the sheer number of family members, retainers or network of supporter" (1997).

The growth of social capital (e.g. knowledge and resources) is vital to the decision-making processes and overall ability to pilot academic expectations and achievements in the collegiate setting. It has been suggested that three forms of social capital exist: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms (Ho, 2002). While all forms of social capital are relevant to higher education, it has further been argued that the establishment of networks and relationships is fundamental to understanding norms within groups or societies, particularly those which exist within higher education (Plagens, 2011). The norms "…emerge as a result of ongoing association among individuals" (Plagens, 2011). With exception to shared courses, first-generation college students at East Carolina University do not experience "ongoing association" with other first-generation college students.

First-generation college students possess little-to-no understanding of social and/or cultural norms regarding institutions of higher education. To some degree, this is due to the inability for family members to impart social capital to their students before college attendance. Research has illustrated that a university or college student's social capital generated from their family background influences their academic accomplishments regarding training and perseverance in higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 2000; Horvat et al., 2003; Anderson, 2005; Ream, 2005). Because of this, there exists an "…incompatibility of students' social capital background and higher educational achievement…" (Jensen & Jetten, 2015).

First-generation college students do not inherit social capital from their familial units relating to institutions of higher education. Without the inheritance of social capital concerning higher education, this population is required to form social capital within this setting independently. It has been argued that "risk behaviors tend to occur within a peer context" (Wolfe, Jaffe, & Crooks, 2006). Because of such submissions, first-generation college students

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are in greater need of guidance towards healthy forms of social capital, such as study groups, on-campus organizations, etc. Without this guidance, first-generation college students may experience peer pressure to engage in risk behaviors (e.g. underage drinking, drug abuse, etc.). Through the findings, it becomes clear that social capital is of concern for first-generation college students, seeking to expand their networks and friendship circles through attending social events. Namely, these findings highlight the relationship and interdependency between financial support and the generation and maintenance of social capital.

3.2 Bourdieu's Cultural Capital

"Studies of educational inequality frequently make use of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital" (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Previously mentioned, however, the academy has long labored to establish a finite definition for cultural capital. Surprisingly, Bourdieu himself struggled with producing a definition of cultural capital, remaining inconsistent "…across all of his works, leading to some confusion about the concept" (Dumais & Ward, 2010). A more laconic definition of cultural capital is the "…distinction within the autonomous fields of art and science; intellectual or educational qualifications" (Fowler, 1997). By extension, and with greater clarification, Bills discusses cultural capital as the "degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the 'dominant' culture of a society" (2003).

Bourdieu contends that, just as economic capital, cultural capital is "…structured to favour [sic] those who already possess…cultural capital, in the forms of habitus of the dominant cultural fraction" (Harker, 1990). This proves problematic as "…cultural capital is unequally distributed in society, with middle and upper class familiar having more and working and lower class familiar having less (or none at all)" (Dumais & Ward, 2010). In accordance with the findings of Dumais and Ward (2010), it is likely that first-generation college students at East Carolina

University arriving from less affluent communities possess little-to-no cultural capital. As DiMaggio (1982) and Laraeu (2000) demonstrate in their respective studies, the lack of cultural capital for this population is challenging to the overall academic success of college students, especially those who are considered to be "first in the family."

The possession and activation of cultural capital has been associated with higher grades and other positive educational experiences (DiMaggio, 1982; Laraeu, 2000). Bourdieu theorizes that cultural capital is attained through the socialization process at home and through familial investment in appropriate forms of cultural training (Bourdieu P. , Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction, 1973). For first-generation college students, inheriting cultural capital from home and through familial investments – as it relates to institutions of higher education – is not feasible. With first-generation college students being the first in their family to experience higher education in a primary sense, this type of cultural capital is absent.

With the absence of this much needed cultural capital, first-generation college students are more likely to reproduce the social structures of the previous generation (Dumais & Ward, 2010). However, in some instances, the lack of this cultural capital can serve as a catalyst for social mobility apropos higher education (DiMaggio, 1982). For many first-generation college students, the desire to break the cycle and to create new forms of social structures for reproduction is great; with this desire as the primary driving force for accessing higher education and promoting social mobility, the anticipation of creating more cultural capital can fuel their attendance and overall academic achievement.

A lack of social and cultural capital among first-generation college students generate challenges in the understanding of academic expectations and the overall ability to navigate within an academic setting. These two theories are well-suited for a study of first-generation

college students. First-generation college student populations do not understand thoroughly the realities and rigors associated with attending a college or university; however, the university has previously established expectations for their performance. In accordance with research by Jensen and Jetten, as first-generation college students' social and cultural capital continues to be incompatible with expectations in higher education settings, this population will continue to struggle with the acclimation and achievement processes in institutions of higher education (2015).

3.2 A Brief Note on Bourdieu's Habitus and Its Link to Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu submits that individuals physically embody culture or cultural capital through understandings which have been educated by life experience and personal history (Bourdieu P. , Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction, 1977). This concept is known as the *habitus,* or a "…learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). To elaborate briefly over the notion of "dispositions" as it is applied to the term *habitus,* "dispositions are acquired in social positions within a field and imply a subjective adjustment to that position" (Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes, 1990). To establish a clearer link between *habitus* and cultural capital: negative dispositions, or an individual's *habitus*, towards higher education can be informed by the individual's lack of cultural capital; as a result, their dispositions, or *habitus,* can influence their educational achievement and attainment outcomes (Gaddis, 2013).

