

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC ADVISING:
WORDS OF WISDOM FROM ACADEMIC ADVISORS

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC ADVISING: WORDS OF WISDOM FROM ACADEMIC ADVISORS

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Prior research has demonstrated unequivocally that first-generation college students do not enroll, persist or graduate from four-year institutions at comparable rates as students from more educated families. With almost half (47%) of all students in American higher education as first-generation college students, and with their college attendance, persistence and graduation rates lower than those of their peers from more educated homes, it behooves institutions to pay close attention to this special population of student.

A great deal of research has focused on explaining the reasons behind first-generation college students' decreased college attendance and graduation rates. Much of the research points towards using academic advising as a strategy to assist first-generation college students, but there is a gap in exactly what academic advisors should do to assist first-generation college students. In this study, intensive qualitative interviews with 10 academic advisors who are also first-generation college students

themselves, and who can therefore see both sides of the issue, addressed how academic advising can help first-generation college students. Transcripts from interviews, notes from the interviews and documents collected from the participants were coded using thematic analysis to arrive at three major themes.

Main themes from the research were the characteristics associated with being a first-generation college student, the role of an advisor with first-generation college students and the relationship to the conceptual framework for the study, cultural capital model. These themes and attendant subthemes are explored in depth, and the best practices and implications for advisors, institutions and graduate programs are discussed in relation to prior research on first-generation college students and academic advising. Suggestions for further research are also presented.

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I am also grateful to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) for a research grant that allowed me to travel to the physical locations of the 10 advisors in this research to meet with them face-to-face. Being able to meet with the advisors in person contributed greatly to my understanding of their advising practice by allowing me to see their space and context. It also allowed me to hire a transcriptionist to help speed the pace of this project.

Finally, I must thank the participants who allowed me into their offices and their pasts to learn about their experiences and their advising practices. I made new friends and contacts, and I learned more than I ever thought possible through the interviews I conducted with these 10 academic advisors. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of learning more about you and what you do.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the first-generation college students, like myself, who are striving to beat the odds by being the first in their families to go to college. We may be breaking our family tradition, and hopefully we'll start a new one for the future.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In an era when higher education in general is increasingly concerned with improving retention, persistence and graduation rates, educational administrators are focusing on student populations with historically lower college attendance and completion rates. First-generation college students, students who are among the first in their family to attend college, historically have much lower enrollment rates than their peers from more educated backgrounds; yet first-generation college students comprise nearly half of all college students (Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007). Emphasis on assisting first-generation college students through student support services such as academic advising may improve average statistics as well as providing a vital service to a large number of students. This research focused on how academic advisors can provide support and assistance to first-generation college students.

Introduction To/ Definition of the Issue

While there is still some debate over the definition of the term “first-generation college student” (FGCS), most of the research agrees that a first-generation college student is a student for whom neither parent has a bachelor’s degree (Davis, 2010). Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 found that 47% of all students in American higher education are first-generation college students, and that first-generation college students comprise 73% of less-than-two-year institutions, 53%

of two-year institutions and 34% of four-year institutions (Engle, 2007). Twenty-seven percent of all US high school graduates in 1992 are first-generation college students; of the 1992 high school graduates, 93% of students from more educated parents enrolled in college, while 59% of students whose parents had no type of college experience had enrolled in college by 1994 (Choy, 2001).

First-generation college students are more likely to be female, older, married or have dependents (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) and to work while in college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). They are also more likely to attend two-year institutions (Bui, 2002; Engle, 2007), but only 10% of first-generation college students who started at a two-year institution earned a bachelor's degree compared with 40% of those who started at a four-year institution (Bui, 2002). Overall, only 47% of first-generation college students earned a degree compared with 78% of continuing-generation students (Engle, 2007).

The transition to college is more difficult for first-generation college students, which was recognized by Billson and Terry (1982) in that "they are making a longer jump from the social status of their parents than are second-generation students. And they are making that jump with fewer resources and less support" (p. 18). Other researchers have explained that "those who were the first in their immediate family to attend college were *breaking*, not continuing, family tradition" (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994, p. 63) and describe college as "a "leap of faith" for these students because no one in their families has done it before" (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2007, p. 5).

Problem Statement and Context

Prior research has demonstrated unequivocally that first-generation college students do not enroll, persist or graduate from four-year institutions at comparable rates as students from more educated families. A great deal of research has focused on explaining the reasons behind first-generation college students' decreased college attendance and graduation rates. As the number of first-generation college students is expected to increase in the future as overall college enrollments grow (Hussar & Bailey, 2009), over 10 million first-generation college students could be enrolled in American colleges by 2018. Therefore, it behooves educational researchers and administrators to gain a better understanding of the background characteristics, college activities and needs of this large subgroup of students.

Much of the research points towards using academic advising as a strategy to assist first-generation college students (Adelman, 2006; DiMaria, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez, 2005; Thayer, 2000), but there is a no agreement in literature regarding exactly what academic advisors should do to assist first-generation college students. Therefore, this research sought to understand from academic advisors themselves what their experiences have been with advising first-generation college students and what seems to help first-generation college students to succeed in college.

Research Questions

This research focused on answering the following research questions:

1. What kinds of experiences do academic advisors have with first-generation college students?

2. What are some of the main questions or issues that arise in advising sessions with first-generation college students?
3. What are some of the best practices in advising first-generation college students?
4. What resources or programs are helpful to address the needs of first-generation college students?

Methodology

This research utilized intensive, semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 professional academic advisors from public, comprehensive colleges in the southeastern United States. These advisors were first-generation college students themselves so that they can understand both the individual experiences of being a first-generation college student as well as the role of an advisor to first-generation college students. Because their first-generation college student status is such an intrinsic part of the college experience for these students, the goals of this project required participants who have had the dual experiences of being both a first-generation college student as well as involvement in higher education as an academic advisor of students from less educated homes. To achieve a cohesive cohort of research participants, all participants were within 15 years of starting their undergraduate collegiate career. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded. I also maintained notes regarding non-verbal cues, such as body language, which were used in conjunction with the transcriptions. I developed an interview guide to guide the discussion to reduce the likelihood that questions would lead the participants towards certain responses. Documents given to or available to students were also coded and analyzed. Cultural

capital model was the conceptual framework for this research, and this framework was used in designing the research guide and questions and in analyzing the data. All of the interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed for gaps or clarity. Finally, the interview transcripts and any other documents were coded and analyzed.

Significance of Issue

In the field. Much of the research on first-generation college students has focused on quantitative studies of the background characteristics and in-college experiences of first-generation college students, or on persistence and graduation rates (or the lack thereof) of these students, often in comparison to continuing-generation college students. There has been a tendency to view first-generation college student status as a deficiency to be remedied by educational institutions before the first-generation student can succeed in college. Qualitative studies have focused on the experiences of being a first-generation college student by interviewing students about their experiences. To date, there are few published studies of the academic advisors of first-generation college students, despite numerous recommendations to use academic advising as a means to assist first-generation college students to adapting to college (Adelman, 2006; DiMaria, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez, 2005; Thayer, 2000).

This research analyzed data gleaned from qualitative interviews and advising documents of academic advisors who work with first-generation college students on a regular basis. As these advisors are also themselves first-generation college students, they have the unique perspective of having been a first-generation college student while they are now professional academic advisors in higher education. As experienced advisors, the research participants are also able to share techniques, practices and

resources that they have found to be effective in advising first-generation college students.

Best practices and resource recommendations were produced in the final chapter of this dissertation. This research also expands the literature on first-generation college students by seeking thick descriptions of experience and issues of first-generation college students from the perspective of the academic advisor.

Meaning to student (personally). I am a first-generation college student as well as an academic advisor, so I have experienced first hand many of the challenges as well as the benefits of being a first-generation college student and advising first-generation college students. I find that the prevailing view of first-generation college student status as a deficit is very limiting for both students and academic advisors. Rather than seeking merely to “cure” the student of their affliction of being a first-generation college student, I embrace the idea that all students have unique characteristics and that these different backgrounds and characteristics are important in higher education.

Definition of Terms

First-generation college student is a term with multiple potential definitions. For this research project, a first-generation college student is as a student for who neither parent or guardian obtained a four-year, Bachelor’s degree (Davis, 2010).

Academic advisor here refers to a person employed by a college or university with the primary job duty to provide academic advising to students. Faculty members very often also advise students, but for the purposes of this study, they are not

considered professional academic advisors if their primary purpose is teaching/ instruction rather than advising.

The term TRIO program refers to federal programs designed to provide access to and assistance with higher education to disadvantaged students, including first-generation college students, low-income college students and students with disabilities. The TRIO programs include Upward Bound, Talent Search and Student Support Services programs; although additional programs have been added since 1972 to support the aims of the original three programs, TRIO programs refers to all of the programs rather than just three.

Organization of Study

This study consisted primarily of intensive, semi-structured interviews with academic advisors who work regularly with first-generation college students and who are also first-generation college students when they enrolled in college. Transcripts of the interviews were coded and analyzed for themes. Other data sources, such as written or electronic documents used by the academic advisors and field notes, were also coded and analyzed. The ultimate goal of this research was to understand the experiences of academic advisors of first-generation college students and to highlight their recommendations and best practices.

This project is organized into five chapters addressing all aspects of the study.

Chapter one focuses on introducing the problem and explaining the context and its' significance to higher education.

Chapter two is a review of the relevant literature on first-generation college students and academic advising. It also includes the conceptual framework of cultural capital.

Chapter three reviews the methodology, including the research questions and participant selection.

Chapter four presents the findings through thick descriptions of the institutions, participants and the major themes that emerged from coding the data.

Chapter five discusses the connections of the findings from this study to the research literature and implications for advising practice for academic advisors, institutions and graduate programs. Suggestions for further research are also presented.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In research, it is vital to understand what has already been done before trying to conduct further research. Therefore, this chapter reviews the relevant classical and research literature on both first-generation college students. The history and foundations of academic advising is then discussed, along with the limited scholarly research. Finally, cultural capital is described and discussed as a conceptual framework for this research.

First-Generation College Students

Definition of terms. There is not a universally accepted definition of who is a first-generation college student (Davis, 2010). Many researchers use the definition that a first-generation college student is a student for whom neither parent had any type or quantity of higher education experience (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), and some use the definition that neither parent received a bachelor's degree (Davis, 2010; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Nunez, 2005). The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 divided students into three categories: students whose parents had at most a high school diploma, students whose parents had some experience with college, and students whose parents had at least one bachelor's degree or higher. Researchers using data from this study (Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) also divided students into the three categories, which further complicated the question of who is a first-generation college student.

Davis (2010) advocated using a definition that admissions officers can use; namely, to define first-generation college students as a student for whom neither parent or guardian possesses a four-year bachelor's degree (p. 2). Also, Davis argued, having a simplified definition will help students to understand the idea since first-generation college student status is something that students self-identify, like race. Unlike low-income status that can be verified with data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), there is no easy way for institutions to verify the college status of students' parents. Therefore, a simple explanation will be beneficial to both students and institutions.

For the purposes of this research, unless otherwise specified, a first-generation college student (FGCS) is a student for whom neither parent has a bachelor's degree, although the parents may have an associate's degree or some other type of experience with college. A continuing-generation college student (CGCS) is a student for whom at least one parent or guardian has at least a bachelor's degree.

Summary of classical and research literature.

Numbers in higher education. Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 found that 47% of all students in higher education were first-generation college students, and that first-generation college students comprised 73% of less-than-two-year institutions, 53% of two-year institutions, and 34% of four-year institutions (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007). Sixty-eight percent of FGCS planned to enroll in college immediately after high school, but only 24% actually enrolled and graduated from college within 8 years, compared with 91% of CGCS who planned to enroll and 68% who earned a degree within the same time (Engle, 2007).

Enrollment in college is expected to increase in the next decade, and a large proportion of that increase is likely to be first-generation college students (Davis, 2010). Enrollment in higher education increased by 14% from 1987-1997, and by 26% from 1997-2007 (Synder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). College enrollments are projected to grow by up to 17% to 21.3 million students enrolled in higher education by 2018 (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). Although the exact numbers of first-generation college students enrolled in higher education in general or in specific institutions is difficult to ascertain due to the different definitions and the difficulty associated in verifying their college student status (Davis, 2010), over 10 million first-generation college students could be enrolled in American colleges if we use the percentages from Engle (2007) and Choy's (2001) research.

Characteristics. First-generation college students were more likely to be female (Chen, 2005; Ishtani, 2006), an ethnic minority (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Ishtani, 2006), from lower-income families (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Housel & Harvey, 2010) and have spoken a language other than English at home (Bui, 2002). These students were also more likely to be underprepared for college (Chen, 2005; Thayer, 2000) and were more likely to need remedial coursework in their first year compared to their continuing-generation peers (55% vs. 27%) (Chen, 2005).

First-generation college students were less likely to take a standardized college admissions test, such as the SAT or ACT, than their peers (50% vs. 29%), and tended to score lower, with 40% of FGCS reporting low scores compared to 12% of CGCS (Chen, 2005). Continuing-generation college students were far more likely to complete a

higher-level mathematics course in high school (41% vs. 15% of FGCS), (Chen, 2005), which has been connected to increased persistence (Choy, 2001).

When they did enroll in college, first-generation college students were more likely to enroll in two-year institutions (Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2007) than at four-year institutions, and typically choose less academically selective institutions (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Educational aspirations. Far fewer first-generation college students expected to obtain a bachelor's degree than their continuing-generation peers, with only 53% of FGCS expecting a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 90% of CGCS (Engle, 2007). Of academically qualified students, 25% of FGCS did not enroll in college immediately after high school, compared with 5% of CGCS (Engle, 2007).

Persistence and graduation rates. Persistence is a major area of focus in first-generation college research. First-generation college students persisted in college at a lower rate than CGCS, although the persistence rates reported in the literature vary widely depending on the sample population, the study methodology and the definition used to define who is a first-generation college student. Ishtani (2006) found that students whose parents had no college experience were 8.5 times more likely to leave college than continuing-generation students. Martinez, Sher, Krull and Wood (2009) reported that 30.6% of first-generation students left college for at least one semester, compared with 27% of CGCS.

Financial challenges. First-generation college students were much more likely to be from lower-income families. According to Chen (2005), 50% of first-generation college students were classified as low-income with family incomes of less than \$25,000

compared to 7% of students whose parents had bachelor's degrees. Engle and Tinto (2008) found 4.5 million first-generation, low-income college students enrolled in 2008. Despite the link between FGCS status and family incomes, Douglass and Thomson (2008) exhorted researchers not to assume that they are interchangeable as their study of low-income students in The University of California system found that only one in three Pell Grant recipients at the UC campuses are first-generation college students.

Stagnation in Pell Grant and federal work-study program funding decreased their purchasing power (Engle, 2007), while the shift toward merit-based scholarships and grants away from need-based aid (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) increased the likelihood that first-generation college students, who are more often low income (Choy, 2001), must work while in college (Billson & Terry, 1982). Research showed that students in general who worked 1-20 hours per week persisted at higher rates than students who did not work at all or those who worked 21 or more hours per week (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), so the work-study position seemed to help the student beyond the mere financial assistance.

Suggested strategies to retain and graduate FGCS. Many first-generation college student researchers recommended intensive advising programs specifically for first-generation college students (DiMaria, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000). Adelman's (2006) analysis found that college students as a whole were less likely to persist or graduate if they earned fewer than 20 hours in their first year or if they had several repeated or withdrawn courses on their record, and recommended academic advising to help students to make appropriate course selections. Cushman (2007)

recommended programs that connect first-generation students with faculty members outside of large and impersonal classes.

Some research suggested that participation in living-learning communities can improve first-generation college student retention (Inkelas et al., 2007). Other types of academic and social involvement on campus showed a stronger positive effect for first-generation college students than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Students in general who worked 1-20 hours per week persisted at higher rates than students who did not work at all or those who worked more (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) so redistributing aid funds from merit-based scholarships to need-based work-study budgets will allow more first-generation college students to participate in the federal work-study program. Other research (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) concluded that increases in work-study funds led to higher retention than the same amount in grant aid. First-generation college students became more connected to campus and developed relationships with faculty and staff through their work-study positions, and these connections may ultimately have helped them to persist and graduate at higher rates.

Family connections were also an important factor in the lives of first-generation college students as their families either encouraged them or discouraged them from enrolling in and completing higher education (London, 1989; Nunez, 2005). Parents who did not go to college may not be able to understand or adequately support their students' in their pursuit of higher education. Recent scholarship suggested implementing family outreach programs, such as special parent/family orientations, to

help parents and other family members to understand the expectations and culture of college (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Nunez, 2005).

Prior research has demonstrated that first-generation college students do not enroll or graduate from college at the same rate as continuing-generation college students. As first-generation college students currently comprise nearly half of all college students (Engle, 2007) and college enrollments are expected to increase over the next decade (Synder et al., 2009), it is imperative that institutions provide resources, such as adequate financial support, academic advising, programs to encourage engagement and involvement on campus and support to the families of first-generation college students, that will assist first-generation college in succeeding in college at rates comparable to continuing-generation college students.

Research literature on first-generation college students.

Pascarella et al. (2004) divided most of the recent research on first-generation college students into three primary categories. One segment of the research was the comparison of first-generation college students with other college students or student subgroups. Second, much of the research focused on understanding the experiences in college of first-generation college students and the transition from high school to college. Third, research focused heavily on the persistence and graduation rates of first-generation college students. In addition to this list, there also seemed to be an emerging category of research that is seeking or offering suggestions for strategies to assist first-generation college students.

Most of the literature fell broadly into one of these four categories, but some of the literature crosses over multiple categories. For example, much of the research that

compared first-generation college students to other student groups included information on their persistence and graduation rates. Most research studies also concluded by offering suggestions or strategies based on their findings, but this is distinct from research that focused predominantly on providing these suggestions. Therefore, I have attempted to sort the relevant published research into these four broad categories.

Comparison to other students. Engle (2007) reviewed dozens of articles on first-generation college and examined statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics. Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 showed that 47% of all students in higher education were first-generation college students, and that first-generation college students comprised 73% of less-than-two-year institutions, 53% of two-year institutions, and 34% of four-year institutions. First-generation college students were less likely to enroll in college, expect to receive a bachelor's degree and to graduate with a degree. First-generation college students were also more likely to leave college without a degree, attend less selective colleges, work during college and live at home. The table below (table 1) illustrates some of the reported differences between first-generation college students (FGCS) and continuing-generation college students (CGCS).

Table 1

Differences Between FGCS and CGCS

	% of FGCS	% of CGCS
Left college without a degree	43	20
Left 4 year institution without a degree	29	13
Earned a degree	47	78
Graduated in 1992 and enrolled in college, earned a degree by 2000	24	68
Academically qualified but NOT enrolled in college	25	5
Expected to earn a bachelor's degree (in 12th grade)	53	90
Planned to enroll in college immediately after high school	68	91
Qualified high school graduates who neither took a college entrance exam nor applied to a 4 year institution	20	4

Note. Compiled from Engle (2007)

Chen's (2005) examination of transcripts from students who participated in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 indicated that first-generation college students were less likely to be enrolled in college than continuing-generation students, but were more likely to leave without a degree if they did enroll in college (43% vs 20%). As with other studies (Ishtani, 2006), first-generation college students were more likely to be female, Black or Hispanic and come from low-income families. First-generation students were also more likely to need remedial coursework in the first year (55% vs. 27%), be undecided about a major after entering college (33% vs. 13%) and earn fewer credit hours during their first year (18 vs. 25) and during their entire enrollment (66 vs. 112). First-generation students were also more likely to choose a vocational major and were less likely to enroll in advanced math courses. First-generation students had lower first-year GPAs (2.5 vs. 2.8) and cumulative GPAs (2.6 vs. 2.9) and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat courses (12% vs. 7%). This study found that when other variables were controlled for, first-generation student status

was not a statistically significant factor in persistence rates, but it did have a negative impact on degree attainment. First-generation college students remained less likely than their peers to receive any educational credential.

Somers, Woodhouse and Cofer (2004) used data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 1995-96 to examine background, college experiences and financial aid on the persistence of first-generation and continuing-generation students; there were almost 16,000 continuing-generation students and over 8,000 first-generation students in the dataset of all 4-year institutions in the survey. Using regression modeling to analyze the data, they found that low-income and multiethnic first-generation students were the least likely to persist, and that first-generation students were also much more afraid of taking on debt and were thus far less willing to take on loans to pay for college. Attending school full-time and living on campus were associated with higher persistence rates, but variables that predict persistence for students in general, such as high-income, high test scores and high GPA, were not statistically significant in the persistence of first-generation college students in this study.

Bui (2002) analyzed the backgrounds and experiences of FGCS and CGCS. Bui recruited freshmen first-generation college students from a program designed to assist first-generation college students by providing resources at UCLA and also recruited freshmen non-first-generation college students from an introductory psychology course participation pool. He yielded 64 first-generation college students, 75 students whose parents had some college experience but no degrees and 68 students for whom both parents had at least a bachelor's degree. All students completed a questionnaire to

assess their background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education and first-year experiences. First-generation college students were more likely to be an ethnic minority, came from a lower socioeconomic background, spoke a language other than English at home, and had lower standardized test scores than students whose parents had at least some college experience. First-generation college students felt less prepared for college, worried more about financial aid and feared failing out of college more; they also felt that they knew less about the social environment at the university and reported that they had to spend more time studying than other students.

Engle and Tinto (2008) drew upon data from three national datasets, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Beginning Postsecondary Students Study and Baccalaureate and Beyond Study, and focused on students who were both first-generation and low-income; previous research had demonstrated that first-generation college students were more likely to be low-income (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). First-generation, low-income students were defined in Engle and Tinto's study as a student for whom neither parent having a bachelor's degree and an annual household income of less than \$25,000 (no distinction in income was made whether the student is dependent or independent); the authors reported that 4.5 million first-generation, low-income students were enrolled in higher education in 2008. First-generation, low-income students were 3 times more likely to leave a four-year institution and 5 times more likely to leave a two-year institution than their continuing-generation, higher-income peers. First-generation, low-income students were nearly four times more likely to leave after their first year than their peers (26% vs. 7%). After 6 years, 43% of first-generation, low-income students left college, with 60% leaving

after the first year. Eleven percent of first-generation, low-income students obtained a bachelor's degree in 6 years compared with 55% of the continuing-generation, higher-income students; this was due in part to the significantly lower (14% vs. 50%) transfer rates from two-year to four-year institutions for first-generation, low-income students. Although first-generation, low-income students were equally likely to aspire to a graduate degree, they were less likely than continuing-generation college students to earn a graduate degree (21% vs. 36%); for those who did enroll in graduate programs, they remained less likely to receive a graduate degree (50% vs. 64%). Engle and Tinto (2008) suggested strategies from the Student Support Services model to assist in retaining and graduation first-generation, low income students: structured first-year experiences, strong academic support, active and intrusive advising, required participation in programs and a strong presence on campus for the first-generation college students support program director.

Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian and Miller (2007) assessed the impact of race/ethnicity and first-generation college student status on student involvement and learning. The researchers used a database of students from four-year institutions who took the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), fourth edition, between 1998 and 2001, and used stratified random sampling to select 4,501 students. The researchers then divided the students into seven self-identified racial/ ethnic groups with 643 students in each group, and included other demographic data such as first-generation status, age, major, and gender, in their analysis. Multiple linear regression indicated that first-generation college student status had a negative impact on four factors of student involvement: efforts they invested in course learning, frequency of

attendance at fine arts events, experiences with student acquaintances and scientific involvement. First-generation status showed a very small but positive impact on academic learning, yet there was a small but negative impact on personal learning. Lundberg et al. (2007) speculated that since first-generation college students enter college with less cultural capital, “perhaps their limited involvement ‘pays off’ better” (p. 73) than for their continuing-generation student peers. More course involvement was important for first-generation college students and may provide the most promise for intervention. “Programs for first-generation students must focus on engaging them more frequently with diverse others and with course learning activities that involve collaborating with others and expressing their ideas” (Lundberg et al., 2007, p. 77). Lundberg et al. (2007) cautioned that institutions must be careful to ensure that there is little public risk to first-generation students, and suggested modeling programs on existing models such as TRIO programs.

First-generation college students were more likely than their continuing-generation peers to be of an ethnic minority background (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005), so Asrat (2007) sought to determine the effects of being both African American and a first-generation college student. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at an historically black college, 303 freshmen and senior students were selected randomly, with approximately 1/3 first-generation and 2/3 continuing generation students; more than 90% of the students sampled were African American. First-generation college students were more likely to be older, live off campus (66% vs. 51%), to have transferred in from another institution, be employed while in college (>50% vs. 36%) and report fewer A grades (19% vs. 31%) but more C grades (29.7% vs.

15%). First-generation students also had lower mean scores on the academic challenge items on the NSSE as both freshmen and seniors. FGCS freshmen reported spending less hours preparing for class than others, but the gap between first-generation and continuing-generation students' studying time closed by senior year. First-generation students were more likely to participate in a community-based project, such as service-learning, as a freshman; they also reported higher levels of interaction with faculty at the freshman level but less interaction than their peers as seniors. Most of the items on the campus environment section were not statistically significant between first-generation and continuing-generation students, except that first-generation seniors' mean score for the campus environment providing the support necessary to succeed academically was statistically significantly higher. One major finding of this study was that first-generation students spent significantly less time studying than their peers, which they suggested as an area of future exploration for support strategies.

Explaining and understanding the experiences of FGCS. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) examined data from the National Study of Student Learning, collecting data from over 2,500 first-generation and non-first-generation students over a two year period, with a 67% return rate. From this data, four categories of characteristics were formed: demographic or pre-college characteristics, institutional characteristics, college academic experiences and college non-academic experiences. This study indicated that first-generation students gained more from extracurricular involvement, worked more hours and completed fewer course credits than their continuing-generation college students peers. "First-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their peers. Not

only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250). The researchers also reported that “our findings are also quite consistent with the expectation that family cultural capital plays a significant role” (p. 277) in the college decisions and experiences of college students, and that first-generation college students had less access to the family cultural capital.

