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Eleanor G. S. Bradley  
Experiences of First-Generation  
College Students

## **ABSTRACT**

The fact that a significant number of first-generation students drop out of college within the first year speaks to the unique struggle that these students face. Although previous studies have looked at this phenomenon, not many have purposefully explored the experiences of the students themselves. This study sought to change that by interviewing 12 first-generation students on their experiences of college and what they believe has helped them to thrive. Several themes emerged throughout the study, including: 1) the idea of shared experiences and peer contact providing a sense of understanding as well as community; and 2) the idea of involvement within the community providing an increased feeling of support. Students also made distinct suggestions on ways colleges can improve their experiences. Further studies that specifically explore the trajectory and retention of students based on their involvement within the first-generation community might be useful.

**EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2017

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## INTRODUCTION

Applying, obtaining admission, and thriving through four (or more) years of college can be a daunting task for anyone to undertake. Being the first in your family to do so can make each step of the way an even scarier challenge to face. Students without parents who have gone to college are unable to turn to their parents for questions with applications, or financial aid, or even picking a major. Not only that, but students often feel a divide between themselves and the other students who are able to rely on their families for support. Students also report feeling like they don't fit in or that they don't belong in the college setting. All of these factors and more play into the increased stress first-generation students face, making it harder to succeed in an already challenging environment.

Thus, the fact that “first-generation college students have lower retention rates than their peers and confront barriers hindering” their success is not highly disputed (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Despite vast improvements in the rate of admission, retention and graduation rates continue to be problematic for this population (Pyne & Means, 2013). As it stands currently, “30 percent of first-generation freshman drop out of school within three years,” despite beating “enormous odds by even enrolling in four-year degree program[s]” in the first place (Dynarski, 2016). This, of course, speaks to many aspects of college life; however, one such aspect that this researcher became interested in giving voice to was the experiences of firstgeneration college students, in regards to their own needs throughout their college career. Despite efforts by the colleges to continue to address the differing needs of first-generation students, “students often find that the institutions do not meet their needs” (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco Jr, 2011, pg. 55). To make matters worse, many first-generation students find that the programs created to support them “create a separation between FGS and non-FGS” (LoweryHart & Pacheco Jr, 2011, pg. 55).



Many previous studies have pointed to shortcomings in the students in order to explain the disconcerting statistics around first-generation retention, instead of exploring the ways in which the colleges are falling short themselves. In the Pell Institute's 2006 study about the transition from high school to college for first-generation students, they showed the ability of pre-college support given to first-generations to help ascertain admission; however, it also highlighted the need for this support to continue once students are on campus, in order to "help them stay" (Engle et al., 2006, p.30). Thus this researcher became interested in exploring the ways in which colleges might better enable these students to thrive, and who better to ask than the students themselves? What are the needs of first-generation college students? What kind of support do first-generation college students need in order to thrive? What is helpful to firstgeneration students throughout their time at college?

More specifically, do students feel supported throughout the admissions process? How do their experiences differ from those students whose parents had gone to college? Do they experience continual support throughout their time at school specific to their first-generation status? What has helped them to thrive at college? And lastly, do these students have any recommendations about how colleges could better improve the experiences of other firstgeneration students? These questions all led to the focus of this study.

In order to explore this topic, this researcher interviewed 12 participants, asking 10 openended research questions, enabling students to share their experiences, thoughts and ideas. The students interviewed all attended Williams College, a small liberal arts institution in Western Massachusetts. Established in 1793, the college is private with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,000 students. According to Collegefactual.com, Williams' student body is 55.6% White, 11.7% Hispanic/Latinx, 10.8% Asian, 7.6% Non-Resident Alien, 7.1% Black or African American, and 7% two or more races. According to Williams College themselves, the

class of 2020 is 39% students of color. The average enrollment of first-generation students is approximately 16%. The first-generation programming at Williams includes a recently appointed first-generation Dean of Students, who oversees all of the supports currently in place for this subgroup.

In the following chapters, I will review the related literature, outline methods used to collect data, and relay the findings of the research. I will then synthesize the data in conjunction with the previous literature, discuss the limitations of the study, and explore implications for further research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Toutkoushian et al. sought to define “first-generation students” in higher education, noting that the understanding of how parental education can shape the outcomes of students is still very inadequate (2015). Their assertion is that the ambiguity resulting from the definition of

the term “first-generation students” is in part to blame for this lack of knowledge and studies.

Must both parents have attended college in order to disqualify a student from inclusion? What if

a student’s parents went to college but did not graduate? Are they still considered

firstgeneration? For the purpose of this study, I will define “first-generation students” as

Pascarella, et al. define it, as students “from families where neither parent [has] more than a high-school education”(Pascarella, Pierson, & Wolniak, 2004, pg. 249).

This review of literature explores previous studies done regarding first-generation college students. Based on the scholarship that I found as well as prior literature reviews, I separated my findings into two sections. Section One explores two theoretical frameworks on which the research is based. Section Two presents my findings on empirical literature and is subdivided into three sections that categorize various types of studies. I have used these general categories that encompass the majority of the literature, as studies that have been done around firstgeneration students have historically fallen into one of these three categories (Terenzini et al., 1996).