While the *habitus* remains unique and enduring for any individual, it is not necessarily unchangeable (Bourdieu, 1990). As society and social structures evolves, for example, an individual's *habitus* may experience forms of evolution. The implementations of educational policies and curricula must be reflective of the needs of the contemporary first-generation

college student cohort and must be altered according to shifts in society and social structures (e.g. national political elections, etc.). As the cost of college attendance increases, so too does the national climate surrounding college attendance decisions; in particular, as public education continues to experience defunding, the fear of affording college is increasing among low-income and less affluent communities (DeHahn, 2017).

3.3 A Brief Note on the Cultural Mismatch Theory

For this work, it is important to briefly note the Cultural Mismatch Theory conceptualized by Stephens, Townsend, Markus, and Phillips (2012). The core of this theory suggests that "…inequality is produced when the cultural norms in mainstream institutions do not match the norms prevalent among social groups which are under-represented in those institutions" (Stephens & Townsend, The Norms That Drive Behavior: Implications for Cultural Mismatch Theory, 2015). It has been further submitted that, according to the Cultural Mismatch Theory, "the academic performance of [first-generation] college students may suffer due to a discrepancy between their interdependent values and the independent norms implicit in institutions of higher education" (Tibbetts, Priniski, Hecht, Borman, & Harackiewicz, 2018). To understand the needs and the overall success of first-generation college students at East Carolina University, it is important to first understand the population's cultural norms surrounding higher education.

To illustrate the significance of this theoretical reasoning, I have first considered the variance of norms presented to first-generation college students in their familial culture. For example, in a home where parents have not attended college, there is likely a greater focus on work values and vocational skills rather than educational or academic achievements. The emphasis of work values or vocational skills within the home-life of these students directly influences the translation of culture surrounding education for this population as they matriculate in the university. This

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culture is informed largely by their life experiences, and by the norms that have been presented to them during their formative years. Within sociological discussions, this history of experiences is referred to as habitus, a submission made by Pierre Bourdieu. A brief conversation regarding this theory will be offered with brevity in a following section.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

A qualitative approach best fits this topic of study; more specifically, an inductive approach. "Inductive research involves the search for pattern from observation and the development of explanations" (Bernard, 2011). In some instances, research can be limited due the imposition of expectations in the form of hypotheses (predictive work). By contrast, qualitative methodological approaches begin with observations, allowing for themes to emerge naturally from the data set after its collection.

3.1 Using a Case Study Approach

As a rule, qualitative inquiry best suits inquisitions that are deeply influenced by various expressions of the human condition. As Flyvbjerg comments, "…in the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge…[ruling] out the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction" (2006). As this study investigated the cultural mismatch of first-generation college students at the institution, a case approach is justifiable. More specifically, the use of a "…technique where evidence collected from one or more case sites is systematically analyzed and synthesized to allow concepts and patterns to emerge" (Bhattacherjee, 2012).

As an approach, the case study seeks to highlight the complexity of a particular case (Stake, 1995). Yin submits that three primary forms of case study exist: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory (1989). This research subscribed to the explanatory case study; that is, a case study approach that "…allows the researcher to factually record and draw inferences…[They] are concerned with providing accurate events and explanations" (Cunningham, 1997). With this approach, a researcher only reports findings that are supportive to "providing a proof"

(Cunningham, 1997). As the goal of case study work is to generate data-informed evidence to support a claim, it is appropriate to select cases based on validity.

3.2 Defining the Case

The concerns associated with selecting the cases within a case study has contributed to a lengthy discourse led by social scientists. These concerns are posed due to the fact that a case's "type" cannot be identified until after its selection and collection (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Ideally, a researcher strives to identify paradigmatic cases from which data may be gleaned. Even with the existence of terminology that captures such cases, no clear definition establishes criteria for isolating paradigmatic cases. In this vein, Flyvbjerg explains the identification process for paradigmatic cases noting "…such practice relies on taken-for-granted procedures that feel largely intuitive" (2006). He further suggests that as a concept, "intuition" can often be difficult for a researcher to substantiate.

In considering the cases that might apply to this study, I issued several caveats that helped to inform the case-selection process. First, the term "case study" here referred to first-generation college students at East Carolina University. First-generation college students were the "case" studied. To report on some of the strugglers that this case experienced, this research investigated a sample of respondents from within this established case.

Next, the sample within the case study allowed for "…useful variation on the dimensions of theoretical interest" (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). That is, the sample provided a variation of responses that more broadly informed the overall theme which had been identified by way of theoretical elucidations. The research not only represents those samples which may be interpreted as "typical," but also accounts for atypical variations of thought. This was best

achieved through the "information-oriented selection approach" which seeks to select samples from within the case that represent features of interest (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2009).

3.3 Sampling Strategy

This study utilized a non-probability, snowball sampling strategy. First, the individual in this sample was required to be a first-generation college student in accordance with the broad definition outlined previously (see "*1.1 Defining First-Generation College Students"). Second, the informant was required to be a full-time, on-campus first-generation college student. A total of ten first-generation college students were interviewed.

As a unique culture surrounds first-generation college students at the University, it is arguable that the respondents were "culturally specialized" according to Bernard's definition (2011). Because these provisos were established for the sample population – that the selected sample possesses unique knowledge regarding the subject of inquiry – it follows that the sampling strategy was, therefore, not random. Though this method may have overlooked some outlying narratives, representative and/or random samples would not function as the more apt strategy—"this is because the typical or average case is often not the richest with information" (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

With the employment of hypotheses, a research may know the project is complete when they have been addressed. Yet, with inductive work that does not actively utilize hypotheses, other signals must be recognizable to mark the completion of a research undertaking. "Saturation" exists as one such signal for qualitative research. At its core, saturation "is a term used to describe the point where you have heard the range of ideas and aren't getting new

information." (Krueger & Casey, 2015). A researcher must subjectively determine the criteria that indicates when saturation has been achieved; however, subjectively of the researcher is often a point of criticism (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Despite the concerns surrounding this approach, saturation remains foundational to any inductive undertaking and, therefore, was utilized in this study. Its limitations have been discussed more thoroughly in forthcoming sections.