In an analysis of the National Study of Student Learning data, Terenzini, Springer, Yager, Pascarella and Nora (1996), examined data from the National Study of Student Learning, collecting data from over 4,000 first-generation and non-first-generation students. The researchers reported that first-generation college students were more likely to come from low-income or Hispanic families, had weaker cognitive skills, had lower degree aspirations, were less involved with peers and teachers in high school, had more dependent children, expected to take longer to graduate and received less encouragement from their families to attend college. First-generation students also took fewer humanities or fine arts courses, took fewer courses in their first year, studied fewer hours, were employed more hours and were less likely to be in an honors program. They also reported fewer positive out-of-class experiences, but more experiences with discrimination. The authors recommend ways for institutions to support first-generation college students by providing more financial aid for part-time students, increase the number of on-campus work options and provide academic advising. The researchers also discussed the need for experiences for first-generation college students with faculty, administrators and staff who validated the students’

beliefs that they were “competent learners, that they can succeed, that they have a rightful place in the academic community, and that their background and past experiences are sources of knowledge and pride, not something to be devalued” (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 17).

In an earlier study, Terenzini et al. (1994), conducted focus-group interviews with 132 diverse, new students at four different types of institutions, ranging from a community college to a large research university. Although the focus was not specifically on first-generation college students, the authors examined some of the specific issues that the first-generation college students discussed. Their research found that first-generation students had a more difficult time adjusting to college, in part because college was not a part of their families’ expectations for them. They were also more likely to defer involvement on campus until they felt that their academic transition was under control. The researchers claimed that colleges’ practices and expectations were based on the idea that there were few differences between college students, but that first-generation college students experience different academic, social and cultural transitions to college. Institutions should find ways to provide the support that first-generation college students need both in and out of the classroom. Terenzini et al. (1994) specifically also suggested that institutions provide an orientation for the parents of first-generation college students as well as the students.

Pike and Kuh (2005) analyzed national databases to examine the differences between first and second-generation college students to understand the backgrounds, engagement and development of students, as well as the relationships between these factors. The study examined data from 1,127 first and second-generation first year

students from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire. Pike and Kuh found that first-generation college students were less engaged and perceived less support from the institution than their peers, but most of the difference was attributed to the first-generation college students' degree aspirations and living arrangements while in college.

In an earlier qualitative study examining the role of family on first-generation college students, London (1989) conducted interviews with 15 first-generation college students at Boston-area institutions to learn “what is at stake—what is lost, gained, fought for, and given to compromise—when, for the first time in the history of a family, one of its members partakes of higher education” (p. 145). London described three main modes of family roles as bound, delegated and expelled, and he used stories from participants to illustrate these roles. His research described the guilt and internal and external conflict that many students described as they were attempting to break away from their families and form their own identities.

Bradbury and Mather (2009) intensively interviewed nine first-year, first-generation college students from the Ohio Appalachia region to learn about the ways these students viewed and engaged their transition to college. They also used analyst triangulation with two other knowledgeable colleagues and member checking with the students to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Common threads from the interviews fell into four main categories: the pull of home, academic adjustment, belonging and financial realities. Nearly all of the participants felt a strong connection to home, with nearly half having had contact with their families on a daily basis. Many also had to juggle their role as a college student with the expectations that their families

had for them to help out with grandparent or younger sibling care and chores/ duties around the house. Five of the nine students were also employed, and nearly all of the participants were anxious about paying for college. “Loyalty to family, necessity of work, and responsibility took precedence over commitment to school.” (Bradbury & Mather, 2009, p. 267). Serious yet tumultuous dating relationships led two female students to not return to college in the spring semester, and another student transferred to another school in part due to an untenable roommate situation; positive relationships with family and friends helped other students to make the transition to college. Bradbury and Mather found that nearly all of the participants were encouraged to attend college by their family and friends. Their professors initially intimidated all of the participants, but this faded over time as they realized that their professors and the staff cared and wanted them to succeed. The researchers concluded that the institutional culture of inclusion, as an open enrollment institution, helped the participants to transition to college. Family and other relationships provided them with a strong sense of identity, but also sometimes prevented students from focusing on their academic obligations. “We found no evidence that family obligations are questioned. These loyalties and obligations appeared to be sacrosanct.” (p. 275). The researchers recommended family outreach programs to extend knowledge about college to the significant others in these first-generation college student lives.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) conducted interviews with 10 first-generation college students enrolled in an early intervention program at a college in Kentucky. They described students who remained very connected with their families, both immediate and extended, as well as their home communities. Most students reported

going home regularly, with younger students in their first or second year and those who did not yet have a strong identity within the college going home the most frequently, often every weekend. These students also reported frequent contact with their parents by phone, sometimes multiple times each day; some students in their junior or senior years reported that they initiated contact with their parents less frequently now than in the past, but that their parents still contacted them at the same rate. About half of the participants indicated that they often felt like two people, one person with their families and another on campus. Bryan and Simmons (2009) explained this feeling as “they did not always fully assimilate into the college environment, but rather, their assimilation was specific and issue driven, which allowed them to switch back and forth more between their home and university cultures” (p. 404). All of the participants discussed their and their parents’ lack of knowledge about college, although most were not angry or bitter about it. Most students also reported that their families had spent very little time on campus other than during orientation or residence hall move-in, but they did not seem interested in sharing the campus with their families; Bryan and Simmons (2009) interpreted this as part of their desire to keep their family life and college life separate. All of the participants described an overwhelming drive to succeed, coming either from themselves, their families or the expectations of their larger home communities. They also felt very pressured to return home after graduating from college, but most students recognized that there are not sufficient employment or cultural options available in their hometowns and were conflicted about their plans after college. Only a few students discussed directly how poverty had affected their lives, but several mentioned how they felt that their high schools did not adequately

prepare them for college. All of these students participated in an early intervention program during high school, to which they attributed a great deal of their success. The authors suggested a series of workshops for the parents of first-generation college students, to help parents to understand the terminology and expectations of college better so they can better understand and support their students' transitions.

Nunez (2005) interviewed nine first-generation female students at a large, research I institution, with eight of the nine students being women of color. Participants were drawn from students enrolled in an academic success course. Nunez utilized semi-structured interviews, reviews of journals from the academic success course and observations of interactions between the participants and academic advisors, peer advisors and academic tutors to learn about their transitions to college and their use of social and cultural capital in their transition. Like Bryan and Simmons (2009), Nunez (2005) found that "students were not necessarily separating from their parents, but maintaining or renegotiating their connections" (p. 99). There were also struggles with how often to go home on weekends, and some reported conflicts with their parents over expectations of visits home. The students in this study had access to a number of different resources to provide with them support and knowledge about the university, including the course on academic success, peer and staff counselors and academic tutors. All of the students spoke about the importance of having someone to go to for help with cultural capital, specifically bureaucratic knowledge (e.g., choosing classes, study skills, etc.) and information on connecting to the resources on campus. Peer counselors, academic advisors and academic tutors were important in these students' transitions to college by providing information as well as emotional support

and academic validation. Faculty members were not mentioned as sources of support for these students. Nunez (2005) suggested that institutions offer accessible support for students to navigation the transition to college and to provide support, particularly during the first year. She described peer advising and tutoring as cost-effective ways to help students to access social and cultural capital. Finally, given the strong connection between students and their families, family orientation was recommended to help families to understand the challenges of entering college.

Persistence and graduation rates. Ishitani (2006) used longitudinal data from the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study for 4,427 students who initially enrolled in college in 1991-1994. Structural equation and event history modeling investigated the timing of key educational events, specifically graduation and dropout dates. Ishitani further divided the first-generation category into two categories: students whose parents' highest educational attainment was high school and students whose parents' had some college but did not receive a bachelor's degree; this was somewhat unusual compared to most of the literature, although some other researchers using National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 data also used a three-part criteria (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007). Ishitani asserted that it was "important for us to be aware of the diverse precollege characteristics that exist within the group of first-generation college students" (p. 881) and of how these characteristics affected attrition and persistence. First-generation college students were 51% less likely to graduate from college in four years and 32% less likely to graduate in five years than their continuing-generation college student peers in this study. Students whose parents had no college experience were 8.5 times more likely to drop out and students whose parents had

some college experience are 4.4 times more likely to drop out than students for whom at least one parent had a bachelor's degree. First-generation college students were most likely to drop out during their second year than any other time, but this risk waned over time after the second year; however, the risk of first-generation college students dropping out remained higher than their continuing generation peers across the study's six-year graduation assessment. While other factors, such as financial aid, high school preparation and statistics and educational attainment expectations, played a role in persistence to graduation, first-generation college students remained less likely to graduate than their continuing generation peers.

A group of 3,290 first-time college students at a large Midwestern public, research intensive institution completed a survey prior to entry and each subsequent semester for researchers to examine moderating and mediating effects on first-generation college students (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). Of the sample, 1,855 self-reported that neither parent had a college degree. Even after controlling for other variables, first-generation college students were more likely to leave college for a period of time, as 30.6% of first-generation students left for at least one semester compared with 27.1% of continuing-generation students. First-generation college students were more likely to have a break in enrollments than continuing-generation college students with low GPAs. Financial issues, specifically lack of scholarships and having loans, were a stronger predictor of attrition than first-generation college student status in this study.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) evaluated data from 4,184 students who were part of the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey; of these, 1,167 were

first-generation college students, defined in this study as neither parent having any type or quantity of post-high school experience, and 3,017 were continuing-generation students. Using a critical social perspective, the authors examined the intersection of first-generation college student status and other variables including background characteristics, precollege achievements, initial commitment to the institution and higher education, institutional variables and in-college experiences. Seventy-six percent of first-generation college students persisted to the second year, compared to 82% of continuing-generation students. Using logistic regression, 15 variables were significant in determining the first to second year persistence of first-generation college students. Married students, Hispanic students and students attending private institutions were less likely to persist to the second year. Being male, speaking English as the primary language at home, increased family income levels, higher expectations of educational attainment, selecting colleges based on faculty reputation, living at home while in college, larger institutional size, higher scores on the academic integration index, higher first-year grade point average, increased satisfaction with social life, total grant aid and total work-study aid received were all associated with positive increases in first to second year persistence for first-generation college students. Each \$1,000 increase in grant aid was associated with a 2.7% increase in first-generation college student persistence, while it was not statistically significant for continuing-generation college students. Each \$1,000 increase in work-study aid had a 6.4% increase for first-generation and a 4.4% increase for continuing-generation college student persistence to the second year. The authors speculated that the increase in persistence for work-study funding rather than grant aid could also be related to the personal relationships

formed between students and the campus staff with whom they worked as well as the monetary assistance.

Strategies to support first-generation college students. Thayer (2000) reviewed dozens of studies related to first-generation college students for a paper commissioned by the National TRIO Clearinghouse. From the literature, Thayer concluded that academic advisors, faculty and staff members, and administrators must make a concerted effort to prevent these students from dropping out of college. Programs to help retain students must be available early in the student's academic career, perhaps even before he or she arrives on campus through high school advising and programs. "Because the greatest proportion of students who leave the institution are likely to do so within the first four semesters... retention strategies must be particularly influential early in students' transition to the campus" (Thayer, 2000, p. 4). Programs should focus on remediating financial disadvantages, lack of awareness of college or academic expectations, inadequate academic preparation, and poor family support.

Inkelas, Daver, Vogt and Leonard (2007) compared the academic and social transition to college among 1,335 first-generation college students enrolled at 33 four-year institutions using data from the National Survey of Living-Learning Programs. After statistically controlling for individual students' background factors, first-generation students engaged in a living-learning program reported significantly more positive perceptions of their transition to college. The authors concluded that educational practitioners should consider recruiting and encouraging first-generation students to living-learning programs. They also reported that informal peer

interactions and outside of class involvement were not statistically significant in student perceptions of transition.

Kathleen Cushman (2007) interviewed 16 first-generation college students who were currently enrolled or had just graduated from colleges around the United States. These students described feeling like outsiders on campus; a feeling that was likely magnified since most of her participants were also ethnic minorities in addition to being first-generation college students. “Differences in income, social styles, and even speech patterns cause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders” (Cushman, 2007, p. 45). These students attributed their academic success to forging supportive relationships early in their academic careers that included both academic and social support. Because first-generation students did not have parents who could reassure them and guide them in college, Cushman said that it was important that these students find support from others, and suggested that colleges institute programs that link first-generation college students with supportive faculty members outside of the classroom.

There is also an extensive subgenre of the first-generation college student literature that focused on pre-college interventions, such as federal programs to help first-generation, low-income and other underrepresented population students to enter higher education (such as the federal TRIO programs). However, given that this research focused on the experiences of academic advisors who work with first-generation college students after they have completed high school and have already enrolled in college, this pocket of research is not included.

Academic Advising Literature

Definition of terms. The National Association of Academic Advising (NACADA) believes that academic advising is a vital function in higher education. “Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community” (NACADA Concept of Advising, 2006). Academic advisors can be professional staff, faculty advisors, or other members of the higher education community. For this study, there is a distinction between a professional academic advisor whose primary responsibility is advising and a faculty advisor whose primary responsibility is teaching or research with advising as a secondary job duty. In this study, advisor refers to a professional academic advisor.

History of academic advising. Academic advising was born in the mid-nineteenth century when the undergraduate curricula shifted away from the classical, prescriptive tradition to a more major and elective based curriculum (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). In the beginning stages of academic advising, advising was by faculty members in addition to their teaching and research responsibilities, and advising was predominantly an administrative and bureaucratic task (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). Academic advising was formalized when Kenyon College in Ohio paired each student with a faculty advisor in 1841 (Cook, 2009), and Johns Hopkins University required students to identify a concentration and a faculty advisor early in their academic careers (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). Centralized advising centers and the use of professional staff advisors began in the 1960s (Cook, 2009), and the first

national academic advising conference was held in 1977 with the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) being chartered in 1979 (Cook, 2009).

In the early years, academic advising theory and research drew mostly from the fields of student development, counseling and career development, but recently has shifted more towards discipline-specific modes of scholarly research as faculty advisors became a part of NACADA (Hagen, 2010).

Academic advising models. There are currently three major models of academic advising, although other less used models and variations on the major models exist. Prescriptive advising is where the advisor diagnoses the student's problem and then prescribes steps to improve it (Crookstone, 1972; Heisserer & Parette, 2002). For example, a student would meet with an advisor to be told which classes to take the next semester and to get concrete information on the registration process; many students are conditioned to expect prescriptive advising from their prior educational experiences. Although this is the easiest method of academic advising for advisors, this model puts the responsibility for the decisions on the advisor rather than the student (Crookston, 1972).

Crookston (1972) described developmental advising as the advisor directing students to resources rather than just simply answering their questions. The goal of developmental advising is to help the student to achieve skills such as independence, decision-making and problem solving. Responsibility is shared between the advisor and the student. Integrated advising combines the positive aspects of both prescriptive and developmental advising by emphasizing both providing information and fostering student involvement in their academic career.

A more recently introduced model of advising is intrusive advising, where the advisor is proactive in contacting students and instructors to enhance student motivation. Advisors do not wait for students to come to them with questions; they actively seek out the student and thus try to communicate that someone at the university cares about them (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Some researchers have advocated for intrusive advising models with first-generation students since they may be unaware of their needs or embarrassed to ask questions (DiMaria, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Research in academic advising. As a new field of scholarly inquiry, there is little published scholarly research on academic advising. Although Grites wrote in 1979 (as cited in Habley, 2009) that research was needed in academic advising, Habley claims in 2009 that research in academic advising has actually advanced very little in the intervening three decades. Schulenburg and Lindhorst (2010) claimed that although academic advising has long been recognized as an important part of higher education, it is still not recognized as an important area of scholarship in higher education.

Most of the published literature on advising focused on using analogies and metaphors to describe advising (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2007). The literature tended to be descriptive rather than research oriented, and typically consisted of models of advising, case studies of academic advising or how-to guides for advisors. The majority of the published research that includes academic advising were retention studies or student satisfaction studies that included academic advising as a variable; academic advising was only tangentially related to the primary research topic. There were also

numerous survey studies on students' perceptions of academic advising and advisors' perceptions of the field. I also found numerous articles describing the history of the field of academic advising and interviews with advisors that simply shared their thoughts without significant analysis by the researchers/ authors. There were few experimental or qualitative studies.

Therefore, this project contributes to the field of academic advising by adding to the understanding of what it is that academic advisors do and what they experience. It also generates suggestions for best practices in advising first-generation college students drawn from a number of academic advisors.

Advising at-risk students. As academic advising is still emerging as a field of scholarly inquiry (Hagen, 2010) there is still scarce research on advising specific student populations, including first-generation college students.

Angela Sickles (2004) provided a list of suggestions for the advisors of first-generation college students. Since not all students have had experience with TRIO programs, she stated that many first-generation college students will turn to their academic advisor for advice not just about academics or policies, but for guidance on navigating day-to-day life in college. Advisors must have comprehensive knowledge of the campus and campus resources, and be prepared to help students to access these resources. While time consuming initially, she explained that “the relationship that the advisor has built with these students will allow the student to feel more at home on the campus and be better equipped to deal with the stresses of being the first in the family to obtain a degree in higher education” (Sickles, 2004, para. 11).

Similarly, Darling and Smith (2007) wrote a chapter in a NACADA monograph on the challenges associated with being a first-generation college student, especially in the first year. They suggested that academic advisors team up with others who have a shared interest in first-generation college students to assess the institutional data, campus culture and needs of first-generation college students on their campus, and to advocate for these students by recommending programs and policies for supporting these students on campus. Comprehensive advising was recommended, especially in building a thoughtful first year schedule that addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the individual student. They also suggested connecting early and often with first-generation college students in the first year, particularly through first-year seminars.

Conceptual Framework

Several recent studies of first-generation college students (Asrat, 2007; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004) have utilized Bourdieu's model of cultural capital as a framework for exploring the impact of parental education on higher education. This study continues this trend by also using cultural capital as the conceptual framework from which interview questions are formed and data analyzed.

Cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron conceptualized cultural capital in 1972 while attempting to understand the unequal scholastic achievement of children from different social classes (Bourdieu, 2001). Bourdieu (2001) explained that academic qualifications serve as a "certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture" (p. 102). Bourdieu viewed capital as the mechanism in which the dominant class maintains its dominance (Perna & Titus, 2005). Oldfield

(2007) explained cultural capital in higher education as “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily.” (p. 2).

Lamont and Lareau (1988) explained that schools are not neutral entities, but rather that they reflect the experiences of the dominant class. Students who were born into the dominant class enter school with key social and cultural experiences while students from working and lower class families lack these experiences and were penalized academically. Those without the cultural experiences can acquire the social, linguistic and cultural skills, but they must acquire these while in school rather than arriving already knowing them, as their continuing-generation peers do. “Because differences in academic achievement are normally explained by differences in ability rather than by cultural resources transmitted by the family, social transmission of privileges is itself legitimized” (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 155). In other words, schools attributed academic performance to ability only, and did not take into account the fact that some students come to school with the social and cultural experiences the schools subtly favor. McDonough (1997) described cultural capital as the knowledge that is useful in school but that is not taught by the schools.

Because students with lower levels of parental education have less access to the social and cultural modes of college, they are less able to acquire the knowledge (Pascarella et al., 2004). “Individuals with highly educated parents may have a distinct advantage over first-generation students in understanding the culture of higher education” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252), while first-generation college students had more limited access to this capital through their family relationships. Pascarella et al.

(2004) hypothesized that since the college experience itself provided an opportunity for obtaining cultural capital, the college experience will lead to greater increases in cultural capital for first-generation college students than their continuing-generation peers. Their research found that first-generation college students derived greater benefit from extracurricular involvement and peer interaction even though they were less likely to be involved in these activities. Because first-generation college students had less cultural capital to begin with, their out-of-class college experiences had more “bang-for-the-buck” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 279).

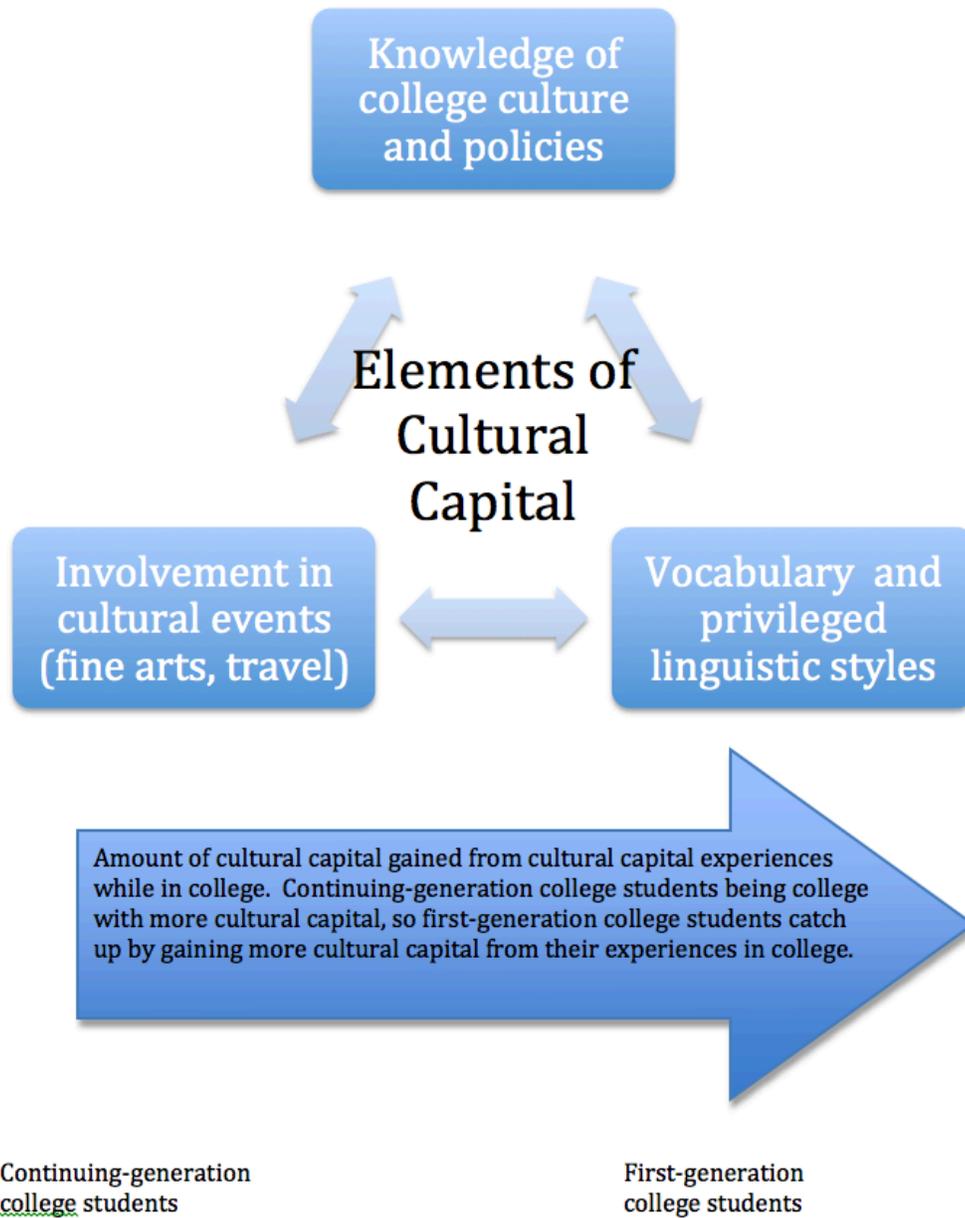


Figure 1. Elements of cultural capital

Carol Lundberg (2007) used the analogy of her son playing little league baseball to explain cultural capital. As neither she nor her husband had ever played baseball,

both they and their son lacked the understanding of the unspoken rules and etiquette of baseball. In one anecdote, she bought all of the items on the list handed out by the coach, but later found out that she had not bought the correct undergarments for her son. The shirts were not on the list, so she had no idea that he needed special undershirts to wear under his uniform. Parents who had played baseball or softball themselves knew the rules and what was necessary to be successful at the sport. Lundberg did not, and so her son was also disadvantaged by not having the right undergarments or the right type of bat for the game. She tied this back to higher education by discussing the language of college that continuing-generation students know, but that first-generation college students do not know that they are lacking the vocabulary.

Bergerson's (2007) qualitative portrait of Anna, a first-generation college student, also focused on the role of capital in higher education.

In a wealthy, college-educated family, potential students are exposed to extensive higher education options. They, their families and their peers speak the language of higher education, understand how admissions processes work, and are aware of scholarships and financial aid options. Anna's family did not have this type of network. (p. 112)

Because Anna's family could not support her financially while she was in college, she worked at Wendy's to pay her bills and even began saving to pay back her student loans. The hours that Anna and students like her spent working detracted from her ability to acquire social and cultural capital in college; she was working while other students were socializing or attending various events.

The idea of cultural capital in higher education is relevant to this research because a four-year bachelor's degree is "linked to long-term cognitive, social, and economic benefits to individuals, benefits that are passed on to future generations, enhancing the quality of life of the families of college-educated persons, the communities in which they live, and the larger society" (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 105), yet many first-generation college students never achieve their goals because they lack the cultural capital to adequately understand their college options and their role as a college student. College educated parents "are in much better position to pass information about their college experiences on to their children, whereas parents of first- generation college students simply do not have that information to pass on to their children" (Asrat, 2007, p. 5).

Extensive research shows that first-generation college students did not enroll in college or graduate at the same rates as their continuing-generation student peers (Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Several studies also show that first-generation college students who did enroll in college were more likely to attend less selective institutions (Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004). Pascarella et al. (2004) and Asrat (2007) attributed this disparity to lower levels of understanding and expectations of college from students whose parents with less experience with higher education. First-generation college students lacked the cultural capital to understand to higher education and were thus disadvantaged from the very beginning.