### **Theoretical**

In looking at various theoretical models in order to explore the literature on this topic, I found two studies that were useful in helping to conceptualize my work. The first study I chose is Tinto’s model of student integration, which asserts that when a student leaves college it is due to a process of interactions between the student, the academic environment, and systems within the college (1975). This theory suggests that “if a student lacks academic integration (thought to be a mix of grade performance and cognitive development), lacks social integration (social interactions, relationships, and attachment with family, peers, and teachers) . . . the student will more likely have low institutional commitment and subsequently leave the institution”

(Hernandez, 2014, p. 5). These factors may be particularly apropos for first-generation students

who might feel a distinct separation and lack of needed support not only from their parents who don't understand the college experience but also from the college (faculty and staff) and peers who might not understand the first-generation experience. In his study, Tinto discusses the fact that in research around students who drop out, the perspective of the individual student is often ignored (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Past research around students who drop out often points to a shortcoming in the student versus looking at the ways in which higher education may be “unsuited to the needs, desires and / or interests” of a group of students (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 6). By ignoring the failings of the institution itself, the studies imply “an inferiority on the part of the individual who drops out,” a fact which I will hope to reverse by voicing the experiences of these students, including specific areas in which the colleges can supply additional support needed (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 6).

A second theoretical perspective I use to understand the experiences of first-generation students includes the link between social capital and first-generation students that Pascarella et al. make in their study. Whereas more tangible variables, such as socioeconomic status or language barriers, are often more commonly addressed and outwardly visible, social capital, defined as “the form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources,” is a more intangible barrier that students whose parents had not gone to college might face. This asset of cultural or social capital might surface in the distinct advantage of “understanding the culture of higher education and its role in personal development and socioeconomic attainment” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252). Additionally, those with college-educated parents might better understand information throughout the admissions process, the orientation process, or even knowing what things to bring to college in the first place. This fact would place first-generation students at a distinct disadvantage from the start.

This idea of social capital was also explored by Moschetti and Hudley, who discussed the ways in which social capital can help students “manage an unfamiliar environment by providing them with relevant information, guidance, and emotional support,” which students whose parents did not attend college may be lacking as compared to their peers (Moschetti & Hudley, 2016, p. 235). Moschetti and Hudley discuss that low-income, ethnic minority students not only come to campus with a lesser degree of social capital but also “struggle in accessing beneficial social capital on campus” (Moschetti & Hudley, 2016, p. 235). Thus, in addition to hindering the students before they reach campus, first-generation students who are also low-income and minority students are at a disadvantage for gaining social capital, something which some may say is one of the purposes of attending college.

### **Empirical**

Studies that have been done around first-generation students have historically fallen into three general categories (Terenzini et al., 1996).

First, there are studies that compare “first-generation and other college students in terms of demographic characteristics, secondary school preparation, the college choice process, and college expectations” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 249). An example of one such study includes Laura Horn, Larry Bobbitt, and Anne-Marie Nunez’s 2000 work on first-generation students’ math track, planning strategies, and contexts of support, in which they found that “first-generation students consistently trailed their counterparts whose parents were college graduates” (Horn, Nuñez, & Bobbitt, 2000, p. 10). This fact “remained true when controlling for academic preparation and other family background characteristics” (Horn et al., 2000, p. 10).

YorkAnderson and Bowman found similar results in their study which assessed the college knowledge of first-generation and second-generation students (1991). Their study found that the second-generation students had an experience of more support from their families for attending

college than did the first-generation students (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). These two studies are similar to the majority of results in this category of studies, finding that first-generation students have less “knowledge about postsecondary education (e.g. costs and application process), level of family income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation in high school” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250).

Secondly, previous research includes studies that “attempt to describe and understand the transition from high school to postsecondary education” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250). An example of the work in this category includes the 1992 study done by Julia Lara in which she explores the idea of being caught between Dominican culture and that of modern U.S. society, particularly associating these experiences with the issues of ‘fitting in’ at a community college (Lara, 1992). Another study that explores this phenomenon is Terenzini et al (1996) which found that not only do first-generation students confront many of the same (if not all of the) challenges of traditional Freshman year students, but they also are faced with additional cultural, familial, social, and academic transitions. Based on these studies, “the evidence is reasonably clear that first-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their peers,” and are at a disadvantage from the start (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250).

Lastly, the third category of research on first-generation students explores these students’ degree attainment and early job outcomes (Pascarella et al., 2004). As Lowery-Hart and Pacheco discuss, “first-generation students are significantly less likely to graduate due to lack of family support, financial strains, poor academic preparation and other barriers” (2011, p. 55). Similarly, in her article *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment*, Susan Choy discusses a series of studies done in 2000 by the

National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

These studies “show that such students are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to postsecondary access – a disadvantage that persists even after controlling for other important factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools in planning and preparing for college, and family income” (Choy, 2001, p. 4). The evidence demonstrates that even once students are enrolled, their access to completing a degree is at a distinct disadvantage over their non-first-generation peers (Choy, 2001).