3.4 Data Collection Method

For this undertaking, I utilized a semi-structured interview instrument. The instrument listed open-ended questions. As this instrument was semi-structured, the order of the questions could be rearranged according to the informant's reluctance to respond and overall willingness to participate in the study. Because this study depended upon understanding the unique experiences of first-generation college students during their collegiate experience – and relied heavily on exploring their contemporary college narratives – an instrument that employed open-ended questions allowed for respondents to respond in their own language. Allowing for individuals to respond in their own language allows for a broader range of themes or opinions to be captured. Whereas a closed instrument would force individuals to respond with predetermined responses, limiting the scope of potential responses, open-ended questions allow for all responses to be collected.

In contrast, there are hazards that may be considered in the use of closed questions; data may be skewed and misleading through forcing responses that are predetermined and not truly represent respondents' opinions (the format of closed questions). In total, the instrument posited eight open-ended questions specifically designed to learn about the struggles that respondents faced as first-generation college students at East Carolina University; beyond this, four self-

reporting demographic questions were listed for respondents to complete: age, home, ethnic/racial identification, and gender identification.[1]

3.5 Data Analysis Method

In qualitative work, establishing patterns, similarities and differences is important in the data analysis process. As a method, textual analysis couples well with inductive, qualitative work; more specifically, the use of grounded theory analysis (also referred to as the "grounded theory approach"). The grounded theory approach "…suggests that researchers should extrapolate conceptual relationships from the data rather than formulate testable hypotheses from existing theory" (Carr, et al., 2018). This method allows for individual, unique patterns to emerge from the raw data. Content analysis methods, by contrast, use the application of predetermined themes to the dataset.

Interviews with respondents were recorded, and then were transcribed within a 24-hour period. After a full transcription of each interview had been produced, each interview was analyzed in accordance with the methods highlighted previously. As the themes emerged organically, they were recorded to assign meaning to each response. The overall purpose of this form of data analysis – grounded theory work and post-collection coding – was to produce comparable ideas as suggested by each informant, lending to the final discussion points.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Restrictions

It is important to note that within case studies results are never generalizable. Even with reaching saturation, the respective approach may overlook some outlying opinions due to a lack

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[1] In an effort to be sensitive to the ongoing conversations surrounding ethnicity, race, and gender identities, several categories were provided for informants to respond; additionally, a self-describing option was available for gender identification.

of inclusion in the sample. As Simon and Goes have suggested, "we cannot make casual inferences from case studies, because we cannot rule out alternative explanation" (2013).

The selection of research methodologist depends heavily upon the relationship being investigated (i.e. the research question), and the discipline within which the research is being formed. From a quantitative approach, the extension of dataset vis-à-vis increased sample size may often be equated with an increase in information, richness and potential for analytical depth. The purpose becomes to establish representative findings or census-styled findings. In contrast, however, qualitative research is not necessarily strengthened when subject to an increase in sample size. An increase in sample size does not parallel directly to an increase in information, nor to the establishment of data richness or analytical depth (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). As there is no predetermined and finite outline for determining when data saturation has occurred in qualitative research, and an overt description of it is impossible to assign, its application is subjective to the respective study and its investigator (Bowen, 2008).

While this may present issues for some researchers and their undertakings, it does not necessarily function as a limitation to this study. The premise of this research is founded on the understanding that first-generation college student populations are unique due to life experiences and culture. Therefore, a general solution for the needs of first-generation college students at the system level is neither practical nor feasible. For this reason, a case study will allow for the collection of data that are unique to the institution and may help to inform institutional practices/policies.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

The goal of this research is to identify the struggles of first-generation college students at East Carolina University in way that could be organized thematically. From those themes, a series of recommendations vis-à-vis discussion points could be offered for the consideration of university administration. Though several collective patterns surfaced during the analysis process, I have identified primary themes for each of the categories.

5.1 Description of the Sample

Ten individuals chose to participate in the case study. Of the ten participants, six individuals self-identified as female, while four individuals self-identified as male. Five of the ten participants self-identified as European American (white), while two self-identified as African American, two self-identified as Hispanic American, and one self-identified as Native American Indian. Six of the ten participants were natives of North Carolina, while the remaining four participants came to East Carolina University from out-of-state (i.e. Ohio, Minnesota, New York, or Kentucky). The age of participants varied between 19-years of age and 23 years of age. Three of the ten respondents were 21-years of age, while two were 19-years of age, two were 20-years of age, two were 22-years of age, and one was 23-years of age.

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents

Identification	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Home	Age
AC	European American	Female	Minnesota	19
TM	European American	Male	Lee County, NC	21
JC	Hispanic American	Female	Sampson County, NC	21
EA	European American	Female	Ohio	20
CB	Native American Indian	Female	Robeson County, NC	22
NA	European American	Female	Kentucky	22
HB	African American	Male	Greene County, NC	19
RA	African American	Male	Johnston County, NC	21
AA	European American	Female	New York	23
JA	Hispanic American	Male	Pender County, NC	20

Table 2: Summary of Themes by Question

Categories from Questions	Main Response Themes
Question 1: *Motivation to attend college…*	1. Future financial security 2. Push by parents to attend
Question 2: *Influence to attend ECU…*	1. Programs 2. Location 3. Financial aid/affordability
Question 3: *Hear about attending college growing up…*	1. Cost/too expensive 2. Too hard
Question 4: *Surprised when first arrived at ECU…*	1. Campus/class size 2. Study skills 3. Getting good grades
Question 5: *Some challenges faced during first year…*	1. Money 2. Making friends/socializing
Question 6: *Most challenging experiences while at ECU…*	1. Explaining to parents about college
Question 7: *Things university could do differently for first-generation students*	1. More scholarships/funds for first-generation students 2. Group/organization for first-generation students to meet other first-generation students 3. Better communication about resources
Question 8: *If you could tell administrators anything…*	1. Listen to students 2. Be more visible 3. More needs-based money

5.2 Motivation to Attend College

Respondents were asked to discuss the elements of their history and life that influenced their motivation to attend college. This question was not specific to East Carolina University, but to college itself. Regarding this category, two main themes emerged: future financial success, and pressure by parents to attend college. Eight of the ten respondents agreed that future financial success motivated their attendance decisions.