Academic advisors can serve as models for first-generation college students in understanding higher education's bureaucracies and expectations (Cushman, 2007;

Darling & Smith, 2007; Sickles, 2004). Academic advisors may be able to impart some of the cultural capital that first-generation college students lack (Cushman, 2007) by helping them to understand higher education and their role as a college student. Academic advisors have the institutional knowledge that first-generation college students lack, and that many continuing-generation college students learned at home from their parents.

There has been extensive research on first-generation college students over the last several decades which has shown that these students face different challenges than students from more educated homes. They do not enroll, persist or graduate from college at the same rate as students whose parents went to college. Most of this research was quantitative in nature or focused on describing the experiences of first-generation college students. Through qualitative interviews with academic advisors who were both first-generation college students themselves and who advise first-generation college students, this study sought to understand how exactly how academic advising, a strategy suggested by multiple researchers, could help first-generation college students to succeed in college.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will address the methodology of this research study. This section will review the methodological approach and rationale, research and interview questions, research design, sampling strategy, including participant and institution selection, data collection, data coding and analysis, trustworthiness and validity, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations and IRB procedures.

From the literature, researchers have learned many of the challenges associated with being a first-generation college student. The conceptual framework of the cultural capital model posits that first-generation college students do not have the cultural capital that students with more education parents have, and it is this lack that leads to reduced retention and graduation rates. Scholars have also speculated that academic advising could be an important support mechanism for first-generation college students, but little published research has directly addressed how academic advisors can help. This study sought to understand from qualitative interviews with 10 first-generation college students who are now academic advisors how academic advisors can help first-generation college students to acquire cultural capital necessary to succeed in college.

Methodological Approach and Rationale

As I sought to understand the experiences of academic advisors of first-generation college students, qualitative methods and research interviews in particular were a natural fit for this topic, and were an effective means to gain the rich

descriptions of experiences and the meaning made from these experiences necessary for this research. Qualitative research methods allowed me the opportunity to learn more about the specific experiences of these individuals, and to learn strategies that might help other first-generation college students to navigate the new environment of higher education.

Specifically, I undertook to understand how academic advisors can assist first-generation college students with obtaining the cultural capital and knowledge they need to succeed in college. As these advisors have been first-generation college students themselves, they have personal stories of their student days as they gained the cultural capital they needed to succeed and ultimately graduate from college. As advisors, they also have the theoretical knowledge of higher education as well as practical experience with the policies and procedures of their specific institutions to impart to students.

Research Questions

In this qualitative study, I interviewed 10 first-generation college student advisors and reviewed documents to analyze, through a cultural capital lens, their experiences as both first-generation college students themselves and as an academic advisor of first-generation college students.

Specifically, I addressed the following research questions:

1. What kinds of interactions and relationships do academic advisors have with first-generation college students?
2. What are some of the main questions or issues that arise in advising sessions with first-generation college students?

3. What are some of the recommendations for best practices in advising first-generation college students?
4. What kinds of resources or programs are helpful to address the questions or issues of first-generation college students?

Interview Questions

From Bourdieu's cultural capital model, we know that it is the lack of family experiences and expectations with college that proves challenging for first-generation college students. Therefore, the interview questions sought to answer the research questions by first attempting to learn from the participants what they perceived as the challenges and benefits manifested from the lack of family knowledge. Interview questions started with a general life history of the participants before moving on to the more specific examples and stories and finally culminated in suggestions from the participants for working with first-generation college students.

Interview questions were:

1. Please tell me about yourself.
 - a. Personal and family history
 - b. Academic history
2. What was it like for you as a first-generation college student when you were in college?
 - a. Benefits
 - b. Challenges
 - c. Support systems
3. What is it like for you now as an academic advisor of first-generation college students?
 - a. Personal connection/ empathy
 - b. Providing support/ resources

4. Because you have experienced being part of this population from both sides (student and advisor), what do you think are the best practices for advising first-generation college students?
 - a. Benefits/ challenges of being a first-generation college student?
 - b. How can academic advisors support first-generation college students?
 - c. What other resources on campus do you use or recommend?
 - d. What documents (electronic or print) do you use with first-generation college students?

Research Design, Sampling Strategy, Institutions and Participants

Ten academic advisors who work regularly with first-generation college students and who were also themselves first-generation college students were interviewed. Participants must have also been a first-generation college student because I sought to understand the intersection of both sets of experiences, as a student and as an advisor of first-generation college students. Because the participants have had experience in both positions, they are able to discuss the needs and best practices for working with first-generation college students. These advisors must also have been first-generation college students themselves so that they can understand both the individual experiences of being a first-generation college student as well as the role of an advisor to first-generation college students.

All of the institutions selected are master's comprehensive or bachelor's granting institutions, according to the Carnegie classification, located in North Carolina. The selected institutions were a mix of sizes, settings and selectivity, and also included two institutions that are comprised predominantly of minority undergraduate students. It was logistically impossible to include institutions from a wide geographic region, so I decided along with my research committee to limit possible choices to the 16 higher

education institutions within the public University of North Carolina system. This choice still allowed for multiple institutional types, locations and sizes while also making it possible for me to have face-to-face interviews with all of the participants, which I deemed to be the most important criterion in institutional selection as the ability to be physically in the space used for advising and to observe body language would be important in producing my field notes. One institution declined to participate, so I moved to the next one of the list of acceptable institutions. Another institution agreed to participate, but there were no eligible volunteers from that institution. I contacted seven institutions to ultimately yield five.

I obtained participants by contacting the academic advising director at each of the five institutions selected to inform them of this project. These directors were asked to forward the research proposal and informed consent document to all of the academic advisors in their unit since first-generation college student status is not something that is typically identified. I then communicated with each prospective participant to explain the project and ask for a short, written personal and educational biography to ensure that he or she met the criteria of the study. Not all advisors who initially contacted me met the qualifications for the study, and so several volunteers were excluded. The number of participants per institution ranged from one to three.

As academic advising and higher education has changed dramatically since the widespread adoption of the Internet, all participants had to be within 15 years of starting their undergraduate collegiate career. Many aspects of higher education have shifted to electronic over the last 15 years, and it was important to have a cohesive cohort who had similar experiences with such advising issues as course selection and

registration. First-generation college students who attended college before the Internet age had a very different experience in terms of scheduling appointments with their advisor and registering for courses.

A specific set of criteria was established for the participants that would yield only those with expertise in the areas in which I was studying, first-generation college students and academic advising. Participant selection was a mix of purposeful selection and convenience sampling in that there were strict criteria which had to be met (must be professional academic advisors who were first-generation college students who now advise first-generation college students and within 15 years of starting their undergraduate careers). I relied on volunteers from within this very limited population pool (Maxwell, 2005), which added a small element of convenience sampling.

As the literature shows that first-generation college students are more likely to be from a lower socio-economic background, to be women and to be from ethnic minority backgrounds, and the participant pool reflected this, with six of the participants were women and four self-reported some aspect of their ethnicity as an underrepresented population in higher education. Also, as the institutions selected for this study are also varied, including both urban and rural settings and two institutions with predominant minority student populations, so the participants' backgrounds were diverse without specific sampling strategies employed for diversity due to the nature of the institutions selected. The sampling strategy achieved the goal in obtaining representative participation of first-generation college student academic advisors (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Maxwell, 2005).

Data Collection

Interview data was collected in face-to-face taped, semi-structured interviews with 10 participants using an interview protocol (see Appendix A). Each participant was interviewed once, with follow up questions answered by phone or email if necessary. After each interview, recordings were transcribed and reviewed for clarity.

Data also included my notes about and descriptions of the physical environment of the advising center and the individual advising office. Details included the availability of materials and handouts, types of handouts available, the layout of the office and how comfortable students might be during the advising appointment. Data also included the participant's demeanor, body language, vocal inflection and other non-verbal cues.

Additional data sources also included any written or electronic resources that the participants use with first-generation college students. This included any written documents such as course guides or university resources, websites or any other type of resource. These resources provided important piece of triangulation of the data by corroborating the advisor's interview answers about how they view the benefits and challenges of being a first-generation college student. These documents are ones shared with or made available to students, including first-generation college students, and the material in them are an important component of the best practices sought.

Interviews

While a more recently widely discussed and accepted academic method of obtaining information in the social sciences, including education, research interviews are based on conversations, which is an ancient form of human knowledge gathering

(Kvale, 1996). Described by Kvale (1996) as “an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon,” (pp. 5-6) the purpose of the research interviews in this project was to learn about the phenomenon of first-generation college student academic advising. Interviewing was used as a basic mode of inquiry (Seidman, 2006) into the participants’ experiences.

“Your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your interview questions are what you ask people in order to gain that understanding.” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 92) Since my research focus was on learning more about the experiences of the participants as well as their current advising practice, I focused on asking mostly open-ended (Seidman, 2006) questions and tried to avoid leading questions (Kvale, 1996). I used the interview guide developed in consultation with my research committee, but I was not wedded to it. Seidman (2006) advises researchers to develop an interview guide when appropriate, but to use it with caution and to allow for questions and discussion that deviates from the guide. I used the guide only to make sure that I asked all 10 participants about the same general topics, but I kept it intentionally short to allow for the interviews to develop organically with each individual participant.

There were many “serendipitous learnings that emerge from unexpected turns” (Glesne, 2006, p. 81) during the interviews that led to follow up questions not listed on the list of formal questions. In several cases, those off-the-cuff questions led down fascinating side roads that yielded some of the richest data. I would jot down notes or key words that would lead me to come back to those interesting points once the

participant had finished their narrative rather than interrupting (Seidman, 2006). The interviews and being in the participant's space for the interview were incredibly rich sources of data for this study.

To arrange the interviews, once the 10 participants were selected, I contacted each person individually via email to schedule a date and time for the interviews. Since I would be traveling across the state of North Carolina to conduct the interviews, I had to plan them well in advance. In one case, one of the advisors did not respond to my email requests to set up a date and time, but did respond to phone messages. Once dates and times were arranged, I made the travel arrangements and obtained specific directions to their offices on campus as I planned to meet with each advisor in their office on campus.

The interviews were designed intentionally to be more like guided conversations. Since humans by nature obtain a great deal of our knowledge from conversation (Kvale, 1996), I hoped this would help to set the participants at ease. Interviews began with me arriving at the advisor's office and typically checking in with an administrative assistant in the advising or unit main office. In some cases, the administrative assistant called back and I took a seat to wait; in others, I was expected and told where to go to find the advisor's office.

We typically shook hands or greeted each other and then exchanged pleasantries about the weather, my travels, the campus or other similar topics for a few moments to get to know each other a bit while I unpacked my notebook, pens and digital audio recorder. There was a slight awkwardness on my part in asking strangers to tell me personal details about their lives, but it dissipated quickly. As an academic advisor

myself, I am often asking students about their lives and their experiences, and it quickly became apparent to me that this was similar in many ways, just with a different population. The participants too seemed to get over any initial minor awkwardness very quickly, likely because they too are professional academic advisors and meeting new people and quickly moving into discussion is simply part of advising.

Once I had a copy of the interview questions out and everything ready to go, I explained my project again briefly and asked for permission to record the interview. This had already been explained in the informed consent form that each participant had signed and returned earlier, but I wanted to give them the opportunity to ask any questions or to decline if they felt nervous. They all agreed. I switched on the digital recorder and provided basic information to help me when I reviewed the recordings later, including the name, date and location of the interview.

I tried to place the recorder in an unobtrusive place on a flat surface where it wouldn't be jostled and could pick up on both voices clearly, but where I could also occasionally and discretely check to see that the red light was on to indicate that it was still recording. I wanted the participants to try as much as possible to forget that they were being recorded and to just focus on the conversational part of the interview and relax. The participants typically seemed to be able to ignore the recorder after a few minutes since it was mostly out of the way

Once I had reviewed the logistics, I gave each participant a copy of the interview guide if they wanted it and then asked them the opening question, which was designed to be very broad and to give them a chance to tell me about themselves and get comfortable with sharing and being open with me before asking them specific questions

related to the topic per Glesne's (2006) recommendations. I had a very brief personal sketch from when I was recruiting participants to ensure that they met the selection criteria, but for the sake of this research, I needed to know more about their personal and educational backgrounds and how being a first-generation college student has impacted them and their advising practice, so this question served a dual purpose to set them at ease and to provide valuable data.

After the opening grand tour question (Glesne, 2006), we moved through the interview questions, questions that developed from the discussion and then I concluded by asking a debriefing question (Kvale, 1996) to see if there was anything more they wished to add or any questions they wanted to ask. Once the tape recorder was safely off, there were short conversations about the next steps on my research and I assured that I would be in touch if I had any additional questions. Then I thanked them for their time and participation and left.

I took extensive notes during the interviews, as recommended by Seidman (2006), both on body language, tone and other non-verbal cues as well as the content of the discussion. This was for two reasons. One, should the audio recorder fail in any way or any part be inaudible, I needed to have a record of the interview in my notes. Second, my notes on the nonverbal cues and other information that the audio recorder could not record would provide an important source of data for triangulation during data analysis. I tried to use abbreviations and shorthand when possible, and I wrote as quickly as I could to accurately capture everything that was said and done in the interview. I also maintained eye contact as much as possible while keeping my notes at least moderately legible for later review. I would look up during any pauses and when

asking questions to make eye contact, but I also relied on my own non-verbal cues such as nodding and encouraging sounds and words (such as mm hmm, go on, wow, how interesting and really) to show my continued interest during my frantic writing.

I too treated the interviews like a conversation, and I would share anecdotes or stories from my own life that were similar to the ones that they shared with me to establish a connection and reciprocity with the participants. This was not an intentional strategy on my part, but rather a part of the conversational flow of the interviews. By the end of each interview, I knew a great deal about each participant, but they knew something more about me as well. This reciprocal exchange we shared was very similar to the advising relationship and personal connection that all 10 of the participants said was so crucial for advising first-generation college students.

Data Coding and Analysis

An outside transcriptionist transcribed each interview, and I reviewed each typed transcript with the recorded interview to ensure accuracy. During coding, I read through each transcript multiple times in an attempt to find themes within and across the various interviews. After identifying groups of themes, I used these prevailing themes to attempt to understand the experiences of academic advisors of first-generation college students and to find recommendations from the data that will help academic advisors to assist first-generation college students in gaining the cultural capital they need to succeed in higher education.

After all interview recordings were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy, I reviewed the transcripts and developed codes and subcodes based upon findings within

the data and from previous findings reported in the literature. The codes allowed me to examine the data and look for themes within the data.

My field notes from the interviews, which also included notes on non-verbal cues such as body language, tone, posture, etc, and written and visual depictions of their office layout and decor also assisted in data analysis. Any documents provided by the participants, whether hardcopy or electronic, were also examined and coded as well. These additional data sources provided a source of triangulation. Glesne (2006) says of triangulation that, “the more sources tapped for understanding, the richer the data and the more believable the findings” (p. 36). By reviewing multiple sources of information, I was able to draw on a richer source of information for analysis and have multiple perspectives as the handouts used by the participants were not necessarily created by them, but they still chose to use those particular documents in their advising practice.

Cultural capital model provided the lens to examine the data using thematic analysis. Cultural capital is the idea that education is not neutral and that education as an institution, including higher education, subtly rewards students from the dominant class who come to college with the expectations and vocabulary. Cultural capital model theorizes that since first-generation college students lack the family history that makes college a “comfortable, familiar environment” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2) they therefore tend to not do as well as students from family backgrounds that have prepared them for the intangible aspects of college life. First-generation college students must acquire cultural capital while also simultaneously engaging in college academically and socially. Continuing-generation college students already have the necessary cultural capital, and thus have less of a transition to college.

Thematic analysis looks for patterns within the data, and combines patterns into themes and subthemes that collectively tell a comprehensive story of the collective experiences of the participants (Aronson, 1994). Thematic analysis allowed me to identify themes across and within the narratives told by the participants. These themes allowed me to begin to understand the collective experience and to begin to draw conclusions about those experiences.

Trustworthiness and Validity

Qualitative research is focused on gaining a thick description and then attempting to understand the experiences described (Glesne, 2006). As this research was conducted as part of my dissertation, my committee members all have previous experiences with some part of the research area (qualitative methods, first-generation college students or academic advising) and their participation allowed them to be external auditors and peer reviewers of my work and analysis (Glesne, 2006).

Analyzing both the transcript data and field notes as well as any written or electronic documents provided by the participants allowed for a degree of triangulation of the data. Data from multiple sources gave me the opportunity to see whether the issues discussed by the participants are also those covered in their handouts and documents. The documents that they shared were also another way of determining what types of knowledge and skills, as cultural capital, are most important for first-generation college students. Interviewing multiple advisors at multiple institutions also helped to increase the likelihood that shared experiences are common based on the participants' roles as first-generation college students and academic advisors rather than just one individual's experiences.

I must also acknowledge my own biases as both an academic advisor and a first-generation college student (Glesne, 2006). While coding and analyzing the data, I did my best to be careful to allow the data to speak for itself and for the themes to grow organically from the data. While my own experiences were included to a small degree in the final product, I attempted to be very clear when I am describing my own experiences and my biases so that the reader understands whose story is being shared. Monitoring my subjectivity and my own biases also helped to ensure that the findings are trustworthy and valid because the conclusions are based not on my own experiences but on those of the participants (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). Reflexivity, which Glesne (2006) described as thoughtful reflection on how the researcher's own assumptions and behaviors affects the study and interpretation of the phenomenon being studied, also helped to ensure that I do not select only the data that conforms with my expectations and personal experiences or only data that is contrary to my expectations (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). While being aware of my reactions it important, Maxwell (2005) asserts that the fact that the researcher is part of the world being studied in interview-based researched "is a powerful and inescapable influence" (p. 109).

Finally, trustworthiness and validity were increased with the use of "rich, thick description... that allows the reader to enter the research context" (Glesne, 2006, p. 39). By including as much detail as is practical from the interview transcripts, my notes on non-verbal cues and physical contexts from the interviews and from the documents reviewed, readers are able to understand the context of the research and the participants' experiences and will see the data from which I drew conclusions. By

reading the data, the reader can then judge whether my conclusions are valid and trustworthy.

Role of the Researcher

Although I am both a first-generation college student and an academic advisor myself, for the purposes of this research, I am first and foremost a researcher.

Therefore, I have made the conscious effort to view the participants and data from a researcher's perspective. While my own experiences as a first-generation college student and academic advisor provided important insights into the topic, the techniques described above helped to ensure that the analysis is trustworthy.

Ethical Issues

Because I interviewed adults with whom I do not have a deep personal or supervisory relationship, the ethical considerations were minimal. In any type of qualitative research, there is a slim possibility that discussions may lead to emotionally challenging topics for some individuals, but I attempted to minimize this by explaining to participants that they could decline to answer any question and stop the interview at any time.

As this is qualitative research, I had to know the identities and some personal information about the participants, and it is therefore impossible for this research to be anonymous. I maintained confidentiality by allowing participants to select a pseudonym in my notes and final product, or selecting one for them if they declined to choose one for themselves; this was the case for two of the participants. Institutions were also given a pseudonym. I also intentionally limited the amount of personally

identifiable information presented in the write up of my research. Specific details of confidentiality and potential harm were explained in the informed consent form.

Glesne (2006) tells researchers to “be mindful, however, of status differences inherent in any research interaction and work to minimize them where possible.” (p. 99), so I did not have any kind of intense personal or any supervisory relationships with the participants. In selecting participants without a strong connection with me, I attempted to minimize any perceptions of a hierarchy from my participants. Glesne also encourages researchers to show their gratitude to participants, which can also help in establishing a mutually respectful relationship and reciprocity. I did this by sending follow up emails and cards thanking participants for their participation.

IRB Procedures

Because this research does involve human subjects, an application was made and subsequently approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my institution, Appalachian State University, and received approval (see Appendix B). All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C).

Summary

There has been extensive research on first-generation college students over the last several decades, but very little of the published research has focused on the ways in which institutions can help first-generation college students to succeed at rates comparable to continuing-generation college students. Academic advising has been suggested by numerous scholars (Adelman, 2006; DiMaria, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez, 2005; Thayer, 2000) as one means of providing support to first-generation college students, but there are few published articles that describe how academic

advising should support first-generation college students. Few articles have provided concrete best practices for academic advisors of first-generation college students.

This study asked those who are best able to understand the advising needs of first-generation college students for their stories and their suggestions for other academic advisors. The 10 participants of this study were academic advisors who are also themselves first-generation college students, so they can understand the academic advising needs from the perspective of the first-generation college student as well as the academic advisor. My conceptual framework of cultural capital allowed me to analyze interview transcripts and any documents supplied by the participants looking for the ways in which the lack of family experience with college influenced their experiences as first-generation colleges students as well as suggestions from the participants regarding how academic advisors can help first-generation college students to gain the cultural capital they need to be successful. From this study, I produced a list of best practices to be shared with academic advisors of first-generation college students.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study was conducted to examine how academic advising can help first-generation college students to succeed in college. Ten professional academic advisors who are also first-generation college students were interviewed to learn about their experiences both as first-generation college students and as advisors of first-generation college students.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to learn about the role of academic advising with first-generation college students. Research questions were:

1. What kinds of experiences do academic advisors have with first-generation college students?
2. What are some of the main questions or issues that arise in advising sessions with first-generation college students?
3. What are some of the best practices in advising first-generation college students?
4. What resources or programs are helpful to address the needs of first-generation college students?

Data Analysis

Using qualitative research methodology and working within the conceptual framework of Bourdieu and Passeron's cultural capital model (1977) and Oldfield's

extrapolation of cultural capital in higher education (2007), data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 first-generation college students who are now professional academic advisors at North Carolina public institutions. Advising documents, both printed and electronic, were also collected.

All 10 participants had unique stories of their experiences as first-generation college students and now as academic advisors, but many elements were strikingly similar and led to common themes emerging from the transcripts and documents. Interviews were transcribed, and transcripts, notes from the interviews and advising documents provided by the participants were coded using thematic analysis.

Findings from the research are presented below in two sections. The first section presents the institutions and the participants; to protect the identity of the participants, identifying characteristics have been changed. The second section presents the major themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data collected from the participants.

Extensive context about the participants is included in the form of “thick description” to add richness and validity. This phrase was first used by Gilbert Ryle in 1949, but anthropologist Clifford Geertz is typically credited with popularizing the notion (Ponterotto, 2006). “Thick description” emerged from ethnography and anthropology, and is, according to Geertz (1973), “what it is... that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.” (p. 10). Geertz continued to explain that with thick descriptions, “small facts speak to large issues” (p. 23) and that for researchers, “the aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts” (p. 28).

In contrast, thin descriptions merely report facts, and do not convey the richness of the background detail present in thick description. “Thick description goes beyond mere and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotions, and the webs of social relationships that join person to one another.” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Glesne (2006) stated that rich and thick descriptions allow readers to share in the research context with the researchers and enhances validity.

Maxwell (1992) divided thick description into two parts that both play a role in providing credibility and validity in qualitative research. First is descriptive validity, which focuses on ensuring the factual accuracy of the research. The second is interpretative validity, which then incorporates the meaning behind actions and observations. Together, they form the nucleus of thick description.

In Maxwell’s (1992) example, a verbatim transcript of an interview can be severely lacking in context that makes meaning of the words on the paper. Context cues such as tone, pitch, facial expressions, gestures and other non-verbal actions can greatly impact the perception of the actual meaning behind and interpretation of a participant’s statements. Without this additional data, the transcript alone does not provide sufficient data for a reader to fully comprehend the situation. Combining the two allows for external readers to better understand exactly what happened and to begin to process the why behind actions.

Because the reader can read a thick description and grasp a situation and the context, they are better able to determine how credible the researcher’s analysis and interpretation is and its transferability to other contexts. Creswell and Miller (2000) further explain that:

The purpose of a thick description is that it creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study. Thus, credibility is established through the lens of readers who read a narrative account and are transported into a setting or situation. (pp. 128-129)

Thick description as a validity tool has made the shift from anthropology and ethnography to the other social sciences that rely on long interviews (Ponterotto, 2006), and was used in this study to help ensure validity. Thus, in this chapter, I will endeavor to do what Ponterotto (2006) says thick descriptions can do by “describing fully the participants of the study without compromising anonymity. A thickly described sample facilitates the reader’s ability to visualize the sample including their relevant demographic and psychological characteristics.” (p. 546). Therefore, the following section will provide context and rich descriptions of the institutions and the participants.

Institutional Selection

Five institutions were selected from the University of North Carolina (UNC) public higher education institutions. There are sixteen constituent higher education members of the UNC system, ranging from research intensive to baccalaureate institutions. Student body composition varies widely, including primarily White, and historically Black and Native American institutions. Locations also differ, ranging from large metropolitan to very rural areas, and comprising almost all options in between. Some institutions have very selective admissions, where only a relatively small percentage of applicants are accepted, while others are more inclusive and most

applicants for admission are accepted to the institution; most fall somewhere in the middle of this selectivity spectrum.

For the sake of this research, only institutions that were classified as baccalaureate or masters institutions under the Carnegie classification system were considered. This allowed for some degree of similarity between the institutions and advising practice.

Information about the following institutions was found on the respective universities' websites; however, to preserve the confidentiality of the participants, I cannot provide references for this data without revealing the names of the institutions and thus making it easier to identify the participants. All of the institutions selected reported their demographics in regards to gender and race/ethnicity, and most institutions also detailed what percentage of students lived on versus off campus. Some institutions defined traditional and non-traditional by age range and provided statistics regarding the number of students in each category. However, I was unable to find any institution that provided the number or percentage of first-generation college students enrolled on their institutional research or data management websites.

The context of the institutions is important because advising practice varies when advising a traditional 18 year old freshman who lives on campus versus a off-campus student with a family who has served in the military for a number of years. There are a number of variables that impact how an advisor approaches a student, individual characteristics of the specific student being primary, but the nature of the institution also has a huge impact on the type of student that advisors would typically see.

