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My Presence is a Disruption for Good is a qualitative research study that explored the experiences of critically minded, first-generation higher education administrators and their work supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. As the number of first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions continues to grow, senior leaders have dedicated administrative roles and institutional resources to support students from families where neither parent nor guardian obtained a 4-year college degree. Many of the administrators in new roles identify as first-generation college students and due to their backgrounds and experiences, they approach their work with a critical orientation. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to explore the experiences of first-generation administrators. Using basic qualitative methods, I conducted individual interviews with 20 critically minded, first-generation administrators representing 15 highly selective institutions. I used a thematic analysis and identified three themes and 11 subthemes informed by Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2004) institutional and empowerment agent and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth frameworks. Findings showed first-generation administrators demonstrated an unwavering commitment to supporting minoritized students and engaged on various levels, to disrupt practices, policies, and procedures to advance equitable student success outcomes and drive institutional change. Administrators' stories suggested their diverse knowledge and first-generation college student experiences motivated and informed their work approach, drawing from asset-based practices and disruptive strategies, to center first-generation college students. Recommendations and implications for future research and practice can enhance support for first-generation college student success.

MY PRESENCE IS A DISRUPTION FOR GOOD: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION ADMINISTRATORS AT HIGHLY SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS

by

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Dr. Silvia C. Bettez
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the 20 first-generation administrators who contributed to this research project and the many champions (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) working to advocate, empower, and advance racial equity and first-generation college student success in higher education and beyond.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Shakima M. Clency has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

> The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.
>
> —Baldwin, 1963

In the summer of 2018, I attended the annual First-Generation, Lower-Income (FGLI) Consortium Administrator Colloquium**,** which brings together a small group of administrators overseeing programs and resources to support FGLI students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities in the United States. Highly selective institutions have unique characteristics and practices that include rigorous admissions criteria, very low acceptance rates, and abundant resources compared to other institutional types (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Arum et al., 2008; Chetty et al., 2017; Jack, 2019; Jerrim et al., 2015). The Consortium launched in 2017 as a national organization to provide leadership, expertise, and resources to develop and serve administrators who work directly with the FGLI student population through knowledge sharing, advocacy, and relationship building. Through the Consortium, I have engaged in personal reflection activities and discussions with other administrators who identify as first-generation college students and think critically about their roles to support student success and drive institutional change.

The following spring, I attended the annual IvyG student and administrator conference, where remarks were provided by scholar Anthony Jack, author of the highly acclaimed book, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges are Failing Disadvantaged Students.* In his remarks, he encouraged administrators to think differently about our work to help students navigate and negotiate unfamiliar institutional cultures influenced by dominant values and norms. A first-generation college student himself, he urged us to interrogate the ideological frames that

positioned students from historically minoritized groups as inferior or deficient due to their social positions in society. He also encouraged administrators to assume responsibility for dismantling institutional barriers and disrupting exclusive policies and practices in our respective institutions. I found comfort in his remarks because his messages were consistent with the ideas I embrace as a critical scholar and administrator with a growing awareness of the longstanding racial, economic, and gender inequities embedded in higher education. His words resonated with me and continue to do so as I explore ways to navigate elite spaces and leverage my administrative position to bring about structural change to better support students from historically minoritized backgrounds, particularly first-generation college students.

As I consider my commitment to access and equity and my efforts to support and empower first-generation college students, questions often arise for me about the work of administrators leading programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. For example, what is unique about the first-generation college student identity, and how does it inform the actions or motivation of administrators leading programs to support student success? Given the pervasive practice of limiting access to students from historically excluded groups, who are the administrators leading these programs, and how did they end up working at highly selective institutions? In what ways does the institutional culture at elite institutions contribute to or hinder initiatives designed to support the success of first-generation college students? Do administrators feel responsible for challenging institutional barriers or disrupting exclusive institutional practices? Why or why not? These are the types of critical questions that piqued my interest and motivated me to engage in this qualitative research study to explore the lived experiences of critically minded administrators who were first-

generation college students themselves and their work supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities.