As one can see, there is a plethora of information on first-generation college students with respect to various aspects of their time in college. Despite this fact, however, Pascarella et al. found that “surprisingly little is known about their college experiences or their cognitive and psychosocial development during college” (2004, p. 250). One of the few studies, in addition to Pascarella et al., was the 1996 Terenzini et al. study that analyzed Freshman-year first-generation students. This study sought to answer whether the characteristics of these students differed from traditional students, whether the experiences of those students differed from those of other students and what the educational consequences of any differences were (Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). They not only found that these students differed in both characteristics and experiences, but also that, although traditional students make greater “net gains” in their first year in reading, the two groups gain to the same degree in math and critical thinking skills (Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). Additionally, Terenzini and his colleagues found that “compared to their peers, first-generation students completed fewer first-year credit hours, took fewer humanities and fine arts courses, studied fewer hours and worked more hours per week, were less likely to participate in an honors program . . .” and “were less likely to perceive that faculty were concerned about students and teaching . . .” (Pascarella et al., 2004). Their study,

however, is limited in that it interviews only first-year students and thus Pascarella and his colleagues sought to fill that gap with their work. Through their 2004 study, the group sought to expand the understanding of “how first-generation students experience college and benefit from it” in a “comprehensive analysis of the National Study of Student Learning data that followed individuals through the second and third years of college” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 251). More specifically their study had three purposes: first, to explore the differences in experiences between traditional and first-generation students in academic and non-academic arenas; second, to explore differences between the two groups in cognitive and psychosocial categories, and third to determine if the “specific academic and nonacademic experiences influencing cognitive and psychosocial outcomes differed in magnitude” for first-generation versus traditional college students (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 251). Consistent with previously discussed research, Pascarella et al found that “compared to other students, first-generation college students tend[ed] to be significantly handicapped in terms of the types of institutions they attend[ed] and the kinds of experiences they [had] during college (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 275). The first-generation students were more likely to complete fewer credit hours across the years of the study, worked significantly more hours than the more traditional students, and were less likely to live on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004). These factors all mean that the students are having less interaction with peers; thus Pascarella et al asserted that this may place these students at a “disadvantage in terms of the developmental benefits they derive from postsecondary education,” as this has been proven to “play a significant role in both intellectual and personal development during college” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 276). Additionally, the increased work hours would lead to significantly more stress experienced by these students, and may result in lower grades (Pascarella et al., 2004). All of these findings suggest that the first-generation students are at a significant disadvantage in terms of their overall college experience.



Another study on this subgroup of students was the Pell Institute's 2006 study about the transition from high school to college for first-generation students in Texas. This study sought to learn more about the experiences of first-generation students specifically during the transition from high school to college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Although the study touched on the support needed once the students were actually enrolled, it primarily focused on the stage prior to enrolling. However, one finding of this study was that students, although receiving support from pre-college programs to help them ascertain admission, "once they arrived on campus they didn't have the support they needed – academic, social, financial – to help them stay" (Engle et al., 2006, p. 30). This study made a plethora of suggestions regarding additional services needed once students are enrolled, including well-developed first-year programs, grants and work-study programs, and counseling services (Engle et al., 2006).

In looking at all of the previous literature on first-generation students, it is clear that a study to explore and voice the first-hand experiences of these students, from the mouths of the students themselves, would be beneficial, and would fill a gap, which might lead to further examination of areas for improvement within the colleges themselves.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Research Purpose*

The fact that “first generation college students have lower retention rates than their peers and confront barriers hindering” their success is not highly disputed (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Despite vast improvements in the rate of admission, retention and graduation rates continue to be problematic for this population (Pyne & Means, 2013). As it stands currently, “30 percent of first-generation freshman drop out of school within three years,” despite beating “enormous odds by even enrolling in four-year degree program[s]” (Dynarski, 2016). This, of course, speaks to many aspects of college; however, one such aspect that I am interested in giving voice to is the experiences of first-generation college students, in regards to their own needs throughout their college career. Thus, the purpose of this study is to give voice to the

narratives of first-generation college students, and their own opinions on what their needs are, and what helps them thrive within the college environment.

### *Research Method and Design*

This study will be an exploratory qualitative study, seeking to give voice to the complex experiences of first-generation students. The study protocol will include semi-structured interviews with approximately 12 to 15 students. I will use nonprobability purposive sampling, where each student is selected due to their unique perspective (as a first-generation student) of the required sample (Engel & Schutt, 2017). The three guidelines for selecting informants when using purposive sampling include that the informants should have knowledge about the cultural arena being studied, be willing to talk, and be representative of the range of view points (Engel & Schutt, 2017). As this study will include only approximately 12 to 15 interviewees due to time constraints, it may be hard to adhere to the suggestion of continuing to select interviewees until the study can pass both the completeness and saturation tests. However, I still believe that this is the most appropriate sampling method (Engel & Schutt, 2017). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Williams College must approve the methodology of this study prior to beginning this research (Appendix E).

This researcher will utilize her placement at Williams College and after receiving approval will post flyers (Appendix A) around campus in order to recruit participants. The flyer includes inclusion criteria, nature of the research and contact information for this researcher. Snowball sampling will also be used as participants will be asked to pass along the flyer to first-generation student friends who may be interested in participating. Following initial contact (via email) with the interested participant, this researcher will respond with a stock email (Appendix B) that will reiterate the inclusion criteria questions. Once the participant responds to the inclusion criteria questions affirmatively, this researcher will set up a time to complete the

interview. If the participant does not meet all criteria, this researcher may still ask the student to pass along the information to any interested friends who may want to participate. Upon meeting, the eligible participants will be given the Informed Consent Form (Appendix C). Only after consenting to participate will this researcher then continue with the interview questions (Appendix D).

### *Sample*

To qualify for inclusion in this study, participants must be first-generation, defined as Pascarella, et al. defined it, as students “from families where neither parent [has] more than a high-school education”(Pascarella, Pierson, & Wolniak, 2004, pg. 249). Students also must be juniors or seniors, currently enrolled in an undergraduate college. In order to participate in an interview, participants also have to be fluent in English.