For example, the traditional college freshman at 18 who is away from home for the first time might need more assistance with adapting to life away from home. However, a military veteran would likely not need advice on how to ensure waking up at the right time to not miss an 8 am class without a parent to call each morning. A working mother may already be very adept at time management and juggling competing priorities while a younger and less experienced student has not yet had the opportunity to gain those skills and may need more guidance.

Residential and family life status may also have a major impact on how involved a student can be on campus. A student who lives on campus, is not married with a family and who either does not work or who only works a few hours per week is more likely to have the time to be involved in campus activities, clubs and organizations than the student who lives off campus, has a family and works many hours per week. Advising a student who is working full-time and has small children at home to join numerous clubs that meet in the evenings may not be the best use of limited advising time in this case.

Knowing the demographics and characteristics of students helps advisors to identify areas to focus on and what transitions may be most challenging. Advisors are not able to cover every possible issue with every student, so they must in effect triage based on what they believe are the pressing concerns and the most beneficial suggestions. Therefore, it is important for the reader to understand the basic characteristics of the institutions to understand the student clientele served and how that might impact advising practice.

The participant institutions. The institutions selected for this study were:

Dogwood State University is a medium-sized, inclusive historically Black master's university. It is located in a mostly urban environment and is comprised mostly of undergraduate students. The typical student is female and African-American. Most students live on campus and attend college as full-time students. Very few students are older than 25 at the time of enrollment.

Cardinal State University is a large, more selective master's university located in an urban environment. It has a very high percentage of undergraduate students, most of whom attend college as full-time students. Most students do not live on campus, but rather commute to the campus for classes. Many students are transfer students coming from another institution. More students are female than male, and the student body is predominantly White. A significant percentage of students are over 25 years old at the time of enrollment.

Old North State University is a large, more selective master's university located in a town setting. It has a very high percentage of undergraduate students, most of whom attend college as full-time students. Most students in general live off campus, but most freshmen-sophomore students live on campus. Many students are transfer students coming from another institution. There are more female than male students, and only a relatively small percentage of students are minorities. Only a small percentage of students are older than 25 at enrollment.

Pine State University medium-sized, inclusive historically Black master's university located in an urban setting. It is comprised mostly of undergraduate students, including both traditional and non-traditional college students. Most students begin

their college career at Pine State and most attend college full-time. Most students live off campus, although almost all freshmen live on campus. Most students are female and African American. A significant proportion of students are older than 25 at enrollment.

Granite State University is a medium-sized, selective master's university located in a rural setting. There are more undergraduate than graduate students, but many undergraduates began their higher education at another institution and transferred to Granite State. Almost all freshmen live on campus, but most students live off campus. Most students attend college as full-time students. There are more female than male students, and there are few minority students. There was no data available about the ages of students.

Participant Selection

From the five institutions, 10 academic advisors who are also first-generation college students volunteered for this research. Of the participants, six identified as female and five self-disclosed some part of their ethnicity as an underrepresented population in higher education. This is in line with prior research that indicates that first-generation college students are more likely to be female and from a minority ethnicity (Bui, 2002).

To protect their privacy, participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym as used throughout this chapter; only John and Sarah declined to choose their own, and one was accordingly picked for them. The other eight advisors selected their own name (even Don Juan). See table 2 for details.

Table 2

Participants

Name	Institution	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Exp.
John	Dogwood State University	Male	African American	4
J. Edward	Dogwood State University	Female	African American	5
Shirley	Cardinal State University	Female	Caucasian	10
Isabella	Cardinal State University	Female	Caucasian	11
Chastity	Cardinal State University	Female	Caucasian	6
Sarah	Old North State University	Female	Caucasian, Native American	14
Frank	Old North State University	Male	Caucasian	5
Don Juan	Old North State University	Male	African American	2
Sam	Pine State University	Male	Caucasian	5
Rose	Granite State University	Female	African American, Native American	6

Meet the participants.

John. John was an African American male academic advisor at Dogwood State University. He was enrolled in a master’s degree program in student affairs at the time of the interview and has a bachelor’s degree from Dogwood State University in history. He has four years experience as an academic advisor. John advises at-risk students.

John was the youngest son of a soldier and a part-time church receptionist, both of whom only had a high school diploma. His mother had attended a community college but did not obtain her associate’s degree. She did later return for and receive her college degree, but this was after John had already received his bachelor’s degree. As the youngest of four children, some of John’s older siblings had attempted college but John was the first to persist in college and graduate with a degree.

John admitted that he was very lucky to have a supportive family and community in his college pursuits. “I had a supportive family... even though they were

not college graduates, they wanted me to be a college graduate. So of course my family would support me.” John’s church community was a source of constant encouragement, saying that “I also had great ties to my church, and my church was a great advocate of education, and I think that plays a vital role too.” John reiterated later that, “a support system is huge. You can’t do it alone- somebody has to help you. Very rarely do you find a person who doesn’t need someone,” he explained.

John in particular felt that mentoring is a key to success for first-generation college students, in part because he struggled himself to find mentors and support when he was in college. “Mentoring plays a key role in higher education, especially for first-generation college students,” he said during his interview. “It’s something I share with my students. Being fairly young, my students can identify with me.” He strongly encourages the use of professional mentoring and peer mentoring programs with first-generation college students.

In his work with the Student Support Services program, John takes students to see plays and other fine arts events. They visit big cities like Philadelphia to expose students to new communities and they host etiquette seminars on topics such as fine dining. “It’s a global world and... it’s all about competing.” Exposure to events and activities that increase their cultural capital are necessary because “they are not exposed to it when they are a child... And you’d be surprised how many of our students... appreciate it.” These events are always dependent on their budget, but he suggests these as best practices to assist first-generation college students. He was not exposed to events like these when he was in college, or he was not aware of their existence and thus did not take advantage of them. “But being in an advisor role now

and taking them to all these different places, I see the force of it,” and he finds it very useful for first-generation college students.

In talking with John, it’s clear that he does develop a close relationship with his advisees.

You are their support system, sometimes you are the only support system that they have, so they need to talk to you about everything, and you kind of make yourself available whenever they need to talk... If that means you don’t leave at five, you leave at six, then that’s what you do.

John said that he feels blessed to see students who nobody expected to succeed to graduate. He says that at graduation, “if you’re crying, you’ve made a difference.”

John’s office was located in the basement of the student support services building for his unit at Dogwood State University. While his office was somewhat tiny and cramped, John had a pair of comfortable upholstered chairs for students that faced his desk. His desk was arranged so that it was between him and students. Other than his diplomas and a few art prints, his office was mostly plain.

Despite being one of the youngest of the advisors, or perhaps because of it, John was dressed the most formally of all 10 of the participants. I felt woefully underdressed when meeting with him, as he was wearing a three-piece suit with a brightly patterned bowtie. Most of the students I observed on the campus were dressed like the typical college student in jeans and t-shirts, which would be in stark contrast to John’s sartorial splendor.

J. Edward. J. Edward was an African American female academic advisor at Dogwood State University. She was enrolled in a doctoral program in educational leadership and has a master's degree in human resources. She has five years experience as an academic advisor. J. Edward advises at-risk students.

Both of J. Edward's parents graduated from high school, but neither attended college. Despite their lack of formal higher education, they both valued education and encouraged J. Edward to continue her education. She described herself as very motivated and a go-getter, and she viewed being a first-generation college student as an opportunity rather than a challenge. She said that many students do not have that same perspective, however, and helping students to understand that being a first-generation college student can be a benefit is part of her desire to work with this population of students.

J. Edward had a strong support system in her family, friends and church community, but she said that some of her first-generation college students report having unsupportive family and community members who simply do not see the value in education. Most of her first-generation college students, however, reported having supportive parents and families, even if they do not understand why they are in college now. She sees advising as helping students to understand college regulations and requirements in the academic, social and personal spheres. She stressed that first-generation college students need someone whom they can go to for help since they don't have that resource available at home.

J. Edward opined that advisors must start by showing an interest in the student and let them know that the advisor is there for them. She stated that she believes that

one of the most important roles as an advisor is to convince students to, “utilize the networking, utilize the offices on campus... I try to get them to understand the significance of utilizing the services available to them.” She also reflected that advisors should always be honest even if it might be upsetting to the student. If an advisor does not know the answer to a question, admit that but then help them to find the answer. Advisors must also have good relationships with other offices on campus to be able to help first-generation college students.

Students, especially first-generation college students, need to create a home on campus through involvement with campus or community organizations or groups of students, she asserted, so she encourages them to get involved on campus as soon as possible. “I think it's meaningful to have someone to talk to and someone to relate to... when you have a first-generation student they don't really have anyone they can call.” So the advisor should be a reference and contact person for a first-generation college student.

Advisors must keep in mind that some students may need a lot more guidance, but remember that they will get it eventually. Some first-generation college students may need more structure and more pats on the back for their accomplishments than some other students. J. Edward also exhorted advisors to remember that they are making a difference to avoid advising burn out when working with at-risk students, including first-generation college students.

J. Edward's office was located off of a main lobby in the student support services building at Dogwood State University, and students were not shy about stopping by and

waving even during our interview. J. Edward simply smiled and waved back briefly in return, but she did not stop the interview to interact with students.

Her diplomas and awards had a prominent presence on the walls above the cushioned couch that faced her desk. When discussing her past experiences, she gestured towards them several times to emphasize her stories about her time in college.

Shirley. Shirley was a Caucasian female academic advisor at Cardinal State University. She has a master's in college student development and has 10 years experience as an academic advisor.

Shirley's maternal great-grandparents and their siblings had college degrees, and her great-grandfather was a physician and her great-grandmother graduated from Duke University with Honors. Shirley's maternal grandfather attended Duke for one year but did not graduate and did not pursue higher education any further. Because her maternal grandfather married a woman, Shirley's paternal grandmother, who was from, "the wrong side of the tracks," Shirley's grandparents and parents had little contact with that branch of the family. She didn't even know about her great-grandparents educational history until much later in life since she barely remembers ever meeting this side of her family.

Shirley's mother worked as a cook in a family-run restaurant and her father was a truck driver for most of his life. Neither of her parents attended college.

It wasn't until a debilitating car accident as a teenager that Shirley even thought about college as an option for her. "Before that time, I never considered going to college... it wasn't even that I was choosing not to, it was just that I didn't think about it,"

she reminisced. "I went to college out of default in a lot of ways, because looking at the people I hung out with in high school, none of them went to college."

Her anxious mother initially persuaded Shirley to attend a small, liberal arts college only fifteen minutes from home. Unfortunately, this institution was not handicap accessible and they had fewer resources to offer students, so it was not a good fit for her. She transferred to a public four-year university and stated that the experiences were "night and day" different from her first institution. At the four-year public university, she met with an advisor in disability services each semester for advising and assistance in making accommodations for her disability. "Up until that point, I had never had any advising, nothing." She explained, "knowing I had someone to go to, to ask about something I was really nervous about... it was always really empowering." It was her experiences with disability services and the contrast with what she did not have at her first institution that influenced her career path into higher education and advising. "I want to be [in] student services. It matters, it's important," she says.

When asked if there were any benefits to being a first-generation college student, Shirley's initial response was no. However, after thinking about it, she mentioned that there were fewer expectations because she was first-generation. She said that her parents considered simply passing to be success and that she was already surpassing family expectations by attending college in the first place. She never considered herself a stellar student, so the lower expectations made those expectations more attainable. She also said that she believes that most first-generation college students appreciate the

opportunity of higher education more than continuing-generation students and do not seem to have as great of a sense of entitlement.

As far as support systems, Shirley reported that she mostly received support from her friends. Her family was “supportive but not helpful. They wanted me to be in college, my mom helped me financially, she did my FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid].” Her family simply did not understand the college world and could not be a resource for her. At this point in the interview, Shirley’s voice became very hesitant as she discussed the role her family and particularly her mother played in her educational career.

One of the ways that Shirley described connecting with students was to let them get to know her by sharing personal information. The downside to this philosophy is that Shirley feels that perhaps she is not taken as serious on campus or that she is seen as “silly or unprofessional or too casual” because she wants her students to know her as a person. Shirley was adamant that she believes that the tradeoff is worth it to have that personal connection with students.

Shirley admitted that she felt and continues to feel somewhat isolated from her family and her pre-college friends because of her degrees. She said that she intentionally does not talk about her job when she is visiting family and friends, and she tells students that they might experience some of the same challenges too. She said that she believes that it is important to address the potential challenges that first-generation college students might face as college students coming from a less education family background so they can be prepared if it happens to them.

Shirley's office was covered in posters for various musical groups and performances, especially the Grateful Dead. Shirley stated her belief that it is important that she allow her students to get to know her a little personally before they will be able to open up and let her get to know them personally. Shirley's accident left her in a wheelchair, so her office is designed to accommodate the physical space needs of her wheelchair. Students typically sit across the desk from her.

Isabella. Isabella was a Caucasian female academic advisor at Cardinal State University. She has a master's in psychology and 11 years experience as an academic advisor. Isabella advises mostly veterans and students interested in joining the military.

Isabella articulated that she was lucky and grew up in a home where education was valued. Her father was in the military and her mother was predominantly a homemaker, but Isabella explained that her parents were from the generation when a high school diploma was sufficient and seen as the norm. Despite the fact that neither parent graduated from college, Isabella said that there was always the expectation that she would attend college. She explained:

Just because I was the first one in my family that [sic] was able to go to college didn't mean that my parents were uneducated or that they didn't care about that. And just because my parents weren't able to pay for college, didn't mean that it wasn't a priority in my household.

Isabella attended a private college after high school but only completed two years before leaving college. She was at the point where she needed to declare a major, but she could not figure out what she wanted to do and had not connected with any potential majors. Also, she was planning to marry a man in the military, and she says

that she was not sure how a college degree would help her since she had seen her mother manage successfully as a military wife without a degree. Since her future husband had a full military scholarship while Isabella had only a partial scholarship, they prioritized his education and Isabella became the primary breadwinner while her husband completed his degree. Once her husband completed his degree and became a commissioned officer in the Navy, he became the primary breadwinner and Isabella was able to return to school.

Isabella transferred to a public university, and was amazed at the differences between it and her first institution. However, the frequent moves as a military family and having young children meant that she was unable to meet all of the degree requirements at her second institution before she and her family moved across the country. It was not until several years later that she was finally able to complete a bachelors degree once they had moved back to their original state and she found an institution where she was thankfully able to use all of her previously earned credits towards a bachelor's degree. It took Isabella almost a decade to complete her degree.

Isabella said that she never considered returning to her original institution despite her geographical proximity. "I had been a scholarship student and had been doing a good job and when I left... it wasn't a blip on anybody's radar. Nobody ever called, so I had the mindset that I don't really need to be there." She was clearly still a bit bitter about how no one every seemed concerned by her departure nearly forty years later. She was also never told anything about residence life and whether living on campus would have been an option for her.

Once Isabella finished her degree, the challenge came in deciding how to use it. “I knew that we would be moving every two years, I knew that there would be different opportunities and different constraints at every new duty station so I just wanted to take advantage of whatever was there.” Ultimately, she did not use her college degree professionally until after her husband retired from the Navy.

However, she was able to use her experiences with college to help her three children to navigate the process better than she herself had. Her husband was assigned to duty in Australia for three years, so Isabella and her family moved with him. Isabella’s oldest daughter would be applying to college in the US while living in Australia, so Isabella worked with a number of other women who had children who had applied to college to help her daughter manage the process from abroad. “My experience had been as a first-generation student. I felt at a disadvantage, and that’s why I needed... more experienced women these women who had a history” with higher education. She was able to use the experiences of these other women with a family history of higher education to help her daughter successfully apply to college.

Once the family returned to the US, Isabella graduated from Cardinal State University with a master’s degree. Her second daughter also enrolled at the institution and was required to take freshman seminar. Isabella investigated the course and learned about the general college academic advising program. She then applied for an open part-time position and became a professional advisor.

Isabella said that one of the benefits of being a first-generation college student was that her parents were so excited when she was accepted to college and received a

scholarship. Her family was very supportive of her desire to continue with higher education and she felt proud of herself for being a role model for her younger siblings.

However, she did experience several challenges as a first-generation college student. “A challenge was that my parents did not understand the nature of college classes, a college schedule. That even though they were supportive, there came a point when it was apparent that they did not have the resources...” to help her financially. So Isabella had to work while also attending college and this led to her making two Cs in her final semester at her first institution. Isabella interpreted her mediocre grades negatively, “that told me that I did not belong. That gave me a message that things were going badly and I needed to get away from it,” which led to her ultimately leaving the institution.

She also described how she felt very isolated as a commuter student at her first institution. She explained:

It just felt bad. It felt lonely, and it felt I had no connection. I didn’t even feel comfortable going anywhere to sit down, so that was like the college campus was for the people who lived there; I was on the campus but I would have to sit in my car.

It took her a while to even work up the courage to go into the library to study during breaks. “I spent a lot of time hiding,” she admitted. As an advisor now, she knows that she was not the only student feeling that way on campus, but they were all hiding and thus did not know that others like them existed.

As a former commuter student who now advises at an institution where most students live off campus, she suggests that all commuting and other non-traditional

students visit a lounge for non-traditional students, of whom many are first-generation. Because so many students are commuters, Cardinal State University provides a lounge as a designated place where commuter and non-traditional students can go in between classes or to meet others like themselves who might not feel like they fit in on campus otherwise. Isabella encourages commuter students to go to the lounge and to reach out a bit to make connections on campus.

Isabella did not have any support systems at her first institution when she was a first-generation college student. Her only real support came from a friend who was from a well-to-do family who had a long family history of pursuing higher education. Even so, Isabella did not learn much information from her friend, but she was mainly supportive emotionally of the challenges of being in college and planning to marry soon and start a family.

Isabella also worked with military students based on her experiences as a military daughter, wife and mother. She was proud to point out that her institution is a model for the state in how to assist veterans in using their military benefits to come to college, and that she was a member of the taskforce to make the transition easier for military students. She explained that many of her military students are also first-generation college students. "A lot of them went in for just that reason; they went in because when they got out they were going to be able to go to college."

Isabella's office housed pictures of her with her family, most of who were in uniform. She said that this is helpful since she very often works with students who are veterans and she can emphasize that she understands their perspective as the daughter,

wife and mother of US service members. Her office also had a very open layout, so that students could pull up a chair next to her as they work on the computer together.

Chastity. Chastity was a Caucasian female academic advisor at Cardinal State University. She has a master's in clinical psychology and has six years experience as an academic advisor.

Chastity was a high-achieving high school student and most of her friends were continuing-generation college students. Most of her friends went to college, so Chastity followed them in applying for college as well. She said that it was always taken for granted that she would go to college since she loved school and excelled at academics. She took Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school, but could not afford to take the tests. Neither her father, birth mother or step-mother, who raised her, completed college.

She said that she really only became involved on campus because several friends joined a sorority and she joined as well. Otherwise, "I probably wouldn't have gotten as much out of college because I didn't know that getting involved was important, I thought you just had to get a degree." Because she was still socializing mostly with friends from high school, her first semester of college felt like a continuation of high school, but rushing a sorority opened her up to new experiences and encouraged her to view college as an experience rather than just an end goal.

Chastity had been offered a spot in the local Upward Bound program, but she turned it down, despite the fact that her older brothers had participated. She declined, "because of the stigmatism of poor kids being in there and I wanted to "fit in"," she said. Looking back now, she thinks Upward Bound could have been very helpful to her. She

said that Upward Bound could have been a strong benefit of being a first-generation college student, but since she choose not to participate, she did not see any personal benefits to having been a first-generation college student.

Chastity's support system was predominantly her peers. She had a group of friends from high school who continued to be friends in college who were supportive. Her sorority sisters were also very supportive, as were boyfriends at times. Another source of support was her aunt and uncle. Her uncle was a retired medical doctor, and Chastity still has the letter that he wrote to her in her sophomore year telling her that he was proud of her and excited about how well she was doing in college. While her uncle was supportive of her endeavors, he was not a source of information on how to succeed in college; they never discussed majors, study skills or future career paths after college.

Chastity went into college planning to be a psychology major and ended up with a psychology degree. She tells her students now, "don't have blinders on, look further." She simply was not aware of other options, possibly because she was a first-generation college student or because she did not have an advisor during her first year who could have helped her to explore other majors. During her first two years in college when she was focusing on completing her liberal arts requirements, she simply focused on courses as a requirement in liberal arts, not as a potential major or career path. She never thought about other avenues or majors.

Chastity remembered meeting with a major advisor but she cannot recall whether it was mandatory or merely suggested. She met with an advisor several times later in her college career but said that the meetings were focused solely on which

courses to take in the next semester. There were never any conversations about career goals or future plans. Once she received a copy of an advising booklet with the requirements for majors, she went through and determined what was required for each semester for her major and simply followed her detailed plan afterwards. She said:

I don't know if it could have been a two-way street, squeaky wheel gets the grease, if I had sat and said "Hey, I want to talk about this," but I just don't remember any of that. And now with this being my profession... how did that happen?

Chastity's office included a number of photographs of her dogs and friends, and her office had an open layout with her desk along the wall. She would turn her back to her computer and turn to face the pair of chairs awaiting students. She said that if she needed to look up something on the computer, she would invite the student to pull their chair up next to hers so they could look up information together.

Sarah. Sarah was a predominantly Caucasian female academic advisor at Old North State University; she indicated that there is Native American ancestry on her father's side, but she self-identifies predominantly as White. She has a master's in biology and has 14 years experience as an academic advisor. Sarah advises pre-health professions students.

Although neither parent went to college, an uncle was a professor at a university, which led to her applying for admission at his out-of-state university; though accepted, she did not attend. Her uncle and aunt were supportive and offered to pay for a scholarship web search at the end of her senior year, but it was too late at that point for scholarships for the following fall.

Sarah grew up in a small, rural community. In her high school, the college attendance rate for the senior class was approximately 30%. There was very limited guidance support or college assistance for students like Sarah, an Honors student in Advanced Placement courses. She explained:

My mom likes to tell the story that my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Robinson, planted the seed of college in my mind, at that point... At the time I didn't recognize what she was doing but [she] definitely planted the seed for my future success, and I think to some extent helped to plant the seed in terms of science for me as well. So despite the lack of college advising in high school, Sarah "was going to college or bust".

As an advisor now, she recognizes that she would have been qualified for Upward Bound and other TRIO programs. However, she did not participate in them while in middle and high school because she did not know about them.

Sarah's biggest challenge with college was financial. "Not knowing about scholarships and deadlines of that nature, and of course this was all pre-internet, I didn't recognize some of the opportunities that I should have been trying to take advantage of in terms of applying for scholarships and other aid." Her family finances qualified her for federal grant aid, but she also had to work part-time to support herself during school, while also taking out some student loans. "And then I worked part time the entire time I was in school, anywhere from 10 to 25 hours a week, as a biology major..." Because of the demands of her major and working, she needed a fifth year to graduate with her bachelor's degree in biology. Also due to finances, she lived at home as a commuter student for all but one semester of her academic career. She explained

that, “there were probably some opportunities I probably missed out on,” by living at home rather than on campus, but it was much cheaper, her family was accepting and supportive of her need to study and she was involved on campus with her participation in the dance club, so she felt very connected to campus. However, Sarah said she never considered opportunities like studying abroad because she did not think she would be able to afford it. She said her GPA also reflected the realities of working 20-25 hours per week while also in college.

Sarah lost part of her financial support when she failed organic chemistry and her completed hours for the semester was below the minimum requirement of 12 hours. She found out that she had lost the scholarship the Saturday before classes started, and she spent several weeks worrying about how she would be able to pay for school before the financial aid office at her institution was able to award her a subsidized loan for the semester. Her parents helped her financially by allowing her to live at home with free room and board.

After completing her bachelor’s degree, Sarah completed a master’s degree in molecular and cell biology with plans to complete a Ph.D. in biology. She loved being a teaching assistant and accepted a position working with pre-medical students. During this time, a severe storm led to power outages, and the freezer with her thesis research lost power. She lost half of her research data and was frustrated that her months of hard work were lost. So she decided that she did not want to pursue a Ph.D. in hard science because of the emphasis on “publish or perish” and the nature of research in academia. She continued working with the pre-medical program while trying to replicate her thesis research and “I just found that I really liked the administrative

advising side of things more so than I was going to like the Ph.D. science track”. Sarah continued to work in a variety of roles with TRIO programs and related programs for the next decade before becoming a full-time special populations advisor at Old North State University.

Sarah’s office did not display much about her personally. The items on the walls were mostly awards or materials for students to review. Her office layout was with the desk designed between her and students.

Frank. Frank was a Caucasian male academic advisor at Old North State University. He has a master’s in criminal justice and has five years experience as an academic advisor. Frank advises mostly veterans and students interested in joining the military.

Frank was one of 10 children born into a lower middle class working family at the end of the baby boom after World War II. Neither parent ever attended college. Out of 10 children, only four graduated from high school and Frank was the only one to graduate from college. Frank was very proud of this fact.

Frank began working at a very young age after his parents divorced when he was twelve. “I basically knew from an early age that if I didn’t go out and work for what I wanted, I wasn’t going to get it.” He began working mowing lawns before working in local orchards after school. During all four years of high school, he worked as a janitor at his high school. He bought his first car at 16, but in retrospect, that may not have been a wise decision since “all I did was work, to pay for insurance, to pay for gas, to drive me to and from school.”

Frank graduated from high school with no real plans regarding his future, so he moved to the city where one of his sisters was working. He got a job working maintenance at a golf course quickly, but he quit that job expecting to start a new job in the local school district as a janitor. Unfortunately, after he'd quit the golf course, he learned that his new janitorial position had not been approved by the school board. He visited an Army recruiter's office with:

No plans to go to college, never had discussed about going to college in my house, it was never a consideration, wasn't discussed by my counselors at school. Not many people in my town went to college unless your father owned the drugstore or was in the management at the local factory.