Framing the Problem

Colleges and universities in the United States were largely constructed for and continue to privilege students who are white and come from college-educated and middle-upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds (Stephens et al., 2012). This reality contributes to the widening college completion and the socioeconomic gap between students from historically excluded or socially minoritized groups and their peers in higher education (Kezar, 2011). Moreover, the college environment influences and reinforces social stratification, a process that creates and perpetuates the inequitable distribution of access and opportunity to benefit students with the most privilege (Anderson, 1996) and presents institutional barriers for students with the least privilege, particularly at highly selective colleges and universities. This privilege is reinforced through exclusive institutional policies, procedures, and practices. These unwritten rules and unspoken expectations, also known as the hidden curriculum, are most harmful to students with limited generational knowledge about the college environment (Davis, 2010; Gable, 2021) and detract from efforts to create more socially just and inclusive educational spaces in higher education.

Existing research has established that first-generation college students, defined in this research study as students whose parents or guardians did not obtain a 4-year bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Davis, 2010), often struggle to discern the tacit rules of educational practice and social interactions (Kezar, 2011). Many first-generation college students enter higher education with limited knowledge of the function and rules of the college environment because they may not have regular access to relatives, acquaintances, or members of their home

community who attended or graduated from college. Subsequently, they are less likely to be familiar with the educational jargon, faculty expectations, and implicit rules of higher education (Davis, 2010; Gable, 2021). Although first-generation college students may have limited access to the academic knowledge, experiences, and skills deemed valuable by the dominant groups in higher education, they also bring unique assets, strengths, and lived experiences to the college environment that we should affirm and nurture.

Unfortunately, much of the public discourse, literature, research, and programs designed to support first-generation college students attribute their success outcomes, graduation rates, persistence, and enrollment rates, or lack thereof, to their family background or categorical characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and more recently, first-generation college student status. This approach is problematic because it is framed from a deficit-based perspective and does not account for this population's inherent skills, knowledge, strengths, and abilities (Yosso, 2005). More importantly, many often use deficit framing in an attempt to absolve university leaders, administrators, and faculty from examining the hegemonic ideologies and oppressive practices that shape the student experience, specifically the experiences of students from historically minoritized communities. Institutional obstacles associated with equity, access, power, and privilege contribute to educational disparities, disproportionately impacting first-generation college students and other students from minoritized communities.

Over the past few years, as the number of first-generation college students enrolled in higher education has grown, more highly selective colleges and universities have established specific initiatives and programs to address first-generation college students' needs. The growth of these initiatives has resulted in increased institutional resources and administrative staff devoted to supporting this population of students. Additionally, national organizations and

initiatives such as The Center for First-Generation Student Success—an initiative of NASPA and the Suder Foundation, the First-Generation, Lower-Income Consortium, The Black First-Gen Collective, and the Kessler Scholars Collaborative—an initiative of the Judy and Fred Wilpon Foundation, among others, have emerged to advocate, empower, and contribute to the national conversation about first-generation student success. Despite these collective efforts and the increasing growth in the first-generation college student population, little research has been conducted to explore the mindset and experiences of the administrators leading offices and programs designed to support first-generation college students. This omission is surprising because administrators can profoundly impact student success efforts (Bensimon, 2005). Hence, this research study may shed light on how administrators who self-identify as critically minded approach their work to support first-generation college students.

Expanding the literature about first-generation college student success to include the voices of critically minded, first-generation administrators who are conscious of the varied experiences, motivations, and obstacles first-generation college students may encounter could provide a unique vantage point to enhance our understanding of the conditions necessary to support student success Additionally, gaining insider knowledge from a diverse group of administrators who work at highly selective institutions may shed light on how these institutions may indirectly reproduce social stratification or, alternatively, serve as a mechanism for reducing inequality in higher education. Lastly, administrators who were first-generation college students themselves and now work in a leadership capacity demonstrate that first-generation college students can overcome obstacles, thrive in higher education, and provide a counter-narrative for success (Bui, 2002; Hand & Payne, 2008; Orbe, 2004). These counternarratives may provide the field of higher education an alternative to the pervasive deficit views often used to characterize

first-generation college students and can serve as a source of pride and inspiration for other first-generation college students and administrators. From an equity perspective, it is necessary to incorporate research guided by practice that centers the voices of those most impacted by inequitable systems and draws on the inherent strengths of minoritized communities (Bensimon, 2007; Yosso, 2005). Together, these factors shaped my desire to conduct research with critically minded, first-generation administrators to explore their work supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities in the United States.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the lived experiences of critically minded administrators who were first-generation college students themselves and their work to lead programs created to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities. Through my research, I have not found any studies that center the experiences of first-generation administrators as the focal point of inquiry. Insight into the lived experiences of first-generation administrators needs to be researched and further explored. This point is reinforced by Bensimon (2007) who expressed concern that practitioners are absent from the discourse on student success. More specifically, Bensimon (2007) emphasized, "When I say that practitioners are missing, I am referring to the lack of scholarly and practical attention toward understanding how the practitioner—her knowledge, beliefs, experiences, education, sense of self-efficacy, etc.—affects how students experience their education" (p. 444). If administrators strive to address gaps in student support and inequitable student outcomes, it may be beneficial to learn from administrators who have the power to influence the student experience and student success. Additionally, administrators who have experience navigating

elite academic spaces may be able to offer context-dependent knowledge and experience about how to support minoritized students across highly selective institutions.