One student, a 19-year old European American female from Minnesota, appeared eager to share reasons as to why future financial success motivated her college attendance decisions. During the interview process, this informant provided exceptionally detailed responses without copious probing—this indicated a personal keenness in sharing her experiences to be included as a part of this undertaking. She noted that:

> …my dad was the sole provider of my family basically. And I just don't ever want to be in that situation, so I want to have that financial security. I also know that by having a degree my options in jobs are diverse and…there will be a lot of them comparatively.

Another student, a 21-year old Hispanic American female from Sampson County, North Carolina appeared reluctant and guilt-stricken when discussing her motivation for attending college. With her head down, starring into her coffee, she discussed the financial situation of her parents briefly:

> I guess I just wanted better for myself. I watched my parents struggle to make money sometimes, going from one unstable job to another. Sometimes we were really good financially, and then sometimes we just couldn't make ends meet… I guess in the end I just wanted to make sure that I could always pay my bills without any trouble. I know a college degree doesn't guarantee that, but I do know that it helps.

A 20-year-old, European American female student from Ohio, admitted that "Even without knowing what [she] wanted to study, [she] did know that [she] stood a better chance of

finding a good job and having a better income if [she] had a college degree to put with [her] name."

Two of the ten respondents noted that their motivation to attend college was the pressure that they received from their familial units. A Native American female student, 21 years old and from Robeson County, North Carolina, said that college is "all [she] knew about growing up." Another female student, 19 years old and from out of state, noted that that her "…parents really valued education."

5.3 Selecting ECU

Respondents were asked the following question about their decision to attend ECU: "Given that there are so many choices for attending college, what influenced you to attend ECU?" The analysis of responses to this question allowed for three primary themes to emerge. Namely: interest in particular program, cost/financial aid, and existing social networks (i.e. friends attending ECU). Seven of the ten respondents stated that East Carolina University offered particular programs of study.

A European American female, 20-years old from Ohio – who later would discuss with me her discontent towards ECU and the funding which was extended to her – noted that:

> As I started to make my way through deciding which colleges to apply to, I realized that my real passion was studying geology. Without getting too boring, I wanted to look into a particular type of geology – and ECU's geology department offered that type.

Another student, a 21-year old African American male from Lee County, North Carolina, remembers his experience in choosing East Carolina University differently, aligning with ideas of location/accessibility, rather than the three primary themes mentioned previously. His

excitement and sense of accomplishment regarding college attendance was apparent during the interview process:

> I would save a little from each paycheck to pay for application fees. So, I created a list of schools that I was interested in that I knew I would have to pay for first…before any other schools would come to mind. ECU was close; my parents had taken the time to go tour schools with my brother, but they didn't take that time with me. So, I was fortunate enough to one day have friend from home offer to take me here to look around…The fountain was pristine, the trees were full, it was such an awesome experience. I knew that I didn't need to tour anywhere else…I also liked that I knew some people here so that I wouldn't be all alone…

Yet another student, a 21-year old Hispanic American from Sampson County, North Carolina, discussed different concerns about attending college, altogether. As we chatted about her knowledge of college before attending, her demeanor indicated that her parents might be disappointed in her for attending college. The following excerpt from the interview provides background and context for this observation:

> I heard lots of things, but none of them were good really. When you say "growing up," I think about things I heard around the house or from family, not really what I heard in school. I remember my parents saying negative stuff about college here and there. Like, "college is for rich people," or "college is where the liberals go." To be honest, I didn't know what a "liberal" was, but I knew I didn't want to be one. I knew my family wasn't rich, so I knew that isn't where I would be going. It was kind of like they thought people went to college, got an education, and then became too smart for their own good…almost like they would look down on everyone else. I don't recall interacting with many college-educated people growing up either, so there wasn't really anything to say differently. And then when I finally came to college, my parents kind of seemed upset or disappointed…like I should have taken a job somewhere or something instead. I think that they thought I'd ask for money that they didn't have. It was a stressful time between us then. I think they still have some disappointment that I didn't stay home to work or anything. Honestly, they don't really chat with me about college…and they have never come to see me here…and I have been here for three years. I have become very close to my friends now, almost like they're my new family.

The same student said she "…found out that [she] could have a job on campus that would help [her] pay for college, and that [she] would be awarded…enough money to cover attendance."

5.4 Ideas About College Prior to Attending

In response to the question, "What did you hear about attending college when you were growing up?" respondents offered two primary themes: cost of attendance/expenses, and difficulty. One first-generation student, a 20-year old European American female from Ohio, said that her formative ideas regarding college did not necessarily produce "…anything explicitly bad…" She continued by saying:

> …there was some language that allowed me to read between the lines; you know what I mean? So, my parents might say something like 'Oh, that's such a long time to go without a job or income and not to even be sure of having a job when you finish.' Or 'Do you really want to be a poor college student for the next four years?' The more I have made friends here and talked to them, the more I realize that it seems pretty common for parents to say stuff like that when they didn't attend college…

Another first-generation student, a 21-year old African American male from Lee County, North Carolina described his formative idea about college as an "…unrealistic goal…" explaining "…that [he] would never make it…" When discussing this element of his collegiate experience, the informant seemed hesitant to reveal this information—perhaps because in reflection, this goal has become a reality for.