### *Diversity / Representativeness of Sample*

This researcher will attempt to select students who are from a range of backgrounds, including race, able-bodiedness, religious/spiritual orientation, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, indigenous heritage, and genders, in order to ensure a variety of experiences being included in the study. However, obviously this is easier said than done and those students with additional stressors, such as a job (who perhaps may come from lower socioeconomic status families) may be harder to include as participants. This researcher will have to be continuously aware of ways in which she can increase the likelihood of students from all backgrounds to participate in the study, such as doing interviews late at night or early in the morning, driving to a student’s home if they live off campus, and so on. This researcher will also need to be aware of how her own background and social identities can affect the interview. As a non-first-generation student (although this won’t be evident, unless they ask), white, female who is technically on staff at the school, there are ways in which her presence in the room may affect the answers the

students give. Due to this fact, semi-structured interviews where the student is encouraged to talk versus being asked only a series of questions, will perhaps aid in the dismantling of any power imbalance in the room.

#### *Ethical Issues: Confidentiality / Anonymity*

This researcher will make note of missing data and / or questions that participants did not respond to. Did people avoid this question / not want to answer? Through this, this researcher will attempt to recognize the absence of specific information, as this is an important piece of ethics due to the results then being misleading.

#### *Data Collection*

This researcher will utilize her placement at Williams College and, after receiving approval from the Williams IRB, will post flyers (Appendix A) around campus in order to recruit participants. The flyer will include inclusion criteria, nature of the research, and contact information for this researcher. The study will additionally use the snowball sampling method in which this researcher will ask students who have agreed to participate in the study if they can refer to other students, as snowball sampling is frequently used in exploratory, qualitative studies.

Following initial contact (via email) with the interested participant, this researcher will respond with a stock email (Appendix B) that will reiterate the inclusion criteria questions. Once the participant responds to the inclusion criteria questions affirmatively, this researcher will set up a time to complete the interview. If the participant does not meet all criteria, this researcher may still ask the student to pass along the information to any interested friends who may want to participate. Upon meeting, the participants will be given the Informed Consent

Form (Appendix C). Only after consenting to participate will this researcher then continue with the interview questions (Appendix D). This researcher will attempt to keep the interviews within the 1-2 hour range, at a location agreed upon with the participant.

This researcher will begin by explaining that she will ask them a series of questions that will explore their own experiences as a first-generation student, and yet they should not feel constrained by the questions. This researcher will leave time at the end of the interviews for the participants to ask questions, as well, if they have any. This researcher will also ask the participant if they are comfortable being recorded, and if they are, will record the interview on a recording device. Following the interview the recording will be transferred to a secure zip drive. This researcher will also complete field notes following each interview, where she will reflect on the interview process, including any observations about the environment.

#### *Data Analysis*

Following completing the interviews, this researcher will transcribe the interviews. After transcription, she will identify themes and patterns that are found throughout each interview using inductive analysis. She will also look for the various themes that may come up related to what was found in the literature review. Once the initial coding process is completed, this researcher will compile a list of codes to organize the themes and patterns observed throughout the interviews. Additionally, this researcher will refer back to the original research questions continuously to ensure that the data and coding informs the research questions. If necessary, ATLAS.ti will be used to facilitate the coding process and manage the data.

## FINDINGS

This study sought to explore the following questions: what are the needs of first-generation college students? What kind of support do first-generation college students need in order to thrive? What is helpful to first-generation students throughout their time at college?

In order to do so, information was collected through qualitative interviews with 12 students at Williams College, asking open-ended questions to explore their experiences as first-generation students.

### *Demographics*

Participants in this study were all enrolled students at Williams College and varied in their class year, majors, educational backgrounds, race, ethnicity and hometown. 12 adult students (ages ranging from 19-24) answered 10 open-ended research questions regarding their experiences as first-generation students at college. The graph below shows the demographics of the students interviewed:

<b>INITIAL</b>	<b>Age / Gender Pronoun</b>	<b>Identifying Ethnicity</b>	<b>Home state</b>	<b>Class Year</b>
<b>M</b>	19; Male	Hispanic / Latinx	CA	Sophomore

A	24; Male	Latino	NY	Senior
M	19; Male	African American	NY	Freshman
S	21; Female	White	FL	Sophomore
N	19; Female	Dominican	MA	Sophomore
V	21; Female	Latina	NM	Senior
K	22; Male	Hispanic	FL	Senior
J	19; Female	Hispanic	TX	Freshman
W	21; Male	Latino	NY	Senior
E	21; Male	Latino	CA	Senior
M	21; Female	Latina	CA	Senior
C	18; Female	Hispanic	CA	Freshman

### ***Major Findings***

I. Participants provided information regarding whether they were asked to identify as a first-generation student during the college admissions process as well as whether or not they received support during the admissions process specific to their first-generation status. Of the 12 students interviewed, the majority (10 out of 12) remembered being identified during the admissions process as first-generation students. Of the other two participants, one was not sure and the other did not remember. Several of the students participated in a program through which they were identified as first-generation, such as Quest Bridge (3 participants) or Windows on Williams (2 participants).



None of the participants reported receiving support from Williams during the admissions process specific to their first-generation status; however, three students reported receiving admissions support from programs such as Quest Bridge. One participant discussed being given a mentor (a first-generation student who was currently a senior at Amherst College, also originally from California) through Quest Bridge, who helped her understand various aspects of admissions, provided assistance with essays and advised in the process of choosing which college to attend.