Therefore, this research study may add to the literature and extend our knowledge and understanding of the circumstances experienced by first-generation college students and administrators at highly selective colleges and universities. In this qualitative research study, I aim to add to the literature about college student success, inform practices to develop and support administrators and offer strategies to enhance support structures to help current and future first-generation college students succeed and thrive at highly selective institutions.

Research Questions

Drawing broadly from literature about college student success, social capital theory, and Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) frameworks, this research study was guided by the following three research questions:

- How do critically minded administrators who were first-generation college students approach their work to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions?
- How do critically minded, first-generation administrators use their unique backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to create and lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions?
- What do critically minded, first-generation administrators working with first-generation college students perceive as barriers to their work at highly selective colleges and universities?

These research questions generated much insightful and useful information from study participants' stories. It is my hope that study participants' stories may encourage and allow faculty, students, and staff to reflect on their mindset, approach, and experiences to inform their work supporting first-generation college students.

Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

In this research study, I chose to draw upon Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework and Yosso's (2005) CCW framework. I was drawn to these frameworks because they are informed by critical theory, incorporate asset-based framing, and have been used in educational research to explain the experiences of minoritized students in higher education. Moreover, both have been used to identify the ways educators can support and empower minoritized students, which is a critical component of how I have approached my work personally and professionally. In the next section, I begin with an overview of how my critical lens informs my work and then briefly provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks used to guide this research study.

As a scholar and practitioner, I employ critical theory as a lens to view and approach my work. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) asserted critical theory "explores historical, cultural, and ideological lines of authority that underlie social conditions" (p. 1). Critical theory is a useful theoretical framework to examine and expose power, privilege, and oppression operating in higher education institutions and society. To date, critical theory has expanded to include many branches, such as critical race theory, queer theory, critical disability theory, and feminist theory, to name a few. It has more frequently been used in educational research to inform theory and practice in student affairs (Broido & Manning, 2002). In the context of higher education and applied to the work of student affairs practice, because the use of critical theory requires a

combination of social critique and action, it offers administrators new ways to think and act against oppressive forces to generate societal and individual transformation (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). This critical orientation and motivation to drive institutional change also align with the charge for student affairs administrators to engage with critical theories and perspectives to inform their work supporting student success (ACPA-College Student Educators International & NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010). In addition to critical reflection and action on behalf of others, critical theories also require student affairs administrators to critically reflect and develop an understanding of themselves in relation to the dominant forces and oppressive cultural conditions that influence higher education.

To operate from a critical orientation, one must be attentive to one's social identities and experiences, influencing one's sense of self, agency, and interactions with others. Put another way, this inward critical self-reflection or subjectivity is vital to the work of those who operate from a critical lens or social justice orientation because "our positionalities - how we see ourselves, how we are perceived by others, and our experiences - influence how we approach knowledge, what we know, and what we believe" (Bettez, 2015, pp. 934–935). Understanding the social construction of identities and awareness of the social, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape one's experiences concerning knowledge production, power, and liberation are essential to social justice work grounded in critical theory. For these reasons, Evans and Reason (2001) suggested that "student affairs professionals should seriously examine critical theory as the lens through which to view the world" (p. 376). Likewise, drawing from prominent critical scholars Freire (1970), Giroux (1988), and Manning (1994), Rhoads and Black (1995) advanced the notion of student affairs professionals as "transformative educators" positioned to engage in transformative work with students "to create more democratic communities" (p. 418). Given the

hostile racial and sociopolitical climate that continues to negatively influence how minoritized students experience higher education, the role and influence of student affairs administrators to shape the student experience and drive institutional change cannot be overemphasized. The need exists, now more than ever, for student affairs professionals to embrace critical theories and praxis-oriented strategies to inform their awareness, understanding, and ability to act against the deeply ingrained inequities operating in higher education. This ideological framing is necessary to help disrupt the hegemonic culture of power, privilege, and inequity embedded in higher education. Central to Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework is the mindset and actions of those positioned to empower students in meaningful ways and champion their success.