> They really discouraged me from applying…so no greater satisfaction was given than when I finally received my purple envelope in the mailbox one Saturday… Me wanting to pursue a liberal arts or humanities degree was particularly embarrassing for them.

5.5 Surprises After Arriving

In response to the question "What surprised you when you first arrived at ECU?" of the ten respondents, seven agreed that campus/class size surprised them. Some respondents noted that:

> I think the first thing that really surprised me was the size of some of my classes during my freshman year. I had come from a rural high school in North Carolina, and I think we had maybe 150 total graduating students in my class. One of my biology classes here

during my freshman year had closer to 300 or 400 students in it. That was just mind-blowing for me to see (21, African American, Male, Lee County, NC).

So yeah, class size was a shocker. I came from a small country high school, so seeing a couple of hundred people in one classroom was wild! I just remember thinking about how much I hated public speaking, and I kept hoping that the professor wouldn't require us to do a presentation or anything at the end of the semester (21, Hispanic American, Female, Sampson County, NC).

I think that class size also shocked me a bit. I don't really know what I was expecting, but some of those gen. ed. Classes were huge… I went into a PoliSci class one time and could have sworn that there were 500 people in the room. I know that isn't true, of course. But that what I mean; the classes seemed huge when I first arrived, and just the environment of so many people in one room was a little intimidating (20, European American, Female, Ohio).

Similarly, two students suggested that required study skills surprised them. One student, a 21-year old African American male from Lee County, North Carolina, discussed the surprise that he faced during his freshman year as he worked to adjust to reading amounts and studying requirements. During his interview, he exposed how these barriers caused distress during his early collegiate period:

I mean, learning how to read so much dry and boring stuff a day or two before class was really difficult. It isn't that there was so much homework to adjust to, but the amount of reading that I encountered was brutal. Studying was another beast… I had studied a bit in high school, but seriously, how much did anyone really study in high school? I remember preparing for one of my first tests here with a history professor… Trying to prepare for her exams was like trying to write without the alphabet… She was a really harsh grader, and I'd be lying if I said she didn't make me consider dropping out once or twice (21, African American, Male, Lee County, North Carolina).

One student discussed the surprise she experienced by achieving high grades during her first year at East Carolina University:

In high school, all of my teachers were like 'college is the hardest experience ever…like expect to fair your first year…' I thought the best grade I would get was a C…. But then I did way better that I thought. Like I was able to get an A or A- in all of my classes, and

all of my professors were super supportive…which I wasn't really expecting because there are so many students here (19, European American, Female, Minnesota).

5.6 Challenges During First Year

Of the ten responses analyzed, the most common challenge to the participants during their first year at East Carolina University was money management or financial stability. Beyond this major theme, expanding social networks/creating friendships emerged as a primary theme within the responses. One student indicated that she experienced hardships with regard to financial security and money management, seeming embarrassed by it. She noted that:

> …During the first year, I really, really struggled with money management and socializing the most. With money management, it was really difficult because I didn't have much money to actually manage to begin with. I had some financial aid, and I felt rich when that hit the bank, but after paying for books and rent and things, that really, really changed… By the end of the first year, I had racked up pretty significant credit card debt…and I wish that I had learned how to deal with it properly beforehand. Parents mentioned being broke, teachers mentioned falling through the cracks…but no one gave advice on how to deal with own finances and things (20, European American, Female, Ohio).

Another student, a 21-year old, Hispanic American female from Sampson County, North Carolina, discussed ways that she earned money to pay for university-related charges, as well as ways that her friends secured income. She seemed reluctant to discuss the ways in which her friends made extra cash, only noting that some were "illegal."

> I really struggled with paying my bills. I was lucky that I ended up hearing about the blood bank and could go there pretty frequently. I know some people who had to do other things…other illegal things…to survive out here. Financial problems haven't really gone away, even with a better job now…I have just gotten better at being broke I guess.

In regard to socializing and expanding social networks, some students noted that this presented unique challenges for them during their first year, as well. A 21-year old Hispanic American female from Sampson County, North Carolina, said:

> I also struggled a lot with making friends. I didn't drink, I didn't smoke, I really didn't like to stay out too late…but everyone else did. So finding like-minded people was kind

of hard. I think people saw me as a stick in the mud, but that wasn't true. I just wasn't into what they were into.

Another respondent highlighted the interconnectivity of money management and socializing during her first year at East Carolina University:

I guess part of that money struggle was really associated with socializing. I was really anxious to make new friends and to get that network of peers going. When my friends would want to go downtown to dance or eat or whatever, I would always try to jump right in with them. That kind of silly spending was hard to overcome. On the one hand, I thought that by saying "no" I would lose the invitations. On the other hand, I knew I didn't have enough money to actually go out and do all of that (20, European American, Female, Ohio).

5.7 Most Challenging Experiences

Student respondents agreed that the most challenging experience faced during their first year at East Carolina University involved relaying their experiences and struggles to their parents and family members. Several students spoke in detail about how this struggle shaped their first year experience.

So, my parents just really didn't understand college or higher education in general. Trying to explain how some things work here to them was really brutal and painful at times. My mother used to say "why does it take you 15 minutes to explain that to me?" My response was always that she didn't know anything about it, so I had to explain the terms and the process, not just the steps… Basically, they had no idea what I was going through here. They wanted to show support, but they had no idea how to do that (20, European American, Female, Ohio).