II. Students were also asked about the orientation program and their experiences of continual needs-specific support during their freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years.

The students' experiences of orientation were varied. All students except one reported being contacted by the Dean of First-Generation Students prior to arrival on campus. Five out of six seniors discussed being contacted in regards to a dinner prior to arrival, but only two attended. One senior who did attend reported that it was "helpful, although [it] doesn't have the structure that [orientation] has now." Another senior felt that although the dinner was tailored towards the first-generation status, it wasn't particularly helpful, as they "didn't absorb anything because [they] were overwhelmed."

Of the sophomores and freshman students interviewed who did attend the first-generation orientation, all reported an overall positive experience. The most consistent theme that emerged included the orientation providing a sense of support and community through shared experiences and peer contact.

One student stated: "the people I met were the real continued resource from orientation." Another student shared this same experience, stating that she "liked for the most part getting to know other people" and "hearing about things other people had faced as a first-gen." Another

student discussed feelings of support in shared emotions around the college experience: “I felt support because I was around other students who were first-generation and were all nervous.”

The one sophomore student who did not attend first-generation orientation discussed the ways in which she felt it affected her: “not being able to go to first-generation orientation definitely impacted my experience and I just didn’t feel comfortable.” This student also stated she saw the effect of not being surrounded by first-generation peers at orientation in that she “did not feel comfortable addressing that part of [her] identity” throughout the subsequent year.

III. All students interviewed for this study reported continued needs-specific support during their freshman year at college and the subsequent years. The most consistent theme that emerged during this question was the idea of involvement within the community providing an increased feeling of support. One student discussed this phenomenon: “once I became involved my understanding of what was available grew.” Another stated how being on the First-Generation Board affected him: “It made me realize it was bigger than I thought it was and there was more support than I realized ...there were more people who understood the struggles that you were going through.” Another student stated: “being on the board was helpful because I talked to other first-gens about things like study abroad and financial aid.” Students also discussed how the first-generation tee shirts that they were given increased visibility on campus and reinforced the feeling of community. All students related back to the experience of a community and shared experiences as an important aspect of support on campus.

IV. Participants were also asked if they could identify how their experiences as a college student might be different from the experiences of students whose parents had gone to college. Answers resulting from this question followed two general themes.

First, students discussed needing outside resources for things that other students may be able to turn to their parents for help with, including financial aid, career / job assistance, general

advice, and writing assistance. One student discussed *You Aspire* – a resource that helps with financial aid applications. Another discussed “being unable to really receive any help and having to do a lot of things on our own is very different because if we have a question on FAFSA we don’t know who to call...” Another student talked about essay revision and the idea of social capital, or social connections: “other students, if they need essays revised, they can have their parents do that... or even the connections... not necessarily get jobs through parents but hear about opportunities through their parents or their parents know someone...and that’s something that we don’t necessarily have.” Students also discussed relying on their siblings in addition to outside resources: “my sister went to college so I felt more supported by her” another student stated “whenever I do have an issue, I can talk to my brothers about it. They didn’t go to liberal arts institutions but they did go to college.”

This question also resulted in students talking about a general lack of support in comparison to the support other students might have had throughout their college experiences. One student stated “everything is just a bit harder because we have to start and figure it out by ourselves.” Another discussed how this experience isn’t a new one: “I grew up knowing my parents couldn’t help me through middle or high school. To put in context, my parents were working by the time they were in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. I knew my parents could never help me with school so this is just a continued experience. I can’t rely on them much.”

The second theme that emerged was that of parents having a lack of understanding surrounding the college experience. Examples included studying abroad, internships, or not understanding the prestige of attending Williams. One student stated “small things, like about colleges, I got into Williams but because it’s not Harvard or Yale ... I wanted to go to Middlebury and my dad shut that down immediately. The only way he was OK with my going here was because I had to show him a Forbes list saying Williams is number one.” Another

student discussed that her “mom is learning what a big deal Williams is by other people’s reactions.”

Other students discussed the study abroad phenomena: “I think its mostly having to explain to your parents what some things mean... like wanting to go abroad... she just doesn’t want me to go... she’s like ‘you wanna go further away from me?’”

Students also experienced this disconnect around internships and careers: “I’ll mention one thing and they’ll think that’s what I’m going to do [for my career]...or not understanding why I would want to go to New York or Boston over the summer versus going home.” Another stated “my parents don’t understand that internships are important, they think I just don’t want to be home.”

V. Students were also asked if they knew about available first-generation support at other colleges or universities and while half (six out of twelve students) reported they did not know of any, several discussed how “Williams is at the top of the list in terms of resources.” Another student stated “friends have told me there is a lack of support, so I can’t attest to what they lack but I know there is much less support [at other colleges].” Another student stated there is a “*need* for support at other institutions.” One student also stated that Williams has been asked to help other institutions put first-generation support programs together.

VI. Students were then asked what they believe has been helpful for them that may be helpful for others, and if they could identify a specific intervention that has enabled them to thrive at Williams. Again, these questions invoked answers that surrounded the importance of a community, particularly derived through involvement in the first-generation initiatives on campus. Students stated: “finding a community;” and “the idea of just having friends and someone to talk that was provided to me by the first-generation initiative;” also “getting onto the advisory board because it has given me agency;” and “continuing to be involved has created a lot of support for me...continuing to participate in first-gen initiatives because it creates a

community for me as I try to create a community for others... the people have made thriving in this environment possible;" Answers also included "the office of accessibility," "the summer programs;" and "psych services."