Institutional and Empowerment Agent Framework

Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework is derived from his early work with low-status Mexican youth in K–12 education. *Low status* is a term Stanton-Salazar (1997) coined to describe the social positioning of working-class minoritized students. Stanton-Salazar (2011) posited that the empowerment and success of minoritized students are contingent upon the skills, network capacity, and ideological motivations of individuals responsible for their success. In my research study, this social capital framework is useful to explore and illuminate if and how critically minded, first-generation administrators embody the characteristics of either institutional or empowerment agents in their work supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. *Institutional agents*, as defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997), "occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system and are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (p. 1075). Often, institutional agents create or lead support

programs to help individual students get connected to institutional resources and develop strategies to adapt to their educational environment. Institutional agents serve a key role as a source of support for students, particularly those from historically minoritized or excluded backgrounds. Their actions may lead to individual mobility, success, and assimilation into the dominant culture. Alternatively, empowerment agents engage in these same actions to support individual student success but are also motivated by a critical ideological framework to act against oppressive systems. Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001) posited that empowerment agents intentionally and strategically work in ways that are "counter to the established and hierarchical social structures" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 3) to empower minoritized students through raising critical consciousness and leveraging their social network. Additionally, empowerment agents approach their work with a critical lens to disrupt and minimize "the reproductive practices of their institutions and to become a moral agent for positive change in their *world* that both agents and youth inhabit" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 3). Both institutional and empowerment agents are vital to the educational success of minoritized students, particularly first-generation college students working to develop social capital and navigate educational spaces that often do not reflect and honor their lived experiences.

The application of the institutional and empowerment agent framework to the work of critically minded, first-generation administrators and their efforts to lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions is relevant because creating inclusive communities and advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion are elements of social justice and espoused values in the field of student affairs (ACPA-College Student Educators International & NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010, 2015). Additionally, this research study complements and may add to student success literature

and professional practice as administrators who operate from a critical paradigm play the roles of both insiders whose roles in an organization provide them with institutional knowledge and outsiders who possess ideas that conflict with organizational policies and practices. Attention to the ways dominant ideologies, policies, and practices influence access and student success outcomes and the actions of those who attempt to drive institutional change to better support minoritized students may allow for a better understanding of the ways administrators can work to improve equity, inclusion, and enhance the college experience for first-generation college students which in turn can benefit all students. In this research study, I draw primarily from Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework to explore the roles and support provided by critically minded first-generation administrators, but also found it useful to explore the skills, behaviors, and experiences that inform their work. Thus, applying components of the CCW framework, particularly aspirational capital, navigational capital, and social capital were useful. Next, I provide a brief overview of the CCW framework and its applicability to this research study.

CCW Framework

Well-cited literature has noted that educational research that draws from cultural and social capital theory, must move away from deficit thinking or the pathologization of minoritized students (Yosso, 2005). Given the growing number of first-generation college students enrolling in higher education, particularly at highly selective institutions, the need exists to draw from theories that offer a counter perspective to challenge deficit perspectives and hegemonic practices operating with higher education (Byrd, 2018). One notable example is Yosso's (2005) CCW model, which shifts thinking from a deficit perspective to understand the many assets that communities of color acquire. Grounded in critical race theory (Delgado, 1995), the CCW model

incorporates six forms of cultural capital, which include: (a) aspirational capital (i.e., the ability to hope and dream for the future despite barriers of inequality), (b) familial capital (i.e., the personal and social resources taught and nurtured by the home community), (c) linguistic capital (i.e., the intellectual and social skills acquired through communication in more than one language or style), (d) navigational capital (i.e., the ability to maneuver through new social situations or institutions), (e) resistance capital (i.e., the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior), and (f) social capital (i.e., the network of people and community resources available).

The CCW model is useful for understanding the experiences of first-generation college students because they may also hold other minoritized identities (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006). Additionally, these students have knowledge, resources, and skills from their home communities that have aided in their enrollment in higher education. Yosso's (2005) CCW model can benefit administrators motivated to amplify and recognize the many strengths, assets, and forms of knowledge that contribute to the success of minoritized students, particularly those who identify as first-generation college students.