Frank signed up for a three-year enlistment with the Army at this meeting.

After his three years, Frank planned to reenlist, but the process was not moving fast enough for him and what he wanted, so he decided to simply leave the Army instead. In researching his GI Bill, he found that that "it was a lot of money and I found out that if I went to school, I could actually make some money for going to school." So he found a part-time job and thought, "I'll try this for a semester." Exactly one week after leaving the Army, Frank enrolled in a two-year college.

Frank attended a financial aid meeting and found out that he also qualified for a federal Pell grant to cover his tuition and fees and books for his first year. He had originally intended only to get his two-year associate's degree. "I couldn't believe the amount of money people wanted to give me to go to school, and once you are in the system and you find out how it works, it's easy to stay in the system." He then transferred to a state university to complete a bachelor's degree; he did not receive an

associate's degree. He did ROTC during his last two years of college and then went back into the Army as a commissioned officer rather than as an enlisted soldier. As an officer, he was expected to obtain a master's degree to continue to move up in the Army hierarchy, so he completed a master's degree in criminal justice when he was moved into an ROTC position at a university. He was eventually transferred to Old North State University, where he served as the ROTC officer for several years. Once he retired from the Army, he became an academic advisor at Old North State University.

Frank shares parts of his personal history with students. "When I have an ROTC student, [I] emphasize you need to walk out of undergraduate program with at least a 3.0 GPA." He tells his advisees that:

The reason I'm telling you this is because no one told me that when I was in the undergraduate program... because I didn't have any mentorship and I didn't have probably a good advisor... nobody told me that 10 years down the road you are going to want to go to graduate school if you want this as a career.

Because he lacked good advising and mentorship, he tries to make sure that he does his best to provide this to his advisees. "I try to pass on what I learned through the process, what I know about now."

"I think the best way an advisor can support a first-generation college student is think about all the challenges that you had, especially for me as a first-generation student, and just bring up the subject," Frank says. He will ask students about their housing situation, relationships with parents and others and how much, if any, they are working. He has helped students to find new apartments, jobs and financial aid once they opened up to him about their successes and challenges. "I find myself

congratulating students that are doing it all with no support from their parents, typically those are first gen college students. I find myself being very empathetic to those situations.”

Frank’s office was very small in the basement of the student support services building at Old North State, and filled with military memorabilia. Students have a choice to either sit in a chair across his desk from him or in a chair that is right next to him as he sits at his desk. When I walked in for our interview, Frank gestured for me to sit next to him but told me to sit where I was comfortable, so students have to option to choose whether to have a more or less formal sitting arrangement.

Don Juan. Don Juan was an African American male academic advisor at Old North State University. He has a master’s in higher education and has two years experience as an academic advisor. Don Juan advises student-athletes.

Don Juan was the second youngest of 17 children. His father was a truck driver and his mother was mostly a homemaker. His mother passed away when he was in the fifth grade, but before her death, she made him and his siblings all promise to graduate from high school, as education was highly valued in his household despite his parents’ lack of higher education. All 17 children completed high school and most went on to college or joined the military, even though not all of his siblings graduated from college. He said that his promise to his mother made him begin to consider going beyond simply graduating from high school but to also think about graduating from college.

He said that his parents never stepped foot on a college campus for themselves, only for college tours with their children. Because he was a younger child, his parents and his aunts and uncles were substantially older than he was, and they grew up during

segregation in the south when higher education options were more limited for African-Americans. He said that his parents had many struggles, and “they didn’t want us to have to struggle to survive, and so they knew the way not to have to do that was to earn an education.”

Despite the fact that several siblings had enrolled in college before Don Juan, he said that his siblings never really gave him much advice about academics or life in college. He explained that the fact that he’d always done well in school had probably convinced his siblings that he did not need any help. After growing up mostly by himself once his mother died, as his father was on the road as a truck driver six days a week and his siblings were mostly out of the house except for him, he became very independent and private, and rarely reached out to his siblings with specific requests for help. He said that he mostly was observant and was able to view and analyze the decisions that his siblings made and decide whether they were positive examples he should follow or negative decisions he should avoid for himself.

Don Juan was able to attend college on an athletic scholarship. Early in his college career, he decided to figure out how he could graduate early with his bachelor’s degree and use the remaining eligibility in his scholarship to begin work on a master’s degree. By planning carefully, he was able to graduate with both degrees using his five years of athletic scholarship eligibility. His graduation planning was purely mathematical, simply a matter of dividing the number of hours required for graduation by the number of semesters and summers available. He did not look at the courses that he needed or course sequencing issues, but simply on the number of hours. “I could have failed miserably within that plan because of prerequisites and stuff like that just

looking at hours per semester,” he said somewhat ruefully, but his advisor worked with him each semester to ensure that he was in the appropriate courses to graduate in three years and was able to do well academically as well as athletically. He trusted his advisor to get him in the correct courses at the correct time.

As a first-generation college student, Don Juan described how everything was so fresh and exciting, especially since he was coming from a very urban environment to a more rural college town. It was a big change for him in many ways, including the fact that there was far less crime and gang activity at Old North State University, where he received his degrees and worked as an advisor. Another major change was coming from a predominantly African-American and Hispanic community to one in which minorities were approximately 10% of the college student population, but he felt that it was important for him to experience being in another environment where he was not in the majority and to have the opportunity to interact with and communicate with people from different backgrounds.

He shared a bit of his personal history with students so that they could see that he was once in their position, and that he survived and managed to make it. He explained that he wanted to be an example of a first-generation student going to school and doing well. He also wanted them to see that being a first-generation college student can be a positive thing. Just being open with them and letting first-generation students know what he was there to help them was very important since they cannot necessarily call their parents and ask for advice. “Sometimes I can give them advice... and sometimes I can just listen to them, and that goes a tremendous way with them.” Just letting students know that he was there for them was a huge thing that he said made

them feel more comfortable coming to him with academic and non-academic questions and issues.

Don Juan's office was located in the student support services building at Old North State University. His office had posters of the sports teams he advises as an advisor to student-athletes and a few photos of himself and teammates when he played football as a student-athlete at Old North State University. Students sit across the desk from him.

Sam. Sam was a Caucasian male academic advisor at Pine State University. He was enrolled in a doctoral program in educational leadership at the time of the interview and already had a master's in college student development. He has five years experience as an academic advisor.

Sam was the middle of three children. His father only completed middle school, and his mother completed high school but did not attend college. His parents did not view college as necessary or very important since they were both fairly successfully self-employed without any college experience.

Sam attended college and graduated with a teaching degree in music. He taught middle school music for three months and hated it, so he worked a number of other jobs outside of education for several years until a former professor contacted him about a graduate program in student affairs counseling. He did not do well in his first semester in college because he was not prepared for it and he did not know that resources such as tutoring were even available, so he had to spend time trying to dig himself out of the low GPA hole. He believes that if he had known about and used tutoring, his GPA would have been much higher after his first year in college. He also ended up needing an extra

semester to graduate because some of the courses he was told to take by his advisor were not required. Advising for Sam was purely prescriptive advising, where a faculty advisor simply looked a checksheet and told him what to take that semester.

He attended the same undergraduate institution as his older sister, so he was able to take advantage of some of her experiences there. Despite the assistance he received from his sister, he still struggled at first in college because he could not ask his parents for advice about being in college. Sam identified this as one of the main challenges of being a first-generation college student, the lack of parental support in the college process. His parents were emotionally supportive of his choice for the most part, despite not really understanding why he wanted to pursue college. Yet they simply did not have the experiences themselves to be able to understand his new life as a college student. He also had to pay his own way through school, and this was a major challenge that he said he suspects is common for many first-generation college students.

As an advisor now, Sam said he works hard to provide a supportive environment for first-generation college students in particular. He explained:

I definitely look for those [first-generation college students] because I want to provide for them an environment and an atmosphere of support. That way they know that they may not have the support at home, but they have an office, at least one office on campus, that no matter what happens, they'll be able to come here [and] ask questions, any questions.

First-generation students need to feel like they have a relationship with at least one person on campus who has their best interests at heart and will try to help them.

Students know that anything they say in his office is confidential, and he said he thinks that has a big impact on how much of themselves they are willing to share with him.

Sam had pictures and fliers for musicians and musical groups up in his office. He also had a number of small items, such a miniature toy drum set, a small stress relief ball, and other items he called manipulatables on the top of his desk, which was between him and students. He said that even the most anxious student would typically unconsciously reach out and start playing with one of the items on his desk top, and Sam could broach a conversation by then asking what was interesting about that particular object.

Rose. Rose was an African American and Native American female advisor at Granite State University. She has a master's in kinesiology and has six years experience as an academic advisor. Rose advises student-athletes.

Rose was the youngest of four children, and her parents divorced when she was a toddler. She was raised by her mother, who had no experience with higher education. Rose was from a large family and has multiple aunts and uncles and cousins, but only one of her relatives ever had any experience with college before Rose entered college, and she returned to college later in life as a nontraditional student, so she did not have the traditional freshman college experience. Many members of Rose's family served in the military, including an older sibling. After Rose completed college, her sister used her GI Bill benefits to attend and graduate from college, but Rose was the first in her immediate family to attend college. She did not grow up with any expectation that she would continue education past high school. College not an expectation or something discussed, and it was not something that anyone in her family ever "thought to do."

Rose's first motivation to attend college was the desire to continue participating in athletics past high school. She earned a partial athletic scholarship that helped to defray her costs, but attending college was still financially challenging for her. She also had a number of family problems as her mother had numerous mental health issues that resulted in Rose having an especially traumatic senior year in high school, even though her life since middle school had been challenging in a single parent home with a mentally ill mother. She spent much of her time staying with friends when her mother was hospitalized or otherwise incapable of being an appropriate parent.

When Rose began college, she said that she "had a chip on my shoulder" to prove that she was smart enough to be in college despite being a minority at the university and a student-athlete. After her traumatic home life, she also did not want her collegiate peers, professors and coaches to know about her mother. She wanted to escape the "jock stigma" and prove that she was just as smart and capable as any other student.

Because she was a student-athlete, she had additional assistance that was invaluable for her. She did not understand many of the college processes like financial aid and housing, and her coach took care of all of those for her. Her eldest sister also helped with financial aid forms and co-signed a loan for Rose's senior year to help her financially. Until just a few years ago, Rose did not know that her sister had been required to co-sign the loan because she did not understand anything about financial aid or how it worked. Her athletic advisor also took care of all of her registration requirements. Her coach and advisor told her not to worry about graduation, so she did not, trusting that they would ensure that she would graduate within her five-year time

limit. She was not advised really, but rather simply given a schedule each term. She very slowly developed a relationship with her advisor, but she mostly met with him only to get her registration papers signed and to pick up her schedule.

As an advisor now, Rose said that she opens up to students to establish a relationship with them. She asks them about themselves and their families and says that it is “breaking the ice from day one” that is important. She makes a point to go to all of the games that she can since she advises student-athletes to show her students that she takes an interest in them. She said this is especially important for the students whose parents cannot afford to come to the games. Her students are often her Facebook friends and know about her favorite sports teams and her tattoos. Her philosophy is to encourage “anything that gets them to start talking and feeling comfortable... it’s about literally just being there, not as a friend but as a someone they can go to.” She tries to find a common ground with each student, even if it is not obvious at first, because she knows that there is something that she will have in common with the student, even if it is just a love of shoes. Once she has established that common ground with the students, then students see her as a regular person in addition to just an advisor.

Rose had a number of awards won by her students adorning her walls. She also had several photographs of her with current and former students and even a few drawings from the young children of some of her students. Her small office had an open layout so that she sat next to students rather than across a desk from them. She was dressed in business casual attire and had several tattoos that were not hidden by her short-sleeved shirt.

Typical advising practice. By the end of the first semester, most advisors will have met with students at least twice or more. Students typically come for an orientation of some sort during the summer or immediately before classes begin in the fall. New student orientation almost always involves at least one meeting with their academic advisor to be sure they enrolled in the correct courses for their first semester.

During the first semester, a typical first-generation college student in a four-year public institution such as those included in this study will also have at least one other individual face-to-face meeting with their academic advisor. Students typically schedule this appointment either online or via a scheduling notebook, although most advisors today have gone to an e-scheduling system to make it easier for students to make, change and be reminded of upcoming appointments. These advising appointments typically take place in the advisor's office, but they are not necessarily limited to this location. Depending on the size of the caseload and availability, advisors may also schedule getting to know you types of appointments with students. These more casual appointments may take place in less formal environments such as a nearby coffee shop. Students will meet with their advisor to discuss their academic progress and to finalize plans for the upcoming semester, and these meetings are usually in the advisor's office due the need for resources such as major checksheets, four year plans, academic catalogs and the like.

Major Themes

All 10 participants shared their stories of being a first-generation college student and their experiences as an academic advisor of first-generation college students today. While each individual had unique experiences, the following section presents the major

themes that emerged from the stories and experiences they shared during the interviews.

Three major themes emerged from the qualitative interviews: characteristics of first-generation college students, role as an advisor and relationships to cultural capital model. Sub-themes for each of these themes also emerged, as indicated in the table that follows (table 3).

Table 3

Major Themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Characteristics of first-generation college students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advantages of being a first-generation college student • Challenges of being a first-generation college student
Role as an advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing personal relationships • Knowing who is a first-generation college student • Defining the role of faculty • Referring to resources • Advising best practices
Relationship to cultural capital model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural events and travel • Language • Clothing

Characteristics of first-generation college students. Although first-generation college students share many characteristics, advisors should not assume that all first-generation college students are the same. “You have to realize that all first generation college students don’t fit in one box. You know, there are lots of different types of first-generation college students and lots of different ways to go about helping them,” Don Juan cautioned. So it may require the advisor to consider and use different strategies to effectively advise and assist the individual student, who just happens to be a first-generation college student.

As with any other special population of students, the participants elaborated on both advantages and challenges associated with being a first-generation college student.

Advantages of being a first-generation college student. All of the participants initially had a hard time coming up with any advantages to being a first-generation college student. However, after a moment or two of reflection, they were able to identify enthusiasm and self-motivation for higher education and pride in being in college as positives for first-generation college students. The participants strongly advised other advisors to capitalize on this enthusiasm and pride by pointing out their accomplishments and focusing on the positives rather than the challenges associated with being a first-generation college student.

Sarah, who advises pre-health students at Old North State University, said that being a first-generation college student:

Creates a sense of resiliency, you have to really go out and figure things out on your own, which... is an asset because then you aren't having to depend on someone else to tell you what you need to be doing, you go out and figure it out for yourself.

By figuring out requirements for herself, Sarah knew how to manage the system and find answers the next time she had a question or a problem. She also said that she was more appreciative of the opportunities she was had as a first-generation college student. She said that, "just having the appreciation of the opportunity that you are being given is a benefit as well, knowing that you are getting an opportunity that other students might take for granted." She appreciates this skill and tenacity in her first-generation college students now because she learned them herself.

Sam, the former music teacher turned advisor at Pine State University, said that the biggest benefit of being a first-generation college student himself was accomplishing the goals he set for himself and his pride at this. John, a young advisor and recent graduate, also mentioned his sense of pride, both his own at his accomplishments and his parents' pride in him for attending and succeeding in college. Isabella, the military mother, said that she was proud to be able to serve as a role-model for her younger siblings by going to college. Frank, the Army officer, was proud of the fact that "I had accomplished something and was bettering myself, not making me better than my brothers and sisters, but I was doing something that they didn't do, didn't take the opportunity to do, didn't want to do." Don Juan, the ex-football player and current student-athlete advisor, said that everyone in his family expressed their pride in him for earning an athletic scholarship

Several advisors also admitted that they find it sometimes easier to work with first-generation college students because these students are more likely than continuing-generation college students to listen to the advisor. As they do not have a parental source of information about college and college policies and procedures, they may be more inclined to trust information shared by advisors. This is a benefit because then the advisor can help to direct them towards resources and programs that are beneficial.

The advisors in this research are also first-generation college students themselves, and all 10 admitted to having a great sense of empathy with other first-generation college students because of that shared background. Advisors who are also first-generation college students can use that empathy as a means to establish the

personal relationship and connection with students. Advisors who are not first-generation college students can learn more to understand the specific benefits and challenges associated with being first-generation and can sympathize with their experiences even if they cannot emphasize.

Advisors can also develop an ally in the parents of first-generation college students. The majority of the participants reported that their parents and family were very excited and proud of them for attending college; only in two instances, for Sam and Rose, did the participants report that their parents were either ambivalent about college attendance or outright unhappy that the participant enrolled in college. The other eight participants reported that their parents were a strong source of support, whether financial, emotional or physical. J. Edward, who advises at-risk students, explained it as:

First-generation parents don't really understand a lot, but they'll be there, to just cheer you on and congratulate you and take pride in whatever accomplishment it is. Even though they may not fully understand it, they know it is something worth celebrating.

Several participants suggested individual discussions or special orientation programs that help prepare first-generation parents to understand and support the transition to college. Advisors can work with parents to help them to understand the new demands of life as a college student and help parents to best support to their students, even if they do not necessarily understand the academic rigors and cultural expectations. Chastity, the psychology major turned advisor, said that, "I think that sometimes that parents don't understand all that goes on in college," but once they have

a better understanding, “they get excited and then they push their students,” and encourage them to get involved on campus, to take advantage of opportunities and resources and to be proactive in seeking help when needed.

Advisors can also harness first-generation college students’ enthusiasm to help them to take more ownership for their education. For the majority of college students, whether first-generation or continuing-generation, college is very different from high school. As Don Juan says, “I think that’s a huge advantage that everything is so fresh and so new and you get a different perspective on life.”

Advisors can help students to take ownership for their education by discussing how exciting it is. Sam does exactly this. The manipulables on Sam’s desk can help defuse tense situations when he asks hard questions. When students are having a difficult time, Sam will ask why they came to college in the first place to try to get them enthused again. He says, “I just start to talk about the excitement of being in college, and I think that’s a benefit of being a first generation student because there is a lot of excitement.”

Don Juan, who managed to obtain both a bachelors and masters degree with his football scholarship, said that first-generation college students need to feel invested in the process of college and to understand both the why and the how. They also need to feel like they have a sense of ownership and independence about their college careers. He also shows them their progress reports from professors, unless the professor requests anonymity, to let the student see that it is not just his opinion of their performance but that it is coming directly from the faculty member. He said it is also

important to explain why students need to take certain courses or complete certain tasks rather than just telling them to do it.

Rose encouraged involvement by engaging her student-athletes in the process of advising. “It’s literally about making them as involved in the process as possible,” she said. She let them choose their courses as much as possible as long as those courses will work with their curriculum requirements. Giving students the choice about their courses helps them to feel more connected and have a sense of ownership of their education. She also holds them responsible for their decisions. She sees her role as “giving them enough responsibility where they don’t feel like you’re on them on all the time, and just letting them know that you’re there when they need you for help.” If they choose to ignore her advice, they have to suffer the consequences for their decisions. Of course, for her advising population, student-athletes, these consequences are swift and often physical. If a student failed to complete a task, Rose said she would contact his coach, and “come the next day, he’d be getting up at six and needing to run.” However, few advisors have trainers on speed dial to immediately teach students the error of their ways, so it may not be possible for all advisors to encourage responsibility in this manner.

Sam, who struggled to find his way in college without much support, also said that he also tries to not only cover the broad processes of college, but also the details that students might not understand or might be afraid to ask, like the date when financial aid checks are disbursed in addition to information on how to apply for financial aid. Because of his own experiences with being confused as a first-generation college student, he’s aware that some students may be too embarrassed to ask

questions, so he answers them as a matter of course, even if they aren't asked. If they don't need that information, they can ignore it, but for many students, those details can be very important and can help them to feel like they truly understand what is going on in college.

John, the sharp dressing advisor of at-risk students, said he had a great deal of self-motivation as a first-generation college student. "I knew what my ultimate goal was. I knew I had to do what I had to do, so I had to make sure that happened," he said. He knew that he did not want the typical jobs for high school graduates in his community, usually food service industry positions, so college was a must for him. As an advisor now, he tries to be the role model that he once lacked to other students who may be struggling to show them that their efforts will ultimately be worth it.

J. Edward described herself as very motivated and a go-getter, and she viewed being a first-generation college student as an opportunity rather than a challenge. She did say that many students do not have that same perspective, however, and helping students to understand that being a first-generation college student can be a benefit is part of her desire to work with this population of students.

Similarly, Frank said he was motivated to do well in college "because you are trying to prove yourself." Frank, who was able to attend college with his GI Bill benefits, said that he would not be surprised to learn that most first-generation college students are what he described as "self-starters" because attending college required them to be more motivated to even seek out the opportunity in the first place.

Since first-generation college students do not have the family history with higher education, athletics advisor Don Juan reported that first-generation college students

seem to be more receptive to listening to advisors, at least at first before they shifted to trusting information from peers more than information from advisors. By establishing the advising relationship early, advisors can help first-generation college students to understand how to make appropriate decisions about their college career and can assist them in finding and using information to make good decisions.

Being a first-generation college student can be considered a form of diversity and that can be a real benefit to students applying to graduate or professional programs in health or sciences, internships and the like. Sarah, who initially planned a Ph.D. in biology before a freezer mishap convinced her otherwise, said that there pre-health programs designed to help first-generation college students specifically, so being aware that a student is first-generation helps her to direct them to those programs. She also said that she has students who do not recognize that they are first-generation and thus eligible for these programs. After a presentation on applying to a pre-health program, she had students who came up to her and were flabbergasted to learn that they were first-generation college students and may qualify for special programs and opportunities because of it. She said that many first-generation college students, herself included, say that, "I just never associated myself with having that sort of background." Frank, the military officer and advisor, said too that, "I never even heard the term first generation college student, really until I came into the advising as a profession, I don't remember it ever being discussed."

Challenges of being a first-generation college student. In addition to all of the other challenges that most college students face with transitioning to college, such

as time management and learning new study skills, all of the participants reported that first-generation college students face unique challenges.

One of the major challenges discussed by the participants was the fact that they, as Frank said, “don’t know what they don’t know” about college. In some cases, participants like Chastity, who applied to college because her friends did, expected college to simply be a continuation of high school. For others, like Frank and Isabella, the military advisors, did not pursue higher education until later in life, when other life experiences, such as life in the military or raising a family, left a gap between educational experiences, which was at times difficult to bridge.

Don Juan was a student-athlete who stated that he never actually applied to college. Most of the paperwork was done for him and he simply had to fill out a few sections that required information and his signature. He also said that he never knew about taking standardized tests, such as the SAT, until his senior year in high school, when it was almost too late to begin thinking about college. John, Frank and Rose emphasized this point in that they did not know how or when to begin preparing to apply to college and that college attendance was not something they learned about in high school.

Almost all of the participants reported financial challenges when they were first-generation college students. As a first-generation college student, Isabella, the daughter of a career enlisted soldier and homemaker, was not prepared for the financial realities of life as a college student. She explained:

Here came the expenses that a first generation college student isn’t going to anticipate: fees, needing a car to commute, whatever other kinds of things that

came up, and kind of scrounging around to feed myself, I had no clue that there would be something like a meal plan, I had never heard of anything like that.

Chastity, who has students pull up a chair next to her, said that not all first-generation college students have financial challenges, but she very often sees first-generation college students experiencing financial difficulties. Sometimes it is that the student does not have enough money to live while in college, and sometimes parents have so sheltered students that they do not understand financial decisions and consequences. She explained further than the financial issues often extend beyond merely paying bills. "So a lot of them if they do have to work, they can't run away to Cabo for spring break, so there's emotional issues with it," and a successful advisor may need to help first-generation college students to understand financial issues beyond merely applying for financial aid.

Rose attended a private institution as a student-athlete, and she said that she was angry and embarrassed about the disparity between her low socio-economic background as a first-generation college student attending college on a partial scholarship and the fact that she perceived most other students as not only not having to worry about paying for tuition, but that they also mostly had luxury vehicles and could go to their families' private cabins on weekends and during breaks. As an advisor now, Rose said she is sensitive to financial constraints and challenges that her students may face, and she certainly understands the frustrations and anger they may feel over the inequalities in resources. She refers students to financial aid to see if they qualify for any scholarships, grants or loans, and she also counsels them on how to best manage their funds.

J. Edward, the at-risk advisor at Dogwood State University, said that students in their student support program are required to complete a financial literacy online program designed to help them understand how to manage their finances and avoid unnecessary debt.

Multiple advisors, including Isabella, Chastity, Sarah, Frank and Sam, also discussed the fact many first-generation college students must also work while in college, which can negatively impact their grades and their time to graduation. Sarah said that her GPA definitely reflected the realities of working 20-25 hours per week while also in college. Isabella too said that the need for her to work while in college contributed to her mediocre grades during her final semester at her first institution, which ultimately led to her decision to leave the institution.

Even for parents who want to help financially, accurately judging how much college costs can be a challenge for them, and subsequently, for their first-generation college students. Sam, who attended the same college as his older sister, explained that his parents did not understand how expensive college would be and were not able to prepare ahead of time to help him with those expenses. He explained that for “people who don’t understand college and the cost, it’s very difficult for them to go ahead and prepare for that.”

Frank, Isabella and Sarah lived at home at least part of the time while in college to help save money. Isabella said that she felt very isolated as a commuter student and said she would often hide in her car during breaks between classes because she felt like the campus was for the students who lived there, and as a commuter, she wasn’t allowed to be there when she wasn’t in class. Sarah said that, “there were probably

some opportunities I probably missed out on,” by living at home rather than on campus, but it was much cheaper and her family was accepting and supportive of her need to study, so she choose to live at home for all but one of her 10 semesters in college.

The inability to be able to contact parents for assistance was also often cited as a major negative for first-generation college students. Army officer Frank explained it as first-generation college students being, “on their own, figuring it out as they go along,” rather than being able to ask their parents for advice or assistance. “There are a lot of unknowns to them because of not being around people that have been through that experience,” he expounded.