VII. Lastly, students were asked if they had any recommendations about how colleges might improve the experiences of first-generation students. Many participants again spoke about Williams having done a "good job providing support" for the first-generation students. Themes which arose during this question included:

- a. The idea of having one or more "go-to" people on campus to ask questions about experiences that other students may be able to ask their parents about, such as going abroad, dropping a class, internships, etc. One student stated: "Like having a person you can go to for academic questions like 'should I go abroad?' and that's something your parents might be able to help with but my parents went abroad to COME to the States!"
- b. The importance of having the programming for first-generation students be cultivated and run by other first-generation students. This again supported the overarching theme of the shared experiences of students providing a sense of support on campus.
- c. The idea of having "mentors on campus who were first-generation students themselves," like faculty and staff.
- d. The need for a first-generation contact in the admissions department, to assist with the admissions process, and a specific first-generation person to assist with the transition out of Williams – such as with job hunting, networking, and / or graduate school planning.

Throughout this research, two significant and consistent themes emerged. First, the idea of shared experiences and peer contact providing a sense of support and community and second, the idea of involvement within the community providing an increased feeling of support. The suggestions students provided in regards to ways in which the college can improve the experiences of others support these two themes, and also provide concrete areas of improvement for future programming.

This research was exploratory in nature and is not meant to be generalized. In addition, the small sample size due to time constraints and resources make it difficult to generalize outside of the group studied. The following section will explore these findings in conjunction with the existing literature and further examine the limitations of this project and implications for further research.

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine the experiences of first-generation students during their time at college. Twelve students at Williams College shared their experiences, answering openended questions about various aspects of their journey. The previous literature, although abundant, has somewhat failed to give voices to the students themselves. Additionally, the pertinent literature has ignored the shortcomings of the institutions involved and has instead implied “an inferiority on the part of the individual” students (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 6). The results of this study are encouraging in that they show students who are thriving within an environment that was previously closed off to them. Students reported experiencing support from the programs currently in place at the college as well as from the social connections flowing from these programs. Additionally, the results of this study give concrete suggestions on areas for growth in the institutions.

As previously discussed, the interviews with the students highlighted two specific themes throughout the initial few questions. First, the students confirmed the need for additional resources in areas where other students might be able to get help from their parents, such as applying for financial aid, career advice, and writing assistance. Secondly, students affirmed the frustration of having parents who do not understand the overall college experience. Students discussed both of these situations leading to a feeling of disconnect from both their parents and their peers – which resulted at times in increased strain and struggle during their time at college.

Two other overarching themes that were consistent throughout all of the questions included: 1) the idea of shared experiences and peer contact providing a sense of understanding as well as community; and 2) the idea of involvement within the community providing an increased feeling of support.

All of these themes are interesting to look at in connection with Tinto's model of integration discussed in the review of literature, which suggests that if students lack social integration they are more likely to leave the institution (Tinto and Cullen, 1973). None of the students interviewed needed to take a leave of absence, despite discussing a feeling of separation and lack of needed support not only from their parents but also from the school and peers who did not understand the first-generation experience. It is possible that, due to the feeling of integration and support as a result of the shared experiences of students (felt during orientation and subsequent first-generation programming) and involvement in the first-generation coalition, the social integration was substantial enough to act as a protective factor against needing to leave school due to negative experiences. However, it is important to note here that one of the specific limitations of this study is that it included only students currently enrolled, thus of necessity excluding those students who might have been on leave or have left the school due to this experience of separation or other causes. It would be important to do a study which includes these students in order to explore this more fully and broaden the findings.

In his study, Tinto also discusses the fact that previous research has typically pointed to shortcomings in the student instead of in the institution. The study at hand worked to change this shortcoming by uncovering areas for further growth and change within the institution as opposed to simply exploring ways in which the students should adapt to the institutional setting.

First, students discussed the ways in which they *are* feeling supported at the school already: the appointment of a first-generation Dean of Students, the first-generation orientation program and particularly being involved in the organization of the first-generation activities. In this, Tinto's theory is supported in that these students involved in developing the programs experienced feelings of integration within the community. Again, it is possible that this resulted in their remaining enrolled within the institution. When asked about a specific intervention that



had enabled them to thrive, almost all students spoke about becoming involved within the first-generation community: “continuing to be involved has created a lot of support for me...continuing to participate in first-gen initiatives because it creates a community for me as I try to create a community for others... the people have made thriving in this environment possible.”

However, students also noted several areas for further growth at Williams, including a suggestion that the school appoint a ‘go-to’ person, a sort of *in loco parentis*, to assist first-generation students with questions or provide guidance in areas where a college-educated parent might otherwise do so. This again spoke to the idea of integration (defined as “social interactions, relationships, and attachment with family, peers, and teachers”), but also the idea of social capital (Hernandez, 2014, p. 5). Whereas more tangible variables such as socioeconomic status (i.e. application fees waived, programs to provide seniors with money for appropriate job interview clothing, etc., as students discussed) are often more commonly addressed, the “form of capital that residents in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources” is a more intangible barrier that students face (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252). Students talked about this phenomena surfacing in various moments during their time at school. Whereas other students had a distinct advantage of “understanding the culture of higher education and its role in personal development and socioeconomic attainment,” first-generation students reported feeling on the outside of this understanding, and feeling that they thus didn’t belong (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252). In their work, Moschetti and Hudley discussed how social capital can help students “manage an unfamiliar environment by providing them with relevant information [and] guidance...”, a barrier which having a ‘go-to’ person on campus might address (2016, p.235).