…I think it was hard to talk to my parents. They lost patience so quick with me trying to explain college to them. Like they thought I was making stuff up or just lying or something…I don't know. They just had no idea how expensive things were and how stressful the whole experience is. That was something else that was really hard to deal with if I'm being honest (22, Native American Indian, Female, Robeson County, North Carolina).

My parents just don't really understand the college experience and what it all means. Like, I had to explain everything regarding financial aid to them. I had to explain how the courses work, how the program is set up, how I am able to pursue dual degrees. They are

both intelligent people but it just wasn't relevant to their life until this point. That was definitely challenging (19, European American, Female, Minnesota).

Telling my parents about the stress…or the hardships…I just couldn't do that. They haven't been here, they don't understand how some of the things in college can cause you to get to a dark place. I like I let them down all of the time because the depression and anxiety was hard to deal with, and I couldn't tell them about it because I was embarrassed…so they didn't understand why I was feeling so low and why my grades were suffering (21, Hispanic American, Female, Sampson County, North Carolina).

5.8 Different Approaches by University

Respondents were asked "What are some things that the University could do differently to help first-generation college students?" Respondents offered three primary responses: more money/funds for first-generation college students, more support groups/organizations for first-generation college students, and better communication about resources that exist for first-generation college students.

One student, a 20-year old European American female from Ohio, said they "…have heard that some universities offer more financial aid for first-generation students…if this is true, I would really have liked for ECU to have offered that to me…" This informant noted that she was unsatisfied with the financial aid that ECU offered, claiming that she did not receive the same amount that had been promised. Another student, a 21-year old Hispanic American female from Sampson County, North Carolina, said that ECU "…could have offered a scholarship first, but I guess that I wasn't really competitive enough for one of those."

Regarding resources at East Carolina University specific to first-generation college students, one student said:

I had no idea that a first-generation center or office even existed here. I mean, if I had known during my first year, I am not sure what it would have changed for me other than

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to provide a place where I could meet similar types of students who might understand what I was through with my family and things (20, European American, Female, Ohio).

Another student, a 19-year old European American female from Minnesota said, "you saw there were resources there, but you didn't learn about them until later on. I know that ECU is trying, but it's still not quite there. The communication can really just be up-ed."

Beyond these points, one student noted the benefits that might accompany a first-generation college student organization at East Carolina University.

> It would be really nice if we had an organization or something that existed back then to get first-generation students together. But, that wasn't really a thing that I know of. Having some type of social event for all of the first-generation students to meet and hang out would have been really cool too. But, I know there's lots of us here, so I don't know what kind of event that would be honestly…I really think that those types of events would have helped me find friends and things, and probably would have kept me out of some trouble earlier on in my college career (22, Native American Indian, Female, Robeson County, North Carolina).

5.9 Speaking with University Administrators

Respondents were asked, "As a first-generation college student, if you could tell the administration/Chancellor anything about your experience, what would it be?" Most notably, all respondents offered one of three answers: for administrators to increase visibility, for administrators to listen to the students, and for administrators to be more interactive with the students.

One student spoke about things that they would like to say to the university's administration, suggesting that "…they need to be more proactive with people who didn't come from a background where college was just the norm in their family." One informant - a 21-year old African American male student from Lee County, North Carolina – demonstrated irritation with administration for being less visible and engaged on campus:

They sit in their ivory towers, and from their chairs they make decisions that they don't really understand. They read some reports, they look at some statistics, and they think that they have a good idea. But do they every really hear the voices of their students? Not just the first-gens, but all of them? I know you were in the SGA at one point, and I know that's part of what you are all supposed to do. But let's face it…how thoroughly can a white man really understand and relate the problems of a black man at a primarily white school in the south?...I see something on Facebook or Twitter, or something in the local news. But otherwise, I don't have a freaking clue who any of the people who actually run things around here are… When we interact with them, do they actually hear what we have to say? They sweep things under the rugs, they hide things that reflect poorly… And if I ever really needed their help, could I count on them? Probably not…they are all politicians…well educated and a lot more intellectual than those in the White House…but still politicians.

Another student pleaded in their response for university administrators to listen to the

needs of their students:

Please, please, please listen to your students. I know that most of you claim to…but that's not always true. I think that the work that is being done here is really meaningful and I hope that they read your research. I mean, these seem like pretty basic things to me for them to know, but you never know. They are really busy people, so they may overlook the simple things. Just know that it was a really big risk for some of us…to come here, and we need some people helping to defend us and insure we success sometimes (20, European American, Female, Ohio).

A 22-year old Native American Indian female from Robeson County, North Carolina,

suggested that increased visibility of university administrators is important for first-generation

students: "…come out of Spilman hall…or whatever that building is called…I think it's

Spilman… We want to see people that actually claim to care about students. I don't feel like

that's too much to ask honestly."

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this thesis is to record and, in turn, understand the struggles of first-generation college students at East Carolina University through the lens of sociological inquiry; it seeks to better understand the needs of this special-risk population. During the initial stages of this project, I considered how the discipline of sociology may best contribute to furthering the understanding of first-generation students within higher education settings. Several theoretical approaches surfaced during review of the current literature. Chief among them, however, three emerged as most relevant to this study and to the questions that it seeks to answer: the cultural mismatch theory, the theory of social and cultural capital, and the concept of *habitus*. Of the findings, three primary findings addressed the concerns of this thesis. The following discussion highlights the key findings from the research, and further outlines some of the implications associated with the findings.