By centering and acknowledging the cultural ways of interacting with the knowledge, experiences, and abilities first-generation college students contribute to higher education, it shifts them from the margins and positions them as cocreators of knowledge and valuable members of the campus community. This positioning supports their success in an educational system that undervalues and underserves historically excluded students (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Moreover, this model is useful because it attends to the institutional barriers and systemic disadvantages often overlooked in educational research about the cultural and social capital possessed by first-generation college students and other minoritized student communities. In this study, I draw from three components of this model: aspirational capital,

navigational capital, and social capital. This study shows how the experiences, knowledge, and strengths that first-generation students and administrators bring from their home commutes should be validated, celebrated, and leverage to support their success in and through higher education.

Definitions of Key Terms

In this section, I introduce several key terms and offer additional contexts to help familiarize readers with several terms used throughout this dissertation.

Continuing-generation college students are college students who have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or a higher level of educational attainment (Aud et al., 2012).

Critically minded administrators are higher education administrators who self-identify or have been described as critically oriented administrators due to their awareness about systemic issues of difference and demonstrated actions in pursuit of more liberating experiences and equitable student success outcomes (Rhoads & Black, 1995).

Empowerment agents act in the same capacity as institutional agents but are critically conscious and invested in counter-stratification, defined as intentional strategies or interventions designed to disrupt hierarchical and reproductive social structures (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). Although efforts to support individual student success are beneficial, the ability to confront inequitable practices in higher education is noteworthy because many student affairs administrators, myself included, have not received formal training to engage in transformative ways. In a structurally inequitable world, administrators who have the motivation, sensitivity, and skills necessary to serve as empowerment agents are critical because of their active choice to serve minoritized students while maintaining a commitment to a radical transformation of the

culture of privilege and inequity embedded in higher education, particularly at highly selective colleges and universities.

For the purpose of this study, *first-generation college students* are defined as students whose parents or guardians did not obtain a 4-year bachelor's degree (Aud et al., 2012; Cataldi et al., 2018; Davis, 2010). As of 2015, first-generation college students comprise a third of the total of college-bound students and more than 24% of the more than 7 million undergraduate students enrolled at 4-year institutions (Skomsvold, 2015; Whitley et al., 2018). They are among the fastest growing segment of the undergraduate student population and reflect the changing demographic of college-bound students in the United States (Jehangir, 2010). It is estimated that by 2025, over 10 million first-generation college students could be enrolled in higher education (Skomsvold, 2015).

First-generation administrators describes nonfaculty, professional staff members who were formerly first-generation college students and now hold administrative positions, traditionally, but not exclusively, in student affairs divisions at higher education institutions. It is worth noting that the term administrator does not accurately reflect one's level of responsibility, hierarchical positioning, or scope of work in higher education. Depending on the institution's size, mission, and organizational structure, the term administrator may be used to describe professional staff members at various levels in the organizational structure, and they may or may not work directly with students, particularly first-generation college students. I have intentionally chosen to use the term administrator because it is consistent with the title used for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), a membership-based organization designed to support staff and higher education institutions across the globe. The term

administrator is not exclusive and may be used interchangeably to include those who identify as student affairs educators, practitioners, professionals, staff, and others.

Highly selective institutions include colleges and universities that are public, private, and specialized institutions ranging in size and are geographically distributed across the United States. These institutions historically admit less than 30% of the application pool and include the original eight private colleges and universities located in the Northeast that make up the Ivy League Athletic Conference (e.g., Harvard, Princeton, Yale) and similarly academically competitive institutions (e.g., Northwestern, Stanford, Boston University), referred to as Ivy Plus institutions (CollegeData.com, 2018).

Institutional agents are sources of support and empowerment for minority working-class students and institutional change agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Due to their positions in the organizational structure, they possess the "capacity and commitment to transmit directly or negotiate the transmission of institutional resources and opportunities" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 6). Stanton-Salazar (2011) further defined institutional agents specifically as "high-status, non-kin, agents who occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (p. 2). Put another way, in higher education, institutional agents hold positions of some power, in which they are strongly networked with access to multiple levels of institutional resources and support. Often, they provide minoritized students with access to information and knowledge to increase their access to the social and cultural capital needed to navigate and succeed in higher education. Although institutional agents play vital roles in supporting student success, many limit their efforts to individual students and do not engage in activities designed to question or

challenge the status quo, which operates to benefit students with the most privilege on college campuses.

The *student affairs profession* includes departments and divisions comprised of professional staff, faculty, and students working in higher education. The field of student affairs emerged in the late 19th century with the creation of administrative roles designed to support students and enhance the cocurricular experience outside the traditional classroom environment. These positions often require a graduate degree in counseling, social work, higher education administration, or other related fields. Student affairs administrators work on college campuses in various roles, including academic advising, housing and residence life, multicultural affairs, campus activities, and sorority and fraternity life.