Additionally, students noted the importance of having the programming for first-generation students be run by the first-generation students themselves. Not only does this let the students work to address the areas in which the institution is lacking, but it also provides students with a feeling of agency and reiterates the sense of support through community discussed previously in the findings. Additionally, it is possible that seeing the school respond to the ideas brought forth by the students themselves reinforces the idea that it is the school that is lacking, not the student themselves, thus providing a sense of self-compassion when “everything is just a little bit harder,” as one student aptly put it. Additionally, being around other first-generation students in order to plan these events might in some way make up for the decreased experience of support students often reported, similar to what York-Anderson & Bowman found in their 1991 study. By being on the first-generation advisory board, students were able to talk about topics such as FAFSA and studying abroad with other students who not only had knowledge on these things but also understood the first-generation experience.

Several students also discussed the importance of having a first-generation person in admissions to assist with that process, and additionally a person to help with the transition out of college. Again, the idea of social capital came into play here. Whereas students who have college-educated parents might be able to call upon their parents’ social networks when looking for jobs or exploring graduate school opportunities, students whose parents did not attend college are unable to do so. This barrier, which surfaced several times throughout my findings, including parents “understanding the culture of higher education,” or being able to assist with social networking, is important to address at the institutional level (Pascarella et al., 2004, p.252). Having a point person to assist with transition questions when leaving college was one student’s idea, or matching students with alumni who are willing to act as a social bridge was another. Students did discuss the fact that this last year a first-generation alumnus started a fund to give

all first-generation graduates \$500 towards job interview clothing and / or transportation to interviews and the like, help which the students reported to be invaluable. Working to gain financial and social networking support from additional first-generation alumni may be a way for the college to provide additional transitional support when students are entering the job field.

It is important to note the limitations of this study. First and foremost is the limited number of students interviewed. Due to constraints of time and availability, not only did this study include only 12 students, but it also only interviewed students who were still enrolled in the school, thus excluding those who have dropped out or taken a leave for various reasons. Those students may have felt less supported and thus may have had significant suggestions of ways in which the college could have provided a more welcoming environment, thus providing very fruitful data.

Additionally, the study was only able to recruit from one college in the area, which therefore speaks only to a very limited population of first-generation students. As one student noted, Williams is a fairly prestigious liberal arts institution; thus, their recruitment of first-generation students is either through Quest Bridge, or focused on specific boarding schools. It would be important for other studies to include different types of schools in order to gain a broader perspective.

Lastly, it is important to note my own identities and how this may have affected not only the students' answers but also my own interpretation of the data. As a Caucasian "traditional student," my own understanding of the first-generation experience is entirely based on the recounting of others' journeys. Despite trying to maintain an objective view, I may have focused on specific aspects of the research while discounting others due to my own biases. Additionally, during the time of the study, I was a social work intern at Williams College's counseling center,

and thus the students may have wanted to relay a more positive experience with the supports at the school than they might actually feel.

Recently, the New York Times ran several articles highlighting first-generation students, a hopeful foot forward in sharing the experiences of these inspirational students. One article included five first-generation journalism students being asked to interview other first-generation students at their colleges about the challenges they have faced. Another discussed Columbia University having a separate graduation for these students in addition to the traditional one: “At Columbia, students who were the first in their families to graduate from college attended the inaugural [“First-Generation Graduation,”](#) with inspirational speeches, a procession and the awarding of torch pins. . . After [the] ceremony, Lizzette Delgadillo said she spoke about the pain of “impostor syndrome — feeling alone when it feels like everybody else on campus just knows what to do and you don’t,” and of how important it was to have the support of other first-generation students. . . .” (Hartocollis, 2017).

Due to increased attention of the first-generation experience and to the disparity of experiences between traditional students and first-generation students, colleges are engaging more around the increased support needed for these students. Additionally, with the everincreasing interest in expanding diversity on campus, schools are now motivated to retain those students who may be experiencing barriers in the environment that the colleges can ameliorate or mitigate. Thus, it seems as though the climate for colleges increasingly meeting the needs of this population is hopeful, and this study has worked to highlight several of the next steps to be taken.

Lastly, the exploratory nature of this study highlighted at least one topic for further investigation. As so many students reported that their involvement on the first-generation advisory board was a pivotal part of their feeling supported, a study that compares the academic

and extracurricular trajectory of students who are involved versus those who are not may be useful. It is possible that results from that study might help to recruit those students during their freshman year who might otherwise be reluctant to join. It would also be interesting for Williams to discover new ways for first-generation students to become involved in the community in addition to being on the advisory board, so as to increase the number of students who receive the benefits from this integration.

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## **APPENDICES**

### APPENDIX A



Are you a First-Generation college student?

Are you interested in sharing your experience of being a first-  
gen?

I am a Social Work student from Smith College School for Social Work who is currently writing her thesis on the experiences of first-generation students, and I would love to include you in my study.

Contact me at [ebradley@smith.edu](mailto:ebradley@smith.edu) if you meet the above criteria and are interested in learning more!

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

## APPENDIX B

Dear Potential Participant (name will be filled in),

Thank you for your interest in this research study. The purpose of this email is to ensure that you meet the inclusion criteria for participation in this study.