6.1 Financial Support

Financial support for first-generation college students emerged as a major finding within this research. Six of the ten respondents identified as "in-state" students. The in-state students were asked to identify their home counties—the following responses were collected: Greene, Johnston, Lee, Pender, Robeson, and Sampson. Of these counties, Robeson and Greene counties are considered two of the 40 most distressed counties within the State, assigning them Tier One designations (Labor and Economic Analysis, 2018). Lee and Sampson counties are considered among the next 40 most distressed counties within the State, while Jonhston and Pender counties are among the 20 least distressed counties within the State (Labor and Economic Analysis, 2018).

With much of the sample coming from low socioeconomic counties within the State, it is likely that families or guardians from these areas are unable to provide financial support for or during college; many respondents within this research noted that their families are incapable or unwilling to provide financial support during college. For many first-generation college students, their families do not understand the significance of higher education and, therefore, do not invest in educational attainment. In some instances, families or guardians may be sacrificing access to necessary resources (e.g. insurance, medications, etc.) to provide financial support for their college students. With the cost of college attendance increasing annually, without additional options for financial support, attending or returning to college is challenging—especially for first-generation college students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Snyder, De Brey, & Dillow, 2018).

While some respondents discussed the ways in which they earned additional income to help offset college expenses, some also noted that their peers were earning additional income during college illegally. When families, guardians, or individuals are incapable of or unwilling to providing financial support for college – and with limited financial support from the institution – students are often forced to pursue other options for financial support.

6.2 The Interdependency of Money and Socialization Among Students

Social capital is gained by the expansion of an individual's network; ideally, as the network expands, so too does one's access to resources and knowledge. Studies have suggested that there is a clearly defined relationship between money and increased social capital (Bianchi & Vohs, 2016). In settings where finances are limited, it may be expected that the expansion of social capital and networks may be less achievable. For first-generation college students, there exists a predisposition to limited social capital in collegiate settings because there are often no

social connections prior to attendance. For first-year students, generating social capital often occurs through impressions and interactions at peer-led social gatherings such as parties, tailgates, etc. (Hummer, LaBrie, & Pedersen, 2012).

This research has identified as a primary theme the lack of financial resources that first-generation college students have at East Carolina University. Respondents agree that this is due to the lack of funding offered to them by the institution, and because parents/family either do not understand the necessity of financial support at college or cannot provide it. It was also identified within this study that some students were financially incapable of attending social events with friends, using credit cards to fund attendance at such events to increase their network and to make new friends.

It is arguable that an interdependency between financial support and increased social capital exists within first-generation college student populations. On the one hand, without access to financial support, students are not able to attend certain social events that promise to increase their respective social capital. On the other hand, however, it is not prudent to provide financial assistance to students for the sole purpose of increasing social capital through increasing the ability to attend social gatherings.

Increasing financial support for first-generation college students at East Carolina University has been suggested by the majority of respondents within this study. Primarily, the increase in financial support, vis-à-vis scholarships and grants, will assist in alleviating the burdens and stresses associated with college attendance. Many students balance their education with part-time jobs to pay necessary expenses such as rent, insurance, and car payments. While an increase to financial support for first-generation college students would contribute to lessening the fiscal struggles of first-generation college students, it would implicitly promote the

generation of additional social capital through the ability to attend more social functions. It is fundamentally important for first-generation college students to have access to a group of peers that help to support their collegiate efforts. It is noteworthy that increasing financial support for this population of college students would directly benefit their efforts to increase their respective social capital. Respondents discussed the use of credit card – and, in turn, the creation of great debt – to fund activities with their friends to expand social networks (i.e. increase social capital). Increasing financial support for this population would further prevent the incursion of debt that often accompanies their attempts to increase social capital.

6.3 Communication Barriers due to a Lack of Cultural Capital

The importance of both the family's and student's cultural capital on educational achievement have been confirmed in a number of studies (Barone, 2006; Downey, 1995; Jaeger, 2009; Jaeger & Breen, 2016; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). The ability to communicate with parents and family members about various experiences and process is critical for first-generation college students. Several respondents noted the difficulty that they experienced when trying to communicate with their parents and family members about university practices. One respondent noted that this difficulty comes from the family's unfamiliarity with language and terminology within higher education. As cultural capital is "…made up of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use educated language," it is arguable that the existence of this unique language and terminology does hinders the overall communication process between first-generation college students and their family (d'Almeida, 2016).

First-generation college students are responsible for founding the family's cultural capital as it relates to higher education. Being the first in their families to experience higher education,

attempting to produce new cultural capital for reproduction in coming generations is a daunting task. Personalized communication between university administrators, the Office of Student Transitions, etc., may help to facilitate the creation of cultural capital within first-generation families, easing the burdens of communication between first-generation college students and their families, directly.

6.4 Social Groups/Organizations for First-Generation College Students

While financial support has been chiefly identified by respondents as the primary point of access for increasing social capital, respondents continually discussed the benefits of creating social groups/organizations specifically for first-generation college students to interact with their peers. Hummer, LaBrie, and Pedersen have identified the significance of alcohol consumption and risk behavior at social events that explicitly promote social capital among first-year college students (2012). Some respondents within this study openly acknowledged the difficulties with not consuming alcohol when attempting to expand social networks or increase social capital through attending social events. Beyond this, some respondents reported feelings of stigmatization due to not consuming alcohol with their peers at social events.

For students who do not wish to engage in peer-led social events (e.g. tailgates, parties, etc.), there is an expressed interest in generating safer, on-campus alternatives designed to promote social capital among first-generation college students. As respondents indicated a subtle understanding of the importance of increasing social capital through the expansion of social networks, it is important for the institution to generate these opportunities in conjunction with student interests. Creating a group or organization exclusive to first-generation college students will promote social capital, reduce exposure to risk behaviors that influence retention (such as underage drinking) at events not affiliated with the institution, and create a network of peer

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supporters with commonalities. It further reduces the incursion of debts in an effort to expand

social networks and increase social capital.