Don Juan felt there was a stigma attached to being a first-generation college student. He said he felt as though the standards and expectations were lowered for him once some individuals realized that he was coming from a less educated family background, and he does not believe that is fair. “Being that you are a first generation college student doesn’t give you an excuse to be mediocre.” Expectations should be set based on individual abilities, not on first-generation or socio-economic status.

Frank also explained that many first-generation college students underestimate or do not understand the value of a good GPA. “I think the danger with first-generation college students is they come out probably thinking, passing is passing, well, you’re doing fine,” as long as they are not failing. The reality is that many future options depend on how successful students are in college. For students who graduate with a low GPA, the perception will be that “you are not quick to learn or you don’t really apply yourself”. As Frank mentioned multiple times, Army officers are strongly encouraged to pursue a graduate degree. If students expect to be career officers, a graduate degree is

essentially required. Yet whether students are accepted into graduate programs often hinge on their college grades. Frank describes how he had to study extensively for the GRE nights and weekends while actively serving as an Army officer during the day. If his college GPA been higher, above a 3.0, then the GRE would not have been required for his program.

Another challenge was uncertainty of what happened after college. Frank did not realize how important grades would be later in life when he wanted to apply to graduate school as an ROTC commander, so now he is very careful to explain to students very early in their academic career how important a strong GPA is to their future plans. Rose was very focused on the end result of getting a job and she did not even consider programs or majors that did not have an obvious connection to a job after college, so she makes sure to have her student-athletes carefully consider future career options that may require additional education.

Rose, the former student-athlete with a difficult family life, did not have a difficult academic transition, but rather a very challenging social adjustment to college. “It wasn’t hard for me to adjust academically... it was more so outside of academics, outside of basketball, I didn’t fit in with a lot of people there,” she says of the prestigious, private university that she attended. Rose came from a low-income family, but the majority of students at the private university were from upper-middle class or wealthy backgrounds. Because of the disparity in backgrounds, Rose said that she would make things up or exaggerate when asked what her parents did rather than admit the truth to her higher socioeconomic peers out of embarrassment and anger of her more humble family life. “I was telling people she [her mother] was a teacher, making it out to be

something better... she's a teacher and she had to go to school, so they wouldn't just see me as a person who was there on a free ride." Rose felt that if she made it seem like her mother was college educated as well, her peers would be more accepting of her. "If I could make my mom sound better, I thought that like people would accept me more."

Most of Rose's ideas about college had come from watching television and seeing college and college students portrayed in popular media. "It was just a lot of things that TV didn't prepare me for, because what you see on TV is nothing like what you go in and do" as a college student. Unfortunately, few of those Hollywood representations of college ended up being true, she learned. Rose said that many of her first-generation student-athletes assume that they will play their sport professionally, especially her football and basketball student-athletes, and will make a living this way because they see sports stars with rags-to-riches stories on TV. "Usually the first-generation kind of kids who were raised in areas where what they've been taught is the best way to get money is music, movies, professional sports," so they do not plan to actually graduate with a degree and expect to simply be drafted into professional sports because that is what movies and music tell them is the path to success. Because they do not have parents who can explain the realities of college, many first-generation college students are like Rose and gain their knowledge about college from inaccurate sources.

Role as an advisor. As the primary research questions for this study focused on the role of academic advising with first-generation college students, one major theme was the role of academic advising and academic advisors in particular in working with first-generation college students. Sub-themes of this theme include the personal relationship between the advisor and student, identifying who is a first-generation

college student, utilizing faculty members effectively, referring students to resources and use of best practices in academic advising that best meet the specific needs of first-generation college students.

Establishing personal relationships. One major subtheme from the interviews was the need for advisors to establish a personal relationship with students early in their academic careers. All 10 of the participants strongly emphasized the need for a personal relationship of some sort between the advisor and student.

As an advisor now, John, the young advisor of at-risk students, cited the personal connection with advisees as the most important part of advising first-generation college students. “Being as you were first generation, once again, you can identify with students and you have that sincere compassion for them because you know what it feels like,” he explained. All of the participants said that they have a particular sense of empathy with other first-generation college students because they’ve also been in that situation, but that any advisor is able to offer assistance and make a personal connection with students.

Shirley had posters of musical groups on her office walls so she can start a conversation about musical preferences with her students and so they can get to know her a little as a person who loves attending concerts. Similarly, Sam had posters of musical groups, Isabella and Chastity had family and pet photos, Don Juan and Rose had team photos and Frank had his Army memorabilia easily visible in their offices to show that they are all more than just academic advisors; they are people as well.

Once students realize that advisors are interesting people in their own right, the relationships that develop between advisors and students can vary from being almost

maternal in nature to friendly to purely academically professional. Isabella, the advisor with extensive family connections to the military, explained that she takes a more motherly tone with most of her students, sternly lecturing them about her expectations for them on rare occasions when they fail to live her to her high expectations, but she believes she can manage this because she is a mother and a grandmother. She will refer students to other resources and then warn them that, "I'm going to act like your mother, I just give them that heads up... I will pull the grandma card once in a while, they start laughing, they grin at me then, and kind of hang their head," and agree to do what she asked of them. She will occasionally admonish them for not doing what is expected of them, but she will also tell them that she is proud of them when they do well and meet or exceed expectations.

Other advisors become friendly with their first-generation college students. Rose and Shirley said that they both encourage students to be more upfront and casual with them. Rose, who advises student-athletes, gives students her personal cell phone number so they can call or text her when they have a problem because she wants them to think of her as their contact person at the university. Shirley has her office decorated with Grateful Dead posters and other items that illustrate part of her personality since she finds that it will very often trigger a conversation with students about their own musical preferences, and she can establish rapport based on that. "My students come up and fist bump me all the time, you know? We're down!" Shirley explained with a smile. The positive is that students are comfortable with their advisor and unafraid to come to them with problems. The downside is possibly learning too much about

students. As Rose explained wryly, “I’ve learned things about my students that if I’d never known, I’d be okay with.”

The other participants encourage a relationship that is more strictly academic rather than friendly. J. Edward, the motivated go-getter in college, said that she has to actively remind students that she is not there to be their friend, but rather that her role is as their academic advisor. Frank, the Army officer, said that he never passes up the opportunity to help any of his students, whether that is with academics or personal issues like finding an apartment or job. However, he does not usually share a great deal of personal information, although he does share some of his academic history so students can learn from his mistakes and not repeat them.

One common element in the sub-theme was that in order to connect with students, advisors should be willing to open up a bit themselves to show that they are human as well. Isabella, who transferred colleges multiple times as a student, stated that advisors and faculty should, “make themselves appear more human, and not to have to stay on the academic pedestal. I think that can make a huge difference with first-generation [students], I know that it did for me.” Isabella went on to explain how an art professor who shared a bit in class about her struggles as a professional woman with a family struck a chord with her that still resonates today, and how that experience with having a faculty member open up just a little about her personal life has had a profound impact on her practice as an academic advisor.

Sam, who kept the toys and small objects on his desk as conversation starters, stated that the connection with students is what is most important in his advising practice. If he has a connection with students, then he can push them by asking ‘why?’

when they come in with assumptions about their academics, college or life in general. He can challenge their notions. Also, because students are willing to share more with him because they have a connection with and trust in him, Sam can celebrate both large and small victories with them. "I celebrate little victories all the time," he said, describing how even small tasks like going to class or buying books for a class deserve to be celebrated because not all students will make it that far.

Most of the participants indicated that they typically share some personal information when it is relevant to help establish that relationship, especially in regards to their own experiences as a first-generation college student. Of the 10 participants, only Sam, who was initially a music teacher before deciding it wasn't for him, stated that he rarely shared his personal experiences as a first-generation college student as he felt that too much time had elapsed between his college experiences and student's experiences to be relevant today.

The other nine participants agreed that sharing something of their personal story was important, and shared how they do this. Isabella often works with first-generation college students who are also ex-military, so she tells them about her family experience as the daughter, wife and mother of military personnel. Don Juan, the football star, tells students about how neither of his parents went to college either. Rose, who was in college with a basketball scholarship, discusses how important it was for her to graduate because she was the first in her family to do so. Frank shares his experiences with struggling to get into graduate school because he did not stay focused on academics during his last year in college and allowed his grades to slip, thus reducing his GPA and hindering his ability to get into graduate school as an Army officer.

“I think the best way an advisor can support a first-generation college student is think about all the challenges that you had, especially for me as a first-generation student, and just bring up the subject,” Frank expounded.

The participants admitted that building and maintaining a connection with students is time-intensive and challenging, and Sam says that not all students need this level of involvement. Most believe that it can make a huge difference for an at-risk student, such as first-generation college students, and is well worth the effort. While it does take time and effort, it does not necessarily require a huge time commitment. Indicating that an advisor is interested in a student outside of academics can only take a five-minute conversation. Rose also said that it is important to establish a cycle of trust with students, so that current students can tell new students that she really is there to help and to trust her.

Another important point was that this personal connection must be established early in the student’s academic career, especially in the first semester or earlier, such as during orientation or pre-college experiences. Don Juan, who never struggled academically but said he would have benefitted nonetheless from tutoring and support services, pointed out that many first-generation college students either end up in academic trouble or do not return to college because of choices they make in their first semester, so advisors can often have the greatest impact early.

Some of the participants also went to lengths to emphasize that the relationship must also be built on trust. J. Edward, who advises at-risk students, said that advisors should always be honest even if it might be upsetting to the student. If an advisor does not know the answer to a question, admit that but then help them to find the answer.

Sam, the advisor with the toys on his desk, reiterated several times that his office is a safe place for students to ask questions without fear. Students must be able to trust their advisors to give them accurate information and to keep their discussions private before a relationship can be established.

Sam explained that establishing the relationship isn't only accomplished in face-to-face meetings, although he generally has multiple meetings each semester with students. He also uses social media such as Twitter and Facebook to stay in touch with students and let them know that he's concerned about them.

Rose, who admitted she had a chip on her shoulder about her difficult family life when she started college, said her attitude when she was in college was, "how can you help me if you know nothing about me?" So students need to feel the connection to an advisor and a sense of concern for them as a person, rather than just as a job, early enough for them to be able to ask questions and get information during the critical first semesters in college.

Knowing who is a first-generation college student. Another key issue was the fact that it can be very challenging for advisors to identify exactly who is a first-generation college student. Of the 10 participants interviewed, none said that their institution explicitly provided this information. Rather, they had to ascertain a student's status through conversations with the student, often indirectly.

Some advisors, like Sara, Rose and Don Juan, were reluctant to ask a student about their parents' educational attainment or profession for fear of alienating students who are embarrassed by their parents' professions or lack of higher education. Sarah said that she often begins conversations with prospective pre-health students by asking

if they're interested in a health profession because they have a family member who is in a health profession. She said that very often the first-generation students will mention their parents' professions at that time and she can usually infer about their family educational status from that. Once she knows this, she makes a note in their file.

Some advisors were more direct and said that they will ask if the student's parents went to college if they must, but almost all preferred the less direct method. One common technique was for the advisor to mention that he or she was the first in their family to go to college and see if that elicited any type of response from a suspected first-generation college student.

One advisor, Shirley, worked with an academic learning community for students from first-generation, low-income, and/or single-parent households, so all of the students in this community must fall into one of the three categories; many fit all three requirements. Each summer of the program so far, Shirley receives a list of prospective students from admissions, but she admitted that she is not sure how admissions ascertains who is first-generation or from a single-parent household. Low-income data is pulled by financial aid based on the expected family contribution from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. However, Shirley admitted that many students do not submit the FAFSA, possibly either because they do not expect to be eligible for financial aid or because they do not know to fill it out.

Most advisors also reported that they did not document a student as first-generation college student anywhere in the file, relying solely on memory to know who was a first-generation versus continuing-generation college student. Shirley, who works with first-generation college students in the learning community, said she does

not write it down anywhere because she does not want to stigmatize students if other advisors or academic professionals saw their record. Other advisors said their sense of empathy and connection with first-generation college students allowed them to recall conversations and details. Only Sarah, who advises pre-health students, directly admitted to making a note in the file for future reference. Several advisors admitted, after thinking about it in the interview, that making a discrete note in the student's file would probably be a wise precaution and something they will add to their advising practice.

Chastity, the advisor with pictures of her dogs in her office, said that she made a note that the student was first-generation in her electronic list of advisees, but it is not noted in their hard-copy official advising file. Frank, the ROTC and veterans advisor, also suggested that there should be some sort of documentation in the student's file that he or she is a first-generation college student. This was helpful for him when preparing for a meeting with a student if he had a general idea of resources to suggest or types of questions that might be more appropriate to ask a first-generation versus a continuing-generation college student. Frank said that:

First-generation students probably need that little extra how's it going? Are you confused about anything? Is any of this confusing you? Who is helping you? Do you have any mentors? Do you understand that I'm your mentor and I'll answer any questions that you have?

By having a note of some type on the student file, advisors will know when to ask those extra questions.

Role of faculty. Another sub-theme that emerged was the conflicting role of faculty. While the majority of the participants reported that they had little direct involvement with faculty members outside of class when they were students, they advocate for their current first-generation college student advisees to develop mentoring relationships with faculty members. Only Don Juan, the ex-football player, said that he met with faculty members outside of class regularly. “I used my professors, my number one resource here, because in my mind, who better to tell you how to do well in a class than the person who is teaching the class?” he asked. He was never told that he should meet with his professors regularly, but he figured that they were the ones creating the syllabus and assigning grades, so it was only common sense that he should discuss his work in the course with them.

Isabella, the commuter student who hid in her car during class breaks because she felt so isolated on campus, said that it has been her experience that first-generation college students are less likely to actually speak with their professors than their continuing-generation peers. When meeting with a first-generation college student in academic trouble, “the first thing I ask is, “have you talked to your instructor?” and of course they haven’t, they don’t,” because they don’t understand the importance of meeting with faculty members, Isabella expounded.

Shirley, the Grateful Dead devotee, confided that she felt intimidated by faculty members and felt like she didn’t speak the same language as they did, so she was very reluctant to approach them about anything. She said, “for me as a first-generation [student], a faculty member was just a faculty member, they weren’t a person. I never would have thought that their life could be anything similar to my mine.” Shirley said

that she believes that she struggles to convince first-generation college students of the benefits of faculty-student interaction because she is still slightly intimidated by many faculty members by everything from their language and vocabulary to the way they dress.

Multiple participants believed that first-generation college students in particular are scared of faculty members and of being involved with faculty members. One strategy Chastity, the sorority member who went to college because all of her friends were applying to college, has used to help students overcome this fear was to give students a homework assignment to research a faculty member and then meet them. Once students have identified a tentative major, she asks them to look up the faculty research interests on the departmental website, find someone who has an interesting research topic and then arrange to meet them. Chastity reported that this helped students to get over the mindset that faculty members are scary and unapproachable and they have the opportunity to connect with someone in their prospective department. Students typically came back to Chastity either passionate and excited about the major or they have decided it is not the major for them after all, but either way, it was a beneficial experience. She said that first-generation college students follow up on this assignment at about the same rate as continuing-generation college students, but that both types of students found it useful.

The participants believed that a mentoring relationship with faculty could be extremely important and beneficial for first-generation college students. The biggest challenge Frank saw for first-generation college students was that they do not typically have a mentor or role model who can say “this is what happened to me in college and

don't fall into this trap". Faculty members, along with academic advisors, can help to fulfill the mentoring role. Frank sees his role as mentoring young students, much as he did as an Army officer.

Athletics advisor Rose also recommended that advisors establish connections with faculty members on campus who can serve as a mentor to students, and who can be trusted to be honest with both the student and advisors about the student's suitability for or performance in the major. She said that she believes that it is better to steer a student towards another major than to have a series of poor grades on the transcript. She relied on word-of-mouth reports from other students about which professors were more open to working with students. So when advising students, she would suggest a specific professor, or recommend against taking a specific professor, based on feedback from other students.

Faculty members can also help first-generation college students by providing early and honest feedback about their performance in their courses. Several participants reported using academic progress reports from faculty members during advising meetings. These progress reports can be submitted anonymously or openly, but it allowed the advisor to have a conversation about the student's academic progress and what, if anything, needed to be improved in the course.

Grandmotherly Isabella encouraged all students to talk directly with their professors to get an idea of their grades. Sometimes students are still in a high school mindset and do not realize how few grades there are in some college classes. So if a student reported not doing well on the first exam, she always recommended getting a

tutor, even if the student thinks it is possible to still do well in the course overall. She said that:

Sometimes I have to be fairly blunt, when they don't take that message very serious, because again if they are first-generation college students, they are still in the high school mindset... So we have to alter their way of thinking into each exam grade is going to be huge.

The faculty member can help reiterate this message by emphasizing the importance of each test grade in a college course and helping the first-generation college student to see how proportionally important each grade is to the final grade.

Referral to resources. All of the participants reported that their current institutions offered various student support services, such as tutoring and writing lab assistance, to students. However, all of the participants also reported that they were unaware of most such resources when they were in college. Music major and jazz fan Sam said that he did not do well in his first semester in college because he was not prepared academically for it and he did not know that resources such as tutoring were even available, so he had to spend time trying to dig himself out of the low GPA hole. He stated that he believes that if he had known about and used tutoring, his GPA would have been much higher after his first year in college.

Don Juan, the football player turned student-athletics advisor, was adamant that it is important for first-generation college students to be using resources on campus during their first semester because so many of them do not understand what is necessary to be successful in college. So taking advantage of tutoring, study skills

courses, time management workshops and other resources can make a huge impact on not just their first semester but on their entire academic career.

Sam said that his typical advising practice is to encourage students to sign up for tutoring right away, especially in high-fail courses like math and the sciences. He said he also advises students to use the library at least once per week as a study area and resource. He strongly suggests that students meet regularly with a representative from the writing center for assistance with their papers because he sees a strong difference in language with first-generation college students versus those who might be from a more educated background, and references his wife and mother-in-law, both of whom grew up in more educated backgrounds, and how they correct his grammar now. He said he did not learn “the King’s English” growing up in a first-generation home, so grammar was not something he learned at home growing up. The writing center can help students who struggle with scholarly writing to improve their writing skills and their grades.

Don Juan was careful to emphasize that academic support services are not only for student struggling academically. He said:

A lot of people felt that since I was doing so well you know and I never had a lot of problems, that I didn’t need to [go to tutoring], that I didn’t need people’s help... If I had known that all this help was here, I’d have graduated with a 4.0 instead of what I did graduate with.

Similarly, at-risk student advisor J. Edward’s advising philosophy was for students to take advantage of support services such as tutoring until they knew they do not need it any longer rather than waiting for the student to be in academic trouble. So

she tries to get first-generation college students to sign up for tutoring or other services immediately and they can drop them later if it becomes clear that they do not need the extra assistance.

Don Juan said that he believes that it is especially important that first-generation college students be informed of the resources and opportunities and to be strongly encouraged to take advantage of them. First-generation college students may not have anyone else who can tell them how important it is to have a tutor or to utilize the writing center whereas continuing-generation students are more likely to have their parents to encourage them to use the university's resources.

Don Juan recommended tutoring in particular for first-generation college students because he believes that first-generation students may be embarrassed or ashamed to speak up in class and ask the professor to slow down or to explain something that everyone else seems to understand. So working one-on-one with a tutor allows them the opportunity to ask questions without losing face. Although he did not struggle academically while in college, some of his student-athlete students do have scholastic challenges, and he said that he always recommends tutoring from day one.

All of the participants stated that they refer students to various resources on campus, but admitted that first-generation college students do not follow up as often as they would prefer to see as an academic advisor. Chastity said that her experience is that most colleges now have mandatory advising during the first year, and suggested that it is important for the advisor to know about the resources and services available and to share this with students during first-year mandatory advising meetings.

Rose, who initially never considered education beyond the bachelors degree level until peers started discussing graduate school plans, said that she will literally walk with students to career services when they have no idea about prospective majors or careers. She also said that she tells students that they are far from being the only student in that situation, that many students need assistance in choosing a major, tutoring or help from the writing center. By making it not seem like such a rarity, she believes that they are more likely to actually follow up and seek assistance.

Once Isabella, who mostly advises military students, makes a referral to a resource for a student, she said she will often have the student make the initial appointment using her computer so she knows they have at least gotten that far in the process. Then she'll make a follow up appointment with the student to find out how the meeting went and tells the student that they should be prepared to tell her how the referral visit went. However, Isabella said that she understands why many first-generation college students don't follow up on the referral because, "they can't know about the value of a resource until they go over and take a look at it," and first-generation college students often do not take the first step of reaching out to the resource for assistance even when referred by their advisor.

Chastity, who said she enjoyed working with parents of first-generation college students, said that she enlists parents by telling them about resources at orientation or if they contact her so they can help to encourage their student to take advantage of available opportunities. Like Isabella and several other advisors, she said she will often have the student use her computer or phone to make the initial contact or to make the

first appointment. She said she believes students are more likely to follow up if they make the initial contact with her.

Sam, who uses toys on his desk to get students to open up to him, said that making concrete and explicit referrals to a specific individual, if possible, seemed to work best for first-generation college students. He said he also emails the student with the contact information of the person or program to whom he is referring them to in addition to giving them a hard copy of that information so they will have multiple copies.

Both Isabella and Rose suggested having an honest discussion about math abilities very early with students interested in majors that require significant amounts of math or higher level math courses. Isabella said that it's better for students to realize that some majors may not be feasible for them before they have committed to a major and have taken a number of courses that will only be elective credit if they must change majors. Students may also become emotionally invested in pursuing a major and spend a great deal of time researching and thinking about future careers, talking with friends and family about their intended major and then feel embarrassed, ashamed or angered when they have to start over in another major. Rose too would rather students choose a major that they can be successful in before they have spent time failing in a major that was unlikely to be a good fit for their math abilities. If the student wishes to continue in a major that may not mesh well with their previous math experience, both said that it is vital that they seek tutoring or supplemental instruction from the very beginning to give them the best chance at success in the course and ultimately the major.

Advising best practices. One of the four research questions was to ask the participants their suggestions for best practices for advising first-generation college students. The following are key recommendations from the 10 participants.

Use available data. If information is available from the institution to tell advisors who is a first-generation college students, the participants vigorously recommended that advisors make a discrete note in the physical or electronic file. However, since institutions collect this information in very different ways and the definition of who exactly is a first-generation college student varies (Davis, 2010), this can be difficult to ascertain from admissions offices or institutional research offices.

Shirley's institution, which has the learning community for first-generation, low-income or single parent family students, uses student assessments to determine whether a student is at risk of dropping out, but she stated that the only information she has found useful in advising first-generation college students is the level of family support. For a first-generation college student who indicated low levels of family support, "I knew I had to dig deep with this student," she said.

Serve as a support system for students. Sarah, in her role advising pre-health professions students, said that advisors have to build trust and a relationship with first-generation college students in order to be a support system for them. She explained:

So when they start having that struggle, they know that they can come to me about that, that they are comfortable with it. And so part of the best practice is letting the first-generation students know my story, and knowing what some of my struggles were, and how I came out of that to still have a level of success.

All of the participants stated that they needed to establish themselves as a support system for students because some first-generation college students don't have the family support; as Sarah explained, "because they are trying to achieve something that mom and dad haven't, they sometimes can be looked down upon by the family for trying to put themselves out of the situation in which they grew up in."

Even for students who have emotionally supportive parents, extended family and friends, parents who have had no experience with college may not be able to understand the cultural shift that takes place when a student starts college. One common refrain from many of the participants was that their parents were very proud and tried to provide as much support as possible, but that the participants still often felt lonely and socially and emotionally unprepared for college.

Special training for advisors of FGCS. Several participants alluded to the need for special training for both professional academic advisors and faculty advisors who work with first-generation college students so they can better understand the characteristics and needs of this population of students. Isabella, who hid in her car rather than interact with other students, staff and faculty, said that any advisor can be kind, helpful and sympathetic, but she believed that she is more likely to ask questions about their financial situation and whether students are working because of her own experiences as a first-generation college student. Thus, providing additional information to advisors who were not first-generation to help them to understand the typical experiences of a first-generation college student may help them to ask questions and make referrals to resources that they might not otherwise have considered.

Special orientation for parents of FGCS. The majority of the participants (8 of the 10) reported that their own families were very emotionally supportive while they were in college, even if their parents could not help financially or did not understand their new role as a college student. Several participants suggested that a special orientation session or meeting for the parents of first-generation college students might be helpful to address the new roles and expectations that students face as college students, college policies and procedures and other important information that parents who never attended college will likely not know.

Chastity said that she enjoys working with first-generation college student parents and sees her role with parents as mainly educating them about realistic expectations; for example, parents cannot have parent-teacher conferences with their college student's professor. She does understand that they do not necessarily have an accurate view of what college is like so she tries to help them to understand what she can and cannot share with them due to federal privacy law. She also uses this opportunity to tell parents about the resources available to students so they can help encourage their students to take advantage of them. She also tries to get parents and students to talk about the student's strengths and make realistic assessments about potential majors and careers. "I think that sometimes that parents don't understand all that goes on in college, and they get excited and then they push their students," not realizing that it is college, "not 13th grade," she explained.

Begin discussing the next steps early. John, who advises at-risk students, advocated discussing graduate and professional schools and future career plans early with their advisor, stating that, "they are setting themselves up for success" by setting

higher standards for their grades and beginning to prepare for professional school exams, such as the GRE or MCAT, early rather than waiting until the last minute. Frank, who struggled to study for the GRE while serving as an Army officer because of an insufficient GPA in college, echoed this when he explained that he encourages students to consider what type of future graduate programs they might consider in the future and to be aware of GPA requirements for those programs.