These key terms are used frequently throughout this research study, and the definitions and contexts offered are intended to provide a common language and understanding. In Chapter II, I expand upon these terms to include relevant literature to provide contextual and practical examples.

Significance of the Research

This research agenda is both personal and professional as I identify as a critically minded, first-generation administrator and have worked to support first-generation college students throughout my career in higher education. My curiosity around this topic assumes there are administrators-–specifically, first-generation administrators—who adopt a critical mindset and engage in practices that attempt to disrupt social inequities and systemic oppression (Freire, 2005) through their work. Given the increased focus on first-generation college students and their anticipated enrollment growth, this research is needed and timely. This research study focuses on critically minded, first-generation administrators as the unit of analysis to explore

their motivation, experiences, and actions taken to foster first-generation college student success and bring about institutional change. Reviewing the literature, I have not found any research applying the institutional and empowerment framework to first-generation student success or the work of administrators, particularly critically minded, first-generation administrators employed at highly selective institutions.

This research attempts to add to the existing literature about first-generation college students and presents a unique opportunity to explore how critically minded, first-generation administrators might conceptualize their work as two-fold: to connect and empower first-generation college students with cultural and social capital while simultaneously working with and for students to act against oppressive institutional systems. This research study can advance existing literature about administrators' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. It can serve as a platform to amplify the voices of critically minded, first-generation administrators and challenge us to think deeply about our commitments and practice. Given the many social and economic benefits conferred upon graduates of elite institutions, insight offered by critically minded, first-generation administrators who work at these colleges and universities may shed light on the challenges and opportunities to approach this work from a critical lens to shape institutional policies, practices, and culture across highly selective institutions.

As higher education leaders continue to diversify the student body through the admittance of first-generation college students, more must be done to ensure the institutional culture, policies, and practices meet the increasingly diverse needs and expectations these students bring to the college environment. Thus, I hope that this research will: (a) help motivate more administrators to approach their work with a critical lens, (b) inform professional practice, (c) promote more critical dialogue and institutional accountability, and (d) offer a preliminary

picture of first-generation administrators' perceptions of the institutional barriers and strategies used to support student success, which is integral to social mobility and equity in the United States. This research study is part of my contribution to helping transform higher education and improve the college experience for all students, particularly first-generation college students.

Personal and Professional Positionality Statement

My interest in this topic originates from my experience as a first-generation college student. As a Black woman from a working-class background, in college, I struggled to navigate a small, private, predominately white institution located 7 hours from home. I can still remember feeling overwhelmed and out of place during my 1st semester in college. Everyone seemed to have it together while I struggled in silence. I was unfamiliar with the academic jargon and faculty expectations, and I regularly questioned if I had the aptitude to succeed. As I encountered institutional barriers and academic challenges, I blamed myself and my family for our lack of resources and mindset needed to succeed like my peers. Fortunately, at the moment I decided to go home and not return after the winter break, I crossed paths with a first-generation administrator who served as a guide and encouraged me to stay at the institution. I appreciated his insight and guidance, knowing that although we did not have the same lived experiences, his awareness of the institutional obstacles I encountered and his ability to offer proven success strategies was beneficial. Additionally, he affirmed that although I often felt minoritized due to my various social identities, my talents and contributions to the campus community were needed and valued. He offered support and positive messages to build my confidence and self-efficacy. With his guidance, I used campus resources, found my academic voice, and social community. I also was introduced to the field of student affairs as a career path.

Throughout my professional career in higher education, I have worked hard to serve students and facilitate meaningful experiences through curricular and cocurricular engagement. I must admit, early in my career, my days were consumed with administrative paperwork and coordinating logistics to support student programming and academic resources. Rarely did I take the time to reflect on how my various social identities informed my work or explore ways to leverage my role to better support students through institutional change. Over time, I assumed more leadership responsibilities and was often called into executive sessions to brainstorm strategies to improve student retention and attrition. Many conversations focused on students' perceived deficits and attempted to blame students for their lack of academic preparedness. This narrative was often used to absolve us from working to mitigate the institutional barriers that limit the success and achievement of students from historically excluded backgrounds. I recognized this was problematic but did not have the language or critical lens to recognize my complicity in an oppressive and harmful educational system. Regrettably, I bought into the meritocracy myth that all