CHAPTER 7: RECOMMENDATIONS

This investigation discovered that first-generation college students face many struggles during their time at East Carolina University. Within this section, I have outlined three recommendations that have been informed by the data collected from this undertaking.

7.1 The Creation of Support Groups and Organizations for First-Generation Students

This suggestion is made in concert with recommendations from respondents regarding institutional resources for first-generation college students. More specifically, I argue for the creation of a support group/organization that is exclusively for first-generation college students. With the assistance of the Office of Student Transitions and the Dean of Students Office, this organization would focus on: a) generating social capital through experiences and activities with other first-generation college students; b) providing workshops on how to discuss higher education and the overall college experience and process with family members or guardians; c) helping students to identify additional forms of financial support through scholarship and grant searches, including workshops in conjunction with the University Writing Center on writing personal statements; and, d) hosting annual focus groups in conjunction with Student Affairs Assessment, Research and Retention to identify new concerns or struggles associated with each incoming cohort of first-generation college students. The overall purpose of the group/organization would be to offer much-needed programming for first-generation college students, as well as hosting various social events to promote social capital and network expansion.

7.2 Money Management Workshops through the College of Business

Several respondents spoke about the difficulties associated with managing money during their first year at East Carolina University. To further their money management skills and financial literacy, I suggest the creation of workshops in collaboration with the College of Business. Faculty and staff from the College of Business would work with the Office of Student Transitions to create specific workshops that focus on various elements of money management that are of particular concern for first-generation college students. For example, sessions may focus on any of the following topics: creating a personalized budget; learning how to responsibly use credit lines and credit cards; assisting in researching and identifying appropriate educational loans; and, learning how to calculate student loan needs and appropriate interest rates, as well as navigating the overall loan processes.

7.3 Webpage with First-Generation Student Resources

Respondents further noted that they were not aware of first-generation college student resources during their first-year at East Carolina University. To increase awareness of first-generation college student resources at the institution, I suggest the creation of a webpage that lists resources specifically for this population. This webpage would be housed on the Office of Student Transitions website, linking vital resources to the list. Resources to link may include: The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the Center for Counseling and Student Development, and first-in-family scholarships through scholarship portals. This webpage would be updated annually by the staff within the Office of Student Transitions.

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Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Tyler Beasley
CC:
        Lee Maril
Date: 5/2/2018
Re: UMCIRB 18-000576
        Fighting as the First

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 5/1/2018. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category #2.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

APPENDIX B: INFORMED SURVEY CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed Survey Consent Statement

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled "Fighting as the First: A Case Study in Understanding the Struggles of First Generation College Students" being conducted by Tyler M. Beasley, a graduate student at East Carolina University in the Department of Sociology. The goal is to interview 15-20 individuals in/at East Carolina University. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete, though we may certainly extend the interview if you elect. It is hoped that this information will assist us to better understand issues that face first-generation college students at the University. Your responses will be kept confidential and no data will be released or used with your identification attached. Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. There is **no penalty for not taking part** in this research study. Please call Tyler M. Beasley at (910) 991-5883 for any research related questions, or the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

APPENDIX C: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Fighting as the First: A Case Study in Understanding the Struggles of First-Generation University Students

Tyler M. Beasley

Interview Script and Questions

**Note: I have numbered these questions to create a semi-structured instrument—the questions can be reordered during the interview depending on the flow of the conversation.

Introduction: *I appreciate you taking time from your schedule to meet with me today. Before we begin, I want to let you know that your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you wish to stop the interview, withdraw your responses or stop participating, you may do so. All of your responses will be confidential; and again, your participation in this interview is voluntary. Do you have any questions before we continue?*

I am a graduate student here, studying for my Masters in Sociology. My research focuses on the sociology of higher education. Specifically, I am interested in the experiences of first-generation college students at the University. I am a first-generation college student, and that is essentially what has driven me to research this topic. I hope that the findings from my research will help the university to understand ways that it may better serve the first-generation college student population, and I am very grateful that you can help me with this by allowing me to interview you. Feel free to jump in with any comments or questions as we go along.

Date:_____   Time:_____   Coding ID:____|

1. Tell me about some of the things that motivated you to attend college.
    a. Prompt points: future financial security/better job opportunities; leave home, etc.

2. Given that there are so many choices for attending college, what influenced you to attend ECU?
    a. Prompt points: location; acceptance rates; program of study; financial aid

3. What did you hear about attending college when you were growing up?
    a. Prompt points: you should go, it's not worth the money, etc.

4. What surprised you when you first arrived at ECU?
    a. Prompt points: class/campus size, on-campus job availability; rigor of coursework; amount of homework

5. What were some of the challenges that you faced during your first year at ECU?

6. What are some of the most challenging experiences that you faced after arriving at ECU?

7. What are some things that the University could do differently to help first-generation college students?
    a. Prompt points: more financial aid; better study halls; more on-campus resources specific for first-gens;

8. As a first-generation college student, if you could tell the administration/Chancellor anything about your experiences, what would it be?

Demographics:

9. How old are you? _____

10. Are you from North Carolina?
    __ Yes   __ No

11. If you answered "yes" to #9, what is your home county (e.g. Wake county, Robeson county, etc.)?

    _____

12. What ethnicity do you consider yourself belonging to?

    __ European American (white)

    __ African American

    __ Hispanic American

    __ Native American Indian

    __ Asian American

    __ Other

13. How do you identify yourself?
    __ Male
    __ Female
    __ Non-binary/third gender
    __ Prefer to self-describe _____
    __ Prefer not to say