Similarly, Rose said that her peers from more educated homes came to college preparing for graduate or professional school from the beginning while she had never even considered anything beyond college. Her understanding of college was, “I go to school for four years, walk out with a degree, I get a job. That’s what I thought college was, I didn’t think it was, you know, there’s a step after college.” Rose was very focused on the end result of getting a job and she did not even consider programs or majors that did not have an obvious connection to a job after college. “For me, it was not even knowing the options.”

Learning communities for FGCS. One of the ways that Shirley at Cardinal State University tried to help first-generation college students was to create a learning community for at-risk students, which includes first-generation college students, low-income students and student coming from a single-parent household. The goal of the community was to, “normalize those three characteristics” and allow students the opportunity to talk about what it is like to be a college student coming from that background.

Recruiting participants into the learning community was also a challenge since students were offered the opportunity to participate on a first-come, first-serve basis

based on the information from their admissions application and FAFSA application. The application may not capture all of the necessary data or students may not always understand the questions. Also, Shirley asked, "How do you let them know how beneficial it is going to be without scaring them away?" Shirley said she has not experienced any direct resistance to her learning community, but she has found a lack of enthusiasm for it. There are numerous centers and offices on campus for other types of diversity, such as racial/ ethnic diversity, sexual orientation and gender identification, she said, but there was no center or office for students coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds, such as first-generation college students. Shirley said that the university's diversity initiatives look good on paper, but that she lacked the resources to provide the support she thinks the students in her learning community need.

This learning community was curricular only and does not involve a residential learning experience. Shirley explained that she would like to offer an optional residential component at some point in the future. It must be optional since so many of the students in the learning community are non-traditional students with families or are students who are local and live at home, so requiring these students to live on campus would exclude a number of students from participating. Students are broken into small groups and take two courses together in the fall of their freshman year. The group as a whole, approximately 100 students, meets together eight or nine times each semester. Students then take a one-hour credit course in the spring semester, and approximately 80% of students return for the one-hour course.

Involve faculty members as mentors. Faculty members can be key members of the support system for first-generation college students, but only if they are willing and able to serve as mentors and to be resources. Rose recommended that advisors develop a network of supportive, understanding faculty members across campus and in various majors who are willing to mentor students and to serve as liaisons to that department. Finding faculty members who were themselves first-generation college students and who understand the unique characteristics and challenges of this population of students might be a good place to start, she suggested.

Isabella discussed how disheartening it can be for students to not get a response from faculty members if they do send emails or leave messages, and that students were then much less likely to reach out to faculty members in the future if they felt that they had been ignored or rebuffed once. She recalled her own lingering bitterness that no one at her first institution ever contacted her when she withdrew from the university, so she understands from personal experience how it feels to be ignored.

Reach out early and often to students. Several advisors also discussed with students how important it is that they get involved on campus, ideally in their first semester. Sam, John and J. Edward all explained how they encourage first-generation students to get involved on campus as soon as possible. Sam expounded on how he tries to persuade them to not go back home every weekend but to stay on campus and make connections and experience college life. He said that understands that many first-generation college students are very connected to their parents and families back home, but he presses them to be engaged on campus as well by sharing information about clubs and organizations on campus.

Sam also said that he tries to meet with each of his students three times in their first semester. The first meeting is an opportunity for them to get to know each other. The second meeting is to review mid-term reports and grades, and where he continues to encourage students to seek assistance from tutoring, professors or other resources on campus. The third meeting is typically to plan for courses for the next semester. This may not be possible for advisors with large caseloads, but it would enhance the ability to develop a relationship with first-generation college students.

Chastity, the psychology major who never explored any other major because she never thought about anything else existing, also said that you have to reach out early to first-generation college students. Chastity makes a concerted effort to meet her advisees at the very beginning of the semester. She said that she sends out emails at the beginning and they go to the linked freshmen seminar courses to introduce herself. She tells students:

We're not here just to help you pick classes. If you are having any issues with any of the transition to college, if you don't know who to talk to, we're a good start. We try to let them know we're not scary and we're open.

She also makes an effort to go to student events, "so again, they see us normalized... anything we can do so that it's not that intimidating," for them to come in and meet with an advisor. Rose and Don Juan also try to attend as many sporting events as possible so their student-athletes see them and recognize them outside of the advising center.

Because of her own experiences as a student who left her first institution and was never contacted, Isabella contacts all students who do not register for courses for the next semester. She explained earnestly that she wants students to understand that

she and the institution think that they are important, and that she hopes they'll return to the institution, if not now, then eventually, to complete their degree.

Relationship to cultural capital model. Oldfield (2007) explained Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's cultural capital model (1977) in higher education as "the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily." (p. 2). Because students from lower socio-economic strata, such as first-generation college students, arrive in college without this vital cultural capital, they tend to find it more difficult to acquire additional cultural capital, which leaves them at a disadvantage in elite environs which favor those with greater amounts of cultural capital. While first-generation college students can and do acquire cultural capital, they must obtain it while in college rather than arriving with it already.

Researchers have speculated that this lack of cultural capital is a major disadvantage for first-generation college students in understanding the culture of college, but that first-generation college students gain more from cultural capital events, such as travel or fine arts events, than their continuing-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). The main elements of cultural capital that emerged from this research were exposure to cultural events and travel, language and clothing.

Almost all of the participants said that first-generation college students typically have less cultural capital than their peers from more educated homes, and most said that they also struggled with the elements of cultural capital as first-generation college students.

Grateful Dead fan Shirley disclosed that she still sometimes struggles with cultural capital, especially with language and clothing, and sometimes shares with students that she still occasionally experiences challenges in academia, despite her greater experience. Students may not feel as awkward about their own new experiences if they understand that advisors have been there, done that, and still sometimes struggle to fit in.

Cultural events and travel. In his work with at-risk students, John takes students to see plays and other fine arts events. They visit big cities like Philadelphia to expose students to new communities and they host etiquette seminars on topics such as fine dining. Exposure to events and activities that increase their cultural capital are necessary because, “they are not exposed to it when they are a child.” These events are always dependent on their budget, but he suggested these as best practices to assist first-generation college students. Shirley’s learning community for first-generation colleges students, low-income students and students from single-parent homes also take trips to cities like Atlanta for the same reasons, to expose them to travel and fine arts opportunities that most students have not previously experienced.

Many first-generation college students whom Sam has advised also do not have a wealth of cultural or travel experiences. Many have never even been out of the state. So he strongly encourages them to take advantage of cultural events on campus and in the community, especially students who have never had that exposure to such events before. As a former, albeit brief, music teacher and music aficionado, Sam encourages participating in both fine arts and musical performances when possible. As Pascarella et al., (2004) speculated, Sam also noted that first-generation college students seem to

reap a greater reward from these experiences than continuing-generation college students because it expands their horizons; the event becomes more than just enjoyment of a concert or a play.

Sarah said that first-generation college students are also sometimes unprepared to travel for interviews for medical or other professional health schools. Because many first-generation college students have not traveled extensively and many have not traveled by air, they are not aware of the strategies to get affordable rates. She cited one student invited to an interview at a very prestigious medical school too far away to reasonably drive. He was very excited, but he waited to buy his plane ticket until just a few weeks before the interview date. The prices had increased substantially since it was so close to the travel date and he was unable to afford the plane ticket. He had to decline the interview because he could not afford the expensive plane ticket two weeks from the date, but it had been more economical if he had bought the ticket when he first learned of the interview opportunity. His lack of understanding of airline pricing policies led to him being unable to interview for a medical school position.

Language. Sarah said she sees a large language gap that is, “very apparent in terms of test scores for pre-health students. Students coming from first-generation, low income, underserved areas traditionally score weaker on all of the health professions exams.” Even if students have solid foundations in the science content areas, their scores are often negatively impacted by their “reading speed and their reading comprehension” as well as their vocabulary. She also said that, “they may need to recognize that how they talk to mom and dad or your best friend back home is going to be different from the context of the actual health professions interview.” She said that

they must work hard to try to improve their reading speed, reading comprehension, vocabulary and language usage and grammar before taking the health professions exams or attending interviews in order to be competitive with their continuing-generation peers.

Ex-football player Don Juan also said he sees a difference in language and vocabulary between first-generation and continuing-generation college students. He encourages first-generation students to take advantage of cultural and fine arts opportunities whenever possible. “If you have the opportunity, you need to experience different things to be well-rounded and to be able to pretty much excel in life.” He said he encourages students to try different types of courses and new opportunities to expand their worldview. He also suggests that first-generation college students read as much as possible, especially things with unfamiliar words, and to use a dictionary application on their phone or computer to look up unfamiliar words. Like Sarah, he stated that he believes that this language difference is a reason why many first-generation college students do not do as well on standardized tests like the SAT or GRE, so it is very important that first-generation college students begin working to expand and enhance their vocabulary and reading comprehension skills as soon as possible in college.

Several of the participants also shared that they sometimes still are intimidated by others in academia. Frank discussed how he was and is unfamiliar with many of the terms specific to education, such as pedagogy, and had to look it up after he heard it a number of times once he began advising. It was not a common phrase in his former

career as an Army officer, so it was completely unfamiliar to him. He didn't want to admit that to just anyone, so he quietly looked it up instead.

Shirley, who decided to pursue advising after positive experiences with a disabilities services advisor, said that she has a very different speech and language style when she is at work versus when she is around her friends and family. "I don't feel like I talk the language, know what to say. There's still that kind of divide," Shirley confided. Shirley also admitted that she speaks in one way while on campus but she speaks in another way while with her family and pre-college friends, and said that she suspects that many first-generation college students do the same.

Clothing. Several participants also stated that first-generation college students are not always aware of social conventions regarding clothing and may sometimes dress inappropriately for academic and professional environments. Some of the participants said that they have to have sometimes awkward conversations with first-generation college students to explain to them how they need to adjust their clothing choices for specific situations.

Sarah noted that first-generation college students are more likely to have questions and concerns regarding what is appropriate to wear to professional or medical school interviews, and that they are often worried about how to afford a new suit or outfit. She said:

What I always try to encourage the first-generation students to do is that they don't have to go to Belk or to Banana Republic and have to spend \$300 on a suit; if you have a pair of dress pants, a nice dress shirt and tie, then maybe you just need to buy a jacket that coordinates and matches with it.

Sarah further expounded that she encourages students to check thrift stores, second-hand clothing stores and to talk with family and friends who are near the same size to see if they have anything that could be borrowed instead of purchased to help them save money. Dressing appropriately does not always mean a large financial outlay for students.

Don Juan, the youngest advisor interviewed, said he sometimes has to caution first-generation college students that appropriate attire for a job or internship interview is not the same as club or social clothing. So he sits down with students to get a sense of what they plan to wear if they let him know they have an important meeting or interview, and then he can gently let them know if they need to change their plans.

Sam said that clothing is also a huge issue with some students, although he is unsure whether this is due to many of his students being first-generation or because of other characteristics unique to his population of students. If students show up to meet with Sam dressed inappropriately, he views that as a teaching moment and asks the student to leave and come back again appropriately attired.

Army officer Frank said that he grew up in a family where his father owned one suit that was rarely worn, and he had to learn how to dress for specific occasions through trial and error. He said that first-generation college students may simply have different expectations and standards for what is appropriate attire based on their past experiences and unfortunately, it often takes an uncomfortable moment for them to learn otherwise. "They show up for an interview and they are dressed down and everyone else is dressed up... they realize that they probably made a mistake," he explained ruefully as he briefly described some of his own fashion faux pas.

Addressing the Research Questions

The overriding research questions were to learn about the role of academic advising with first-generation college students and how academic advisors can provide support to and assist first-generation college students. The guiding research questions are addressed below.

Experience with first-generation college students. I asked the participants to describe their advising experiences with first-generation college students, and they responded by detailing a wide variety of experiences with working with first-generation college students. They predominantly described having a greater sense of empathy with first-generation college students because they understand the challenges that first-generation students face in transitioning to college.

One common experience detailed by the participants was building a relationship between the advisor and first-generation college student. This relationship can take a number of different forms, but the important point from the participants was that this connection must be established early in the student's college career in order to be most effective. Without a relationship, first-generation college students are unlikely to view their advisor as a support system and may be less likely to contact their advisor when they experience academic or interpersonal difficulties in college.

Several advisors suggested strategies to create this relationship, typically by opening up and sharing some part of the advisor's personal life and experiences with the student. Shirley said that the relationship must be reciprocal, and students will not be comfortable sharing personal details with her if she hasn't shared any personal

details of her life with them. J. Edward and Sam said that this relationship must be built on trust.

Others advised reaching out early and often to first-generation college students, especially during the critical first semester in college and before. Some participants speculated that it would be very difficult to establish a relationship in only one meeting, so they suggested meeting multiple times with students and/ or attending events where students can see advisors outside of the advising center and get to know them a bit as people as well.

Advising first-generation college students also seemed to require advisors to do more than just course or major advising in many cases. Because many first-generation college students have less cultural capital than continuing-generation college students, advisors of first-generation college students often also took on a role of helping students to acquire additional cultural capital by encouraging them to attend cultural and fine arts events and to travel. Advisors also reported encouraging students to read challenging texts to improve their vocabulary and to visit the writing center to work on the writing, grammar and syntax skills. Several advisors also described how they have had conversations with first-generation college students about what is appropriate clothing to wear to job or graduate school interviews and other special occasions. Their role as an advisor was expanded far beyond that of curricular advising to include elements of lifestyle coaching with some students.

Main questions or issues. I asked about the types of questions and issues that arise during advising, and the responses were diverse. Isabella and Chastity both stated that first-generation college students are often still in a high school mindset, and they

see their role as an academic advisor as helping them to understand that college is very different. Expectations both in and out of class for students are typically very different in college than it had been in high school, but many first-generation college students do not have the family experience with college to truly understand how different it will be. From understanding a syllabus and how grades are calculated to figuring out the financial realities of life on a college campus, first-generation college students may be less prepared for college life than students from more educated homes.

A major advising issue reported by the participants was convincing first-generation college students to take advantage of resources available on campus. Several participants reported that first-generation college students are less likely to avail themselves of resources such as tutoring or writing assistance even if necessary, perhaps because first-generation college students either are not aware that resources are available or because they do not realize how beneficial those resources can be.

Multiple advisors also described how many first-generation college students view a college degree as a path to a job at the end of the four years, and do not necessarily consider graduate or professional school as options until very late in their academic career, if at all. The participants suggested that advisors may need to address the fact that many careers today will eventually require additional education, and to encourage first-generation college students in particular to consider those possibilities early in their collegiate careers so they can begin to prepare for graduate or professional school exams and to be sure they have the appropriate GPAs.

Best practices. When asked for recommendations for advisors working with first-generation college students, there were a number of best practices suggested by

the participants. If available, advisors should take advantage of any data regarding first-generation student status or other relevant data provided by the institution and record this information somewhere in the student information system or the student file.

Participants also reiterated the need for advisors to be seen by students as a trusted support system, especially by those students, like first-generation college students, who may not be able to ask their parents for advice and assistance. This can be accomplished by advisors reaching out early and often to students.

Faculty members were also suggested as a source of support and mentoring for first-generation college students, but only those faculty members who understand the needs of first-generation college students. Special training for both professional academic advisors and faculty advisors was also suggested.

Because the parents of first-generation college students have little or no personal experience with college, participants also suggested holding a special orientation session or meeting for them. This time could be used to help prepare parents for the changes that their students are likely to experience as new college students and to equip them to best support their students as they transition to college.

Talking about future plans, such as graduate or professional school, was also discussed as a best practice since many first-generation college students are unaware that they may need additional educational credentials or training at some point in their chosen career paths.

One institution had a learning community, which included first-generation college students, which was administered by one of the participants. The goal of the

learning community was to normalize being first-generation and reduce the perceived stigma.

Resources or programs. I asked what resources were available for first-generation college students, and the participants all said that while their institutions already provided a number of resources for students, the main challenge was convincing first-generation college students to take advantage of them. The participants did not suggest any particular new programs or resources, but rather provided ideas to encourage students to take advantage of tutoring, writing assistance and faculty mentoring that is already available.

Learning communities are already available on many campuses, but one of the institutions offers a learning community for students from first-generation, low-income or single-parent homes.

Summary

In this chapter, the five institutions and 10 participants were introduced, then the three major themes and accompanying sub-themes were discussed.

The next chapter will review these findings in relation to the previous literature on first-generation college students and academic advising. How this research addresses the gap in previous research and implications for practice in academic advising is also discussed, as are suggestions for future research.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Conclusion

Extensive prior research has been conducted on first-generation college students, and numerous researchers have suggested academic advising as one strategy to assist first-generation college students in their transition to college (Adelman, 2006; DiMaria, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez, 2005; Thayer, 2000). Much of the previous research on first-generation college students has been quantitative in nature or has focused on the students themselves; this study sought to bring a new qualitative perspective by interviewing academic advisors who have been both first-generation college students and who advise first-generation college students now as professional academic advisors.

Through qualitative interviews with 10 academic advisors who were also first-generation college students, this study was designed to learn about the experiences of the participants as first-generation college students as well as their experiences now as academic advisors who advise first-generation college students. The 10 participants shared some remarkably similar stories about their experiences in higher education over a time frame that spanned decades, and offered suggestions about how academic advisors, faculty members and institutions may better serve first-generation college students through academic advising and other programs.

This study found three main themes and several subsidiary themes. The main themes found were: role as an advisor, characteristics of first-generation college

students and relationship to cultural capital model. This chapter will address how these themes relate to the previous literature, how this study addresses the gap in the published literature, limitations of the research design, implications of the research for advisors, institutions and graduate programs, and suggestions for future research.

Analysis- Literature

There has been a great deal of prior research conducted on first-generation college students. Much of the previous literature focused on the quantitative aspects of first-generation college students in higher education. The relative dearth of qualitative research, especially that incorporating academic advising of first-generation college students, was the point of this study. The results of the current research confirmed some previous findings, but also led to new ideas and perspectives not previously mentioned in the literature reviewed by the author.

The major themes found in this research were role as an advisor, characteristics of first-generation college students and relationship to cultural capital model.

Role of an advisor.

Identifying who is a first-generation college student. Davis (2010) argued that higher education needs to adopt a simplified definition of who exactly is a first-generation college student as currently accepted definitions can vary widely. There are a wide variety of definitions used within the literature, and there is not currently one accepted definition. In this study, a first-generation college student was defined a student for whom neither parent has a bachelor's degree, although one or both may have had some college experience or a degree less than a bachelor's.

The participants expressed frustration with the fact that many of their institutions do not collect this data for advisors. All except one of the participants said that they had to find out if their students were first-generation or not primarily through conversations with students. Only one participant, Shirley, said that her institution provided some information on whether students were first-generation or not, and that was only because she was the administrator of a learning community for at-risk students, including first-generation college students.

All of the participants said it would be easier in many cases to be able to readily identify who is a first-generation college student without having to engage in conversational gymnastics to avoid offending a student who might be embarrassed or ashamed of their family educational background.

Make connections with the student. Several researchers advocated for intensive academic advising support for first-generation college students (Adelman, 2006; DiMaria, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996; Thayer, 2000), but little research was found that described exactly what this means in practice.

The participants of this study were in a unique position to describe exactly how they thought academic advising could help first-generation college students, and they overwhelmingly all said that a personal connection between the student and advisor was key. This personal relationship and connection can vary in tone, but the important point for all 10 participants was that this connection be established early in the student's academic career. Sam said that this is the single most important part of his advising practice because it allows him to ask questions of and to challenge his students.

Without the personal relationship, students may not trust him and are less likely to come to him with big or small questions and concerns.

All of the participants said that they believe that effective advising has the potential to be of great personal, professional and academic benefit to students. However, making connections with first-generation college students during the first year is key to retaining students to their second and subsequent years since first-generation college students are at a higher risk of leaving college than their peers (Adelman, 2006; Ishitani, 2006; Thayer, 2000). The participants agreed that the advising relationship and personal connection should be established as soon as possible, possibly even before the student has formally matriculated by focusing on orientation or pre-college experiences with academic advising. This is in line with suggestions from the literature that interventions be implemented early in order to be most effective (DiMaria, 2008; Thayer, 2000).

Role of mentors. Cushman (2007) found that programs that connected first-generation college students to faculty members outside of class helped with the transition of first-generation college students to college. Similarly, Terenzini et. al. (1996) discussed the need for first-generation college students to interact with faculty, staff and administrators who valued them as worthwhile learners because of their backgrounds, not in spite of it. Several participants discussed the need for mentoring especially for first-generation college students.

Former Army officer Frank said that he goes out of his way to explain to students, first-generation college students in particular, that he is there not just as their academic advisor but also as mentor, and that he can help to answer many different types of

questions. Several other advisors said that they work to connect students with faculty mentors in the intended major.

However, only one participant, Don Juan, reported having had mentoring experiences with faculty members as an undergraduate first-generation college student. The other participants typically said that while they see the value in this type of relationship now, they reported that they did not have that experience personally. The ages of the participants varied greatly, and Don Juan was one of the younger participants and had only recently graduated from college, so one can hope that faculty mentoring relationships are becoming more prevalent on campuses.

Advising best practices. Inkelas et. al. (2007) investigated the role of living-learning programs on first-generation college students' perceptions of transitions to college and found that those first-generation college students enrolled in living-learning communities reported more positive transitions. Shirley at Cardinal State University runs a learning community specifically for first-generation college students, low-income students and/or students from single parent homes to help normalize these characteristics and reduce the stigma of these backgrounds within the group. While it is a new program and she did not have data to share at the time the interviews were conducted, she said that most students who participated in the learning community persisted at the university.

Characteristics of first-generation college students.

Family connections. Family connections were found to be an important factor for first-generation in the literature, both positive and negative (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; London, 1989; Nunez, 2005). This research confirmed

this. Eight of the 10 participants said that their family members were significant, positive influences on their decisions to pursue higher education. Only two, Sam and Rose, said that their family members were neutral or negative influences.

Most of the participants spoke of their families' pride when they began college and their emotional support even if they could not necessarily provide financial support. Isabella said that her parents were always exceptionally proud of her for being the first in the family to go to college. Sarah explained that her parents really did not understand what she was doing in college, but they were always supportive of her, whether by providing her with a free place to live while in school or giving her emotional support. Likewise, Frank's mother gave him a place to live when he was initially enrolling in college for the first time after leaving the Army the first time.

Only two of the participants reported that their family members were not at least emotionally supportive. Sam's parents did not see the need for a college education since they were successful without it, but they were not overtly disapproving either. They simply did not quite understand why he felt the need to go to college to be successful. Rose's mother suffered from multiple mental illnesses, which may have also contributed to her very unsupportive behavior when Rose decided to go to college on a basketball scholarship.

Several researchers have found that found that many first-generation college students remained very connected with both their immediate and extended families (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Nunez, 2005). Most of the participants in this study reported being in close contact with their parents at least, and several with siblings and extended family as well, while they were in college. They also

said that many of their first-generation advisees said that they talk to their family members regularly.

Nunez (2005) discussed how many first-generation college students struggle with how often they should go home, especially during their first few semesters in college when they are still establishing an identity at college. Sam, Don Juan and J. Edward all explicitly discussed how important it is for first-generation college students in particular to be able to create a new community and sense of identity on campus. Sam specifically said that he advises all students, but especially first-generation college students, to avoid going home during the first few months on campus if at all possible to allow them time to make friends, join clubs and generally get involved on campus. If students are gone every weekend, they are not likely to be as involved on campus and they are more likely to leave college in Sam's experience.

Several previous studies have suggested family or parent orientation programs geared towards the parents of first-generation college students (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Nunez, 2005). Several of the participants of this study also suggested programs geared towards assisting families and parents to understand the new roles and demands of their student. Isabella and Chastity said that they enjoy working with parents when possible, and that they try to educate parents about these shifting roles. Sometimes parents are not aware of how different things are in college, and they do not understand that they cannot call a professor and ask for a parent-teacher conference if their student does not do well on a test. An orientation session for the parents of first-generation college students could help answer some of these

questions or provide information on how parents and families can provide emotional support without overwhelming first-generation college students.

Financial challenges. Prior research has shown that more first-generation (50%) than continuing-generation (7%) are classified as low-income students (Chen, 2005). Other researcher has demonstrated that first-generation college students are likely to have to work at least part-time while in college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001). Most of the participants of this study, all of whom were first-generation college students themselves, reported financial challenges, and most also reported working at least some of the time while they were in college. Sarah reported that some semesters, she was working almost full-time while also trying to juggle school and extra-curricular activities.

Douglass and Thomason (2008) found that only one in three Pell Grant recipients in The University of California system were first-generation college students, but the participants in this study said that their current first-generation college student advisees seem much more likely to come from lower income homes than continuing-generation students. So while it is possible for a first-generation college student to come from a comfortable or affluent home, it was not a common occurrence for the participants. The more common scenario was for a first-generation college student to also have at least some degree of financial need and for many first-generation college students to need to work while in college to help support themselves.

Relationship to cultural capital model.

Cushman (2007) reported that some first-generation college students expressed feeling like outsiders on campus due to a number of reasons, including speech patterns.

Several of the participants reported feeling like outsiders on campus; Isabella described hiding in her car in the parking lot rather than sit in the library or other facilities because she felt like she did not belong. Shirley said that she still feels like she doesn't have the correct academic vocabulary to fit in with faculty members on her campus.

Several participants said that first-generation college students have a disadvantage when it comes to vocabulary and language skills. For Sarah, who advises pre-health professions students, she says it becomes very apparent when students take the pre-professional exams and first-generation college students tend to not score as highly on the verbal and writing sections as continuing-generation students. Her only prescription for this is for students to expose themselves to higher-level vocabulary by reading more. Other advisors also noted the disparity in vocabulary and said that they encourage first-generation college students to read extensively, attend fine arts and cultural events and travel, especially internationally, when possible.