1. Are you currently enrolled at a college as a junior or senior?
2. Are you 18 years of age or older?
3. Do you identify as a first-generation student? (For the purpose of this study, this is defined as being from a family where neither parent has more than a high-school education)

If you meet all of the above criteria, you are qualified to participate. If you are still interested in participating, please provide a few times you may be available for an in-person interview. If you do not meet the criteria listed above, I sincerely appreciate your interest but unfortunately will not be able to include you in this research study. Thank you for answering the screening questions.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Bradley, MSW Candidate

Smith College School for Social Work

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

APPENDIX C

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Eleanor Bradley and I am conducting this research study through Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, where I am a student in the Master of Social Work (MSW) Program.

I am interested in exploring the experiences of first generation students, in their own words.

The data from these interviews will be used for my MSW thesis and for possible presentation and publication.

Please see the below consent for in order to agree to participate.

**2016-2017**  
**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....

**Title of Study:** Experiences of First-Generation Students

**Investigator(s):** Eleanor Bradley, [eb Bradley@smith.edu](mailto:eb Bradley@smith.edu)

.....

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to participate in a research study of the experiences of first-generation, junior and senior year students
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a junior or senior student who is the first in your immediate family to attend either a two or four-year college.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to explore several research questions, including what are the needs of first generation college students? What kind of support do first-generation college students need in order to thrive? What is helpful to first generation students throughout their time at college?
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my Master's in Social Work (MSW).
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

### **Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: Participants will be involved in a semi-structured interview where they will discuss their experiences as a first-generation student. Interviews will last between 45 minutes and one hour. If the participant consents, the interview will be audio recorded.

### **Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- The study has the following risk: It is possible that you could become distressed talking about your experiences. However, this is an exploratory study, and you will not be pushed to discuss experiences you do not want to discuss.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

- The benefits of participation are: Participants will be given a place to tell their story and, perhaps, gain some insight into an important aspect of their experience as a first-generation student. Participants may also gain satisfaction knowing that their story may potentially contribute to the improvement of services to support first-generation students.
- The benefits to social work/society are: This study will help to better understand the experiences of first-generation students and perhaps identify areas of further research. In addition, it could identify areas of growth or improvements that could be made within the first-generation support services.

### **Confidentiality**

- Your participation will be kept confidential.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. If this is an interview and you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by *March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017*. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report. If this is an anonymous survey, simply exit at any point by clicking on ‘escape’ at the top of the screen if you wish to do so. Answers to questions prior to exiting will remain in the survey up to that point, but I will have no way to know who you are, and the survey will be discarded as I will not use incomplete surveys in my study.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, *Eleanor Bradley*, at *ebradley@smith.edu* or by telephone at xxx.xxx.xxx. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. *You will also be given a list of referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study.*

.....

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**1. I agree to be [audio] taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

Were you asked to identify during the college admissions process as a first-generation student?

- *How* were you identified as a first-generation student?

Did you receive support during the college admissions process specific to your first-generation status? If yes, what was it?

- Did you find it useful?
- Was there follow up specific to your first-generation status once you were on campus from the admissions department? Or from another campus office?

If there was an orientation program specifically for first-generation students, what was your experience of that orientation program or event?

- Did it feel specifically tailored towards your first-generation status? How so?
- Did it provide you with information tailored towards your first-generation status? What information specifically?
- Did it provide you with a feeling of additional support in light of your first-generation status? How so?

Was there continual support (events, groups, programs) during your first year in college that were needs-specific towards your first-generation status?

- What about your Sophomore year?
- Junior year?
- Senior year?
- How did you learn about available supports specific to first-generation college students?

Can you identify how your experience as a college student might be different than the experience of a college student peer who had parents that had some experience of college? If yes, how so?

Are you aware of or have heard about specific types of support in place for first-generation college students at other colleges or universities? If so, what are they?

Can you identify a specific support or intervention that you participated in or received that you feel enabled you to thrive in college?

Do you have any recommendations about how colleges might improve the experience of first-generation college students?

What has been helpful for you that you think would be helpful for others?

Is there anything else you would like to add that was not covered during this interview that would be helpful for this study?

## APPENDIX E

### **Williams College Institutional Review Board**

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Date: December 21, 2016  
To: Eleanor Bradley, Smith School for Social Work  
From: Ken Savitsky, Chair, Williams College Institutional Review Board

Dear Eleanor,

The IRB has reviewed your research proposal entitled Experiences of First-Generation Students and has granted approval for this protocol via expedited review as of the above date. The review was expedited because the study will employ adult participants, involves no deception, and poses no risks to participants above those ordinarily encountered in everyday life.

If you decide to make any substantive modifications to your procedures, please obtain new IRB approval prior to implementation of those changes. Also note that the approval for this project lasts for one year from the above date. Federal funding agencies require annual re-approval, so if you wish to continue your project beyond that date, you may need to obtain new IRB approval prior to doing so.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Ken Savitsky, Ph.D.  
Professor of Psychology Chair,  
Williams College IRB  
[ksavitsk@williams.edu](mailto:ksavitsk@williams.edu)

## APPENDIX F





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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

January 8, 2017

Eleanor Bradley

Dear Eleanor,

The Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee approves your request for exemption from Smith College School for Social Work HSC review based on the fact that William's College is the IRB of record. We wish you the best with your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Quincy McLaughlin, Type of Advisor