Addressing the Gap

Extensive prior research has been conducted on first-generation college students, but most of this has been quantitative in nature or focused on understanding the experiences of first-generation college students. Few studies were found to date that examined specifically the role of academic advising in assisting first-generation college students, despite the fact that numerous researchers have suggested academic advising as a strategy to help first-generation college students to successfully transition to college and to persist and eventually graduate from college (Adelman, 2006; DiMaria, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez, 2005; Thayer, 2000).

This study sought to explore this gap in the literature by interviewing practicing academic advisors who are also first-generation college students to learn about their experiences as first-generation college students and their practice as advisors to first-generation college students now. This study qualitatively describes the myriad ways in which academic advisors interact with first-generation college students, and how that interactions and engagement with students may serve as a means to provide support to a statistically at-risk population of students.

A second goal of this study was to provide a list of practical ways that academic advisors, institutions and graduate programs can prepare advising practitioners for working directly with first-generation college students. The participants in this study described their own backgrounds and experiences in higher education as well as their experiences with and personal advising practice as they advise first-generation college students. Their experiences may be able to help future advisors and administrators to develop advising programs that will best meet the needs of first-generation college students.

Limitations

As with any research project, there are limitations. The intentional design of this study created some limitations by focusing on a specific subset of academic advisors—those who were also first-generation college students. Some of these limitations may be addressed in future research by expanding the participant pool to include a wider selection of participants.

Another limitation to this study was the geographic limitation of the participants. While there was ethnic and gender diversity among the 10 participants, each one was

selected from within North Carolina. Expanding the geography to include a greater range would increase the diversity of the participants and thus the potential applicability of the results to other regions of the United States.

Also, the decision was made for convenience's sake to focus primarily on master's comprehensive and Baccalaureate-level institutions rather than doctoral and research-intensive institutions. Again, expanding the selection criteria to include additional types of institutions would increase the types of advisors and types of advising represented in the study.

This study focused exclusively on professional academic advisors who have advising as their primary job duty rather than faculty members who advise students in addition to instructional activities. Future studies might also include a mix of professional and faculty advisors to incorporate additional perspectives on advising first-generation college students.

All of the participants came from institutions with academic advising models which emphasized professional academic advising at the freshman-sophomore level before students typically move to faculty advisors at the junior-senior level once they declare a major; this was not an intentional design component and likely stemmed from the fact that all participants were from within the same state university system and thus had similarities in structure. Expanding the participant pool to include advisors coming from other types of advising models may yield new insights and opinions that were not discussed by advisors coming from this type of advising model.

Finally, almost all of the participants are special populations advisors; two advise student-athletes, two advise ROTC/ veteran students, two advise at-risk students

and one advises pre-health professions majors. Only 3 of the 10 participants work with general student populations. Advising special populations, which may include first-generation college students, may mean that these advisors have different experiences than a general advisor, although this was not found to be the case with this set of participants.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was cultural capital model, first articulated by Bourdieu and Passeron in 1977, and extrapolated to higher education in particular by Oldfield (2007). Cultural capital focuses on the role of three specific areas: social, linguistic and cultural. Students from less educated homes typically come to college with lower levels of cultural capital, and must gain this cultural capital while in college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

This model worked well for this research. The participants stated that, in general, they felt that first-generation college students did in fact come to college with fewer experiences with fine arts events and with fewer travel experiences than continuing-generation college students. Several advisors, including Sarah, Sam and Don Juan, said that first-generation college students have less impressive vocabularies and command of English grammar and usage than students from more educated homes. The results of this research in regards to cultural capital fit with the conceptual framework of cultural capital model.

One element that might be added for future research in higher education would be administrative or bureaucratic knowledge. First-generation college students do not have the background knowledge regarding the language of higher education,

admissions practices, the culture of higher education or how to network and interact with faculty and staff (Bergenson, 2007). This is partially considered under language, but it extends far beyond simple linguistics. It is the framework of how higher education functions, and this is a challenge that many first-generation college students struggle to overcome. Many first-generation college students do not know how to apply for scholarships or when to begin preparing to apply for admission for college. They do not know what office hours are or how to approach faculty members to discuss their progress in a course. Having a low-risk area in which they can ask these questions and gain additional knowledge and skills in administrative practices in higher education could increase their comfort with this side of higher education.

Another element that might be addressed would be the pop culture side of contemporary media. While the cultural capital model as described by Bourdieu and Passeron considers high cultural activities, such as theatre, it does not incorporate popular culture, such as television, movies and music. As Rose attested, for many first-generation college students, their pre-college knowledge comes not from parents or family members who can explain about college life, but from watching television shows and movies that depict college and college students. Unfortunately, these depictions may not be entirely accurate for the types of institutions at which students will ultimately enroll. However, the fact that first-generation college students have this type of knowledge about college cannot be ignored because it directly impacts their beliefs and expectations about college and their role as a college student.

Implications

This research yielded three main areas of implications: for academic advisors, for institutions and for graduate programs. These are discussed below.

For academic advisors. For the professional or faculty academic advisor, the participants overwhelmingly reported that establishing a personal connection early in the students' academic careers was of paramount importance.

However, before advisors can work on establishing a relationship with students, the institution must first identify who exactly is a first-generation college student. While there is no definitive definition of the term first-generation college student at present, Davis (2010) advocates for a general definition that a first-generation college student is a student for whom neither parent or guardian has obtained a four-year college degree, although they may have attended some college or graduated with a two-year degree.

This data may be collected in a number of different ways. Most of the participants said that they determined information about generational status from conversations with students. Only Shirley said that some degree of information regarding generational status was provided to her by the institution. My institution asks students about their parents' highest level of education completed as part of the application, and this information is available to all advisors who seek it in our digital student information system, although it is a bit difficult to find.

Some of the participants said they simply asked the students about their parents' educational attainment while most relied on less direct conversations. Advisors may consider asking students about their motivation to come to college, what attracted them

to the specific institution, why they are considering a specific major or career path or other questions that may encourage students to indicate whether or not their parents attended college. However, it has been my experience that sometimes simply asking students if their parents have told them very much about college will garner a detailed response that has not as of yet seemed to upset a student. Sometimes they will reply that their parents never went to college, in which case I know that they are a first-generation college student, or perhaps I will be told that their mom went to college but never really said much about it, and so I'll know that the student is not technically a first-generation college student, but may still have some questions. Each advisor will have to find questions or conversation starters that work with their personal style, comfort level and the culture at their institution.

Regardless of how the information is gathered, once a student is identified as first-generation, the participants felt it was important that advisors consider documenting this somewhere in the student's file. The majority of the participants stated that they relied on their memory and their empathy with first-generation college students to help them to remember who is first-generation and who is not. It seems potentially unwise to rely solely on memory. Advisors can forget, and they can and do take other positions. Also, depending on the advising model, students may be assigned to a different advisor if they change intended majors or once they formally declare a major, and the new advisor would not have the background knowledge to know that this student was first-generation and may need additional assistance or encouragement on occasion.

Several of the participants stated that they were afraid of stigmatizing students if they documented their first-generation college student status. Only Don Juan specifically described what one stigma could be when he said that he believed that some people might have lowered expectations for first-generation college students. However, given the lower persistence and graduation rates for first-generation college students, it is also not inconceivable that administrators could use generational status as a factor in deciding how to allocate limited resources and choose to fund programs or students who are statistically more likely to be retained than those who are theoretically at risk. While this may be a concern, the potential benefits in having advisors who understand their needs as a first-generation college student may outweigh the potential risks. Advisors would need to consider the climate at their institution to determine whether or not this is true on their campus, so it should be carefully considered before any action is taken.

If there is any danger of a negative stigma for first-generation college students, advisors might consider using a code or symbols that could serve as a reminder to the advisor that the student is a first-generation college student, but that wouldn't clearly identify them as such to others who might review their file. A star, exclamation point, yellow dot or any other symbol or code could be employed as long as it was used consistently to designate first-generation college students.

However, advisors should consider asking the student whether he or she would want to be identified in such a way in their file and explain how it might assist with advising in the future so the advisor could help to ensure that they were taking advantage of appropriate resources and opportunities on campus. This leads to a

secondary issue, which is that some first-generation college students may not realize that their status makes them more statistically at-risk, and that telling them that they are more likely to need assistance or to have problems. This could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where first-generation college students then expect to do poorly and subsequently do not do well in college because they don't believe they can succeed.

As this study only involved academic advisors and not current students, advisors will need to carefully consider both the pros and cons of documenting a students' generational status. The participants in this study were first-generation college students themselves, but they were no longer students, so their recommendations that a students' generational status be noted may not be confirmed by research conducted with current first-generation college students. Students may be consulted before any notation is made, or ideally the institution as a whole could articulate a comprehensive policy regarding identifying first-generation college students that would incorporate input from first-generation college students.

Once advisors know who is a first-generation college student, it is especially important to establish a personal connection early in the students' academic careers. Since many first-generation college students do not return to college for their second year (Adelman, 2006; Cushman, 2007; Ishitani, 2006), it is vital that this connection be established in the first year, and preferably in the first semester or earlier (DiMaria, 2006; Thayer, 2000).

All 10 of the participants in this research were very clear about the importance of this personal connection. It need not necessarily be a friend-type relationship, but all of the advisors stated unequivocally that first-generation college students need to feel a

sense of personal connection with their advisor in order to be able to trust their advice and to be comfortable coming to them with questions or concerns.

To foster this relationship, advisors may need to have more frequent meetings with advisees, particularly those most at risk, such as first-generation college students. In a time when advising loads are increasing, this may not always be easy, but personal relationships cannot be established overnight or without time and effort. Sam said that he meets with all new freshmen at least three times during their first semester, which allows him to develop that relationship.

If advising loads are too large to allow longer, one-on-one meetings, advisors could consider small group meetings, shorter meetings just to check in and see how the semester is progressing, peer mentors or other strategies that would allow first-generation college students to know that the advisor cares and is available, but is not so intrusive to be off-putting for students. In the future, technological innovations may also help with this, but the participants were not able to recommend any programs that substantially improved advising practice, just the logistics of scheduling appointments or recording advising notes.

Several of the participants reported using peer mentors for a variety of reasons. Peer mentors were typically described as upperclass students who received training to help answer questions and direct students towards appropriate resources. Peer mentors can help answer routine questions, and may be less threatening than an advisor, especially with questions about social interaction, but the peer mentor would be trained to know when to refer questions to the advisor or to other resources, such as the student counseling center. If there are too many students in the advising load to

make multiple one-on-one appointments feasible, peer mentoring programs might be a viable alternative that would provide first-generation college students with ample support from their more experienced peers, while also allowing them advice and assistance from an academic advisor when necessary and appropriate. In Sarah's case, her peer mentors are also pre-health professions students who are enthusiastic about helping younger pre-health majors to learn what they need to know to be successful.

The 10 participants in this study said that their shared experiences and empathy as a first-generation college student allowed them to understand the benefits and challenges of being a first-generation college student. However, an advisor who was a continuing-generation college student can also be an effective and sympathetic advisor to first-generation college students with proper training. My institution requires advising training for both new undeclared student advisors and faculty advisors, so adding a unit on the special characteristics of first-generation college students may help continuing-generation advisors, or the first-generation college student advisor like Frank who did not realize they were a first-generation college student, to understand the characteristics and needs of this group of students.

The participants also stated that they saw a difference generally in the enthusiasm levels between first-generation and continuing-generation college students. Since the majority of college students will at some point face a crisis of faith and start to question whether or not their efforts in academia will ultimately be worth it, advisors need to harness this enthusiasm and excitement at being in college to help sustain first-generation college students when doubts being. One strategy suggested by the participants would be to ask first-generation college students to discuss why they are in

college to try to get them thinking about why they are “breaking, not continuing, family tradition” (Terenzini et. al., 1994, p. 63) by coming to college. If students can remind themselves why they are in college, perhaps they can regain some of that initial excitement and pride at their accomplishments when they feel overwhelmed.

The participants also said that their families were mostly very proud of them for going to and graduating from college, even though they often did not understand exactly what it meant to be a college student. So involving parents and family to the extent possible under privacy regulations may also help to keep students focused on the ultimate goal of graduating from college when challenges arise.

It is inevitable that students will face a challenge or two in college. From angst about choosing a major to not doing well in a specific class, almost all students face academic stumbling blocks at some point, and first-generation college students face greater transition issues as a group than continuing-generation students (Billson & Terry, 1982). When students need additional support, the participants said that first-generation college students in particular need specific, concrete referrals to resources. Rather than simply referring them to the writing center, several of the participants refer them to a specific person in the writing center whom they know will be willing to sit down and address the student’s problems with them. Isabella and Chastity both usually have the student make the initial appointment while in the office with them, and will make them write it down in their planner or program a reminder into their phone so they will not forget. Isabella asks students to email her back after the initial appointment to let her know how it went, and she will email them if she does not hear from them within a reasonable time frame to make sure they attended.

Several participants said that it can be overwhelming to be given multiple referrals during a single advising appointment, so advisors should be careful to not scare students who may already be feeling slightly dazed by their new environment. Students do not know how beneficial many student support resources can be until they go, but they are either afraid to go or do not realize how helpful it can be to go. In many cases, advisors cannot force students to get tutoring or to go to counseling except in extreme circumstances, but can be careful to explain why it can be beneficial and explain that these are not just for students who are failing or are in danger or flunking out of college.

Don Juan was also adamant that students who need any type of assistance should be offered referrals to these resources, not just the ones in danger of doing poorly. He did well academically, but said that he could have made As in some classes where he made Bs if he had known about tutoring or other academic resources. Advisors should be careful to make sure that the students who are doing adequately or even well academically are also aware of the academic support services as well as students who may need them to avoid being on academic probation.

For institutions. Given that 47% of all students in contemporary American higher education are first-generation college students (Engle, 2007), most educational institutions will have a significant number of first-generation college students among the student body. Therefore, institutions might also wish to consider institution-wide policies to address the disparity between first-generation and continuing-generation college students.

Many institutions, including my own, have developed special coding systems for special population students, such as student-athletes, Honors students, students on probation, et cetera. Institutions should consider viewing first-generation college students as a special population of their own and code them accordingly in the digital student information system. This would allow for advisors, faculty, administrators, institutional research personnel and others with a vested interest to quickly identify who is a first-generation college student. Advisors and faculty would save time having to try to delicately determine students' generational status without asking directly if they are uncomfortable with such a direct conversation, and it would allow for tracking of first-generation college students as a cohort for research purposes.

Institutions may also wish to consider implementing special advising programs for the parents of first-generation college students. Prior research has suggested this strategy (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Nunez, 2005), as did several of the participants. Because parents of first-generation college students have little or no personal experience with college life themselves, they may have unrealistic expectations about life in college or what their role can be. In an era where parents of college students have limited access to information outside of what their students choose to tell them, this can be a challenge for some parents after the much more accommodating atmosphere of K-12 education, and this can lead to anger and resentment on the part of parents. I have personal experience with trying to explain FERPA (Federal Educational Rights to Privacy Act) privacy policies to parents who do not realize that as their students are considered legal adults now, they do not have the same rights to grade information, schedules and access to professors as they did when

their students were in high school. Providing this information at the beginning rather than having to deny them information when they are demanding it might keep tempers calmer and help parents to understand how different their role is now.

In addition to providing special orientation programs for the parents of first-generation college students, institutions should also consider including special training for advisors and faculty members who will interact with first-generation college students. Most of the advisors interviewed for this research did not report positive mentoring experiences personally with faculty members when they were in college. Because of their poor personal experiences, they stated that they are somewhat leery of referring students to faculty members unless they already know that the faculty member understands the unique challenges of being a first-generation college student. Previous research has found that faculty mentoring can be a positive experience in retaining first-generation college students (Cushman, 2007; Terenzini et. al., 1996). However, the challenge will be in recruiting faculty, staff and administrators to serve in this capacity when the demands on the time of the faculty continue to grow while the number of hours in the workday remain the same.

Institutions could also implement a student center or lounge specifically for first-generation college students. Personally, I did not know what the term first-generation college student meant when I was in college, and Frank reported the same experience and a total lack of familiarity with the term first-generation college student until he was in graduate school. Isabella said that she would often sit in her car during breaks in her day because she did not feel welcome on campus as a commuter student. Many institutions now have facilities on campus for ethnic minorities, GLBT students and

other special populations, so why not have a space or center designed for students who make up almost half of all college students (Engle, 2007)? This would allow first-generation college students the opportunity to meet other first-generation college students and recognize that they are not alone. Simply understanding that I was not the only person confused by academic language and unclear about my future would have helped me to feel much more comfortable in college. This center could have hours when an advisor, peer mentors or faculty member cognizant of and empathetic about first-generation college student issues was available to answer questions or provide support. At the very least, students would realize that there are a substantial number of students like them at the institution, and they may be more inclined to seek answers to their questions at such a center.

Learning communities have been suggested as a means to assist with the transition to college for first-generation college students (Inkelas et. al., 2007), and one participant, Shirley, is testing this with a learning community at her institution, Cardinal State University. Further research is needed in this area, but this is a promising area for institutions to explore to help first-generation college students to successful transition to college.

For graduate programs. Many graduate programs in higher education, educational leadership and student affairs practice have courses on special populations of students, such as minorities and GLBT students, in particular. As first-generation college students comprise almost half of all college students (Engle, 2007), they may be considered one of the largest special population student groups at most institutions; first-generation college students will also likely be included in all other special

populations groups. Therefore, graduate programs focusing on student development or higher education may wish to consider adding a unit on the benefits, challenges and needs of first-generation college students to the curricula of these programs.

Future Research

Future research on this topic might be expanded to address some of the limitations of this study and to expand this study for future researchers.

Future researchers may consider recruiting advisors who are not themselves first-generation college students to see if they have different thoughts or perspectives on advising first-generation college students. To the best of my knowledge, there is no research on how many academic advisors were first-generation college students. Realistically, many academic advisors who advise first-generation college students will not have been first-generation college students themselves, and these advisors may have important points of view to be considered as well.

Since the majority of the advisors in this study were predominantly special populations advisors (7 of the 10), future research may focus primarily on general advisors who do not advise a special population of students. Researchers could then investigate whether general populations advisors see a major difference in advising first-generation and continuing-generation college students and their advising needs. Alternatively, some researchers may instead wish to focus more specifically on special populations, such as particular ethnic groups, genders, or particular backgrounds, such as veterans, who are statistically more likely to be first-generation college students rather than a more broadly defined group of first-generation college student advisors.

This study was intentionally limited to advisors in the University of North Carolina public higher education system to ensure that I would be able to meet with each participant in person to conduct face-to-face interviews. Expanding the participant pool geographically may yield new ideas from advisors who are not a part of the UNC system.

This study relied on the advisors describing their advising practice. Future researchers could observe advising sessions with the advisor and students. Researchers may observe and possibly record sessions with only first-generation college students or with a mix of first-generation and continuing-generation college students to glean whether there are differences between how the advisor interacts with students or with the types of questions and needs of the two groups of students.

Researchers could also interview first-generation college students themselves about their advising needs and transitions to college. This has been done before in several cases; combining qualitative interviews with students and advisors may help to provide a more complete picture to researchers interested in conducting more research on this topic.

For this particular topic, I chose to interview practicing academic advisors. Researchers more interested in the administrative side of advising first-generation college student might find it more useful to interview academic advising administrators, such as directors of academic advising or deans who supervise general undergraduate advising on campus to learn about how personnel and resources are allocated for advising special populations of students, including first-generation college students.

Conclusion

Through qualitative interviews with 10 academic advisors who were also first-generation college students, this study sought to understand the role of academic advising with first-generation college students and to identify some of the ways in which academic advising can help first-generation college students to successful transition to college. Three major themes emerged from the experiences of the participants: role as an advisor, characteristics of first-generation college students and relationship to cultural capital model, the conceptual framework of this study.

These themes tie back to the extensive previous research that has been conducted on first-generation college students in American higher education, and also provided suggestions for advising practice and institutional policy in regards to advising first-generation college students.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about yourself.
 - a. Personal and family history
 - b. Academic history
2. What was it like for you as a first-generation college student when you were in college?
 - a. Benefits
 - b. Challenges
 - c. Support systems
3. What is it like for you now as an academic advisor of first-generation college students?
 - a. Personal connection/ empathy
 - b. Providing support/ resources
4. Because you have experienced being part of this population from both sides (student and advisor), what do you think are the best practices for advising first-generation college students?
 - a. Benefits/ challenges of being a first-generation college student?
 - b. How can academic advisors support first-generation college students?
 - c. What other resources on campus do you use or recommend?
 - d. What documents (electronic or print) do you use with first-generation college students?

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval

To: Angela Mead
Honors College
CAMPUS MAIL

From: Robin Tyndall, Institutional Review Board

Date: 1/18/2011

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

Study #: 11-0173

Sponsors: NACADA Research Grants Program

Study Title: First-generation college students and academic advising: Words of wisdom from academic advisors

Exemption Category: (2) Anonymous Educational Tests; Surveys, Interviews or Observations,(4) Collection or Study of Existing Data, If Public or Unable to Identify Subjects

This submission has been reviewed by the IRB Office and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b). Should you change any aspect of the proposal, you must contact the IRB before implementing the changes to make sure the exempt status continues to apply. Otherwise, you do not need to request an annual renewal of IRB approval. Please notify the IRB Office when you have completed the study.

Best wishes with your research!

CC:
Cecil Killacky, Leadership And Edu Studies

Appendix C: Informed Consent



Consent to Participate in Research *Information to Consider About this Research*

First-generation college students and academic advising: Words of wisdom from academic advisors

Principal Investigator: Angela D. Mead, doctoral student
Department: Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, Appalachian State University
Contact Information: ASU Box 32073
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(828) 262-2580

Faculty advisor: Dr. Jim Killacky, director of Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership
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What is the purpose of this research?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about academic advising and first-generation college students, who are college students for whom neither of their parents ever received a Bachelor's degree from a college. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 10 people to do so. By doing this study we hope to learn about the experiences of academic advisors who were first-generation college students, and how academic advising can help first-generation college students to succeed in college.

What will I be asked to do?

The research procedures will be conducted in your town. You will be visited there 1 time during the study. This visit will take about 90-120 minutes (1.5 to 2 hours). You may also be contacted by phone or email if there are any follow up questions after the interview. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is about 2 hours over the next 2 months.

You will be asked first to submit a short, written biography of your personal life and your educational experience to make sure you meet all of the criteria and for the study. You will participate in a one-on-one, face-to-face interview about your experiences as a first-generation college student and now as an academic advisor. These interviews will be recorded and notes will be taken that will help with reviewing the interview data later. You will be asked about your background and educational history, your experiences as a first-generation college student, your experiences as an academic advisor and any suggestions or thoughts you have about how academic advisors can help first-generation college students to succeed in college. You will also

be asked to share any documents or websites that you think are helpful in advising first-generation college students.

You should not volunteer for this study if are under 18 years of age, if you are not currently an academic advisor at a college and if you were not a first-generation college student. You should also not volunteer if you were not in college as a student within the last 15 years.

What are possible harms or discomforts that I might experience during the research?

To the best of our knowledge, the risk of harm for participating in this research study is no more than you would experience in everyday life.

Some of the answers you provide may be very personal. Your answers will be kept confidential and you will be assigned a pseudonym in the write up of this research. Your name and the name of your institution will not be identified. It is very unlikely but not impossible that someone could determine that you participated in this research study.

What are the possible benefits of this research?

The results of this study will be shared once it is completed, and you may find some of the academic advising suggestions and documents to be useful in your work as an academic advisor. There may be no personal benefit from your participation but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

This study should help us learn about how academic advisors can help first-generation college students to do better in and to graduate from college.

Will I be paid for taking part in the research?

You will not be paid for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

How will you keep my private information confidential?

The information that you share will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. The write up of this study will be about all of the volunteers' combined information. You will not be identified in any published or presented materials unless you have specifically given permission to identify your name.

Your name and personal information will not be shared with anyone who is not on the research team. You will be assigned a pseudonym in the interviews and in the write up of the data. Only the research team will have access the list of real names and pseudonyms, and it will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team. This list will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be password-protected on my computer.

You will only be referred to by your pseudonym. The institution that you work at now will be identified by generic information and not specifically by name. Information will not be included

that a reasonable person could use in identifying you specifically as a participant in this research study.

However, there are some circumstances in which your information may be shared with other people. Information that identifies you may be shared with people who ensure that we have done the research correctly, such as Appalachian's Institutional Review Board and the research funding agency.

Once your name and institution name are removed from any documents and the recorded interview, the data collected will be stored indefinitely on a computer. Only the research team will have the list that gives your real name with your pseudonym, and that will be destroyed two years after this research study is completed. Information collected during this study may be used again in future research studies, but no one will know that any information came from you.

Who can I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be available to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at (828) 262-2580 or by email at meadad@appstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, contact the Appalachian Institutional Review Board Administrator at 828-262-2130 (days), through email at irb@appstate.edu or at Appalachian State University, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, IRB Administrator, Boone, NC 28608.

Do I have to participate? What else should I know?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you choose not to volunteer, there will be no penalty and you will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have. If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. There will be no penalty and no loss of benefits or rights if you decide at any time to stop participating in the study.

Sometimes the researchers may determine that your participation is no longer needed. You will be notified if you should no longer participate in this study.

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board of Appalachian State University. This study was approved on January 18, 2011. This approval will expire on January 17, 2012, unless the IRB renews the approval of this research.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should indicate your agreement:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I understand that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- I understand I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Vita

Angela D. Mead was born in North Carolina and raised by her single father, Joe. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a Bachelor of Arts degree in communications in May 2003 and began graduate studies at Appalachian State University immediately, graduating with a Master of Arts degree in Higher Education Administration in May 2005. She began her doctoral studies in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University in summer 2006.

She has worked with both at-risk and high achieving populations of students and currently serves as the Honors Advising Coordinator in the Honors College at Appalachian State University.

Ms. Mead has presented nationally on first-generation college students and honors students as well as the intersection of the two special populations of students. She received a National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) research grant to help fund her dissertation research on academic advising of first-generation college students.

She lives in Boone, North Carolina with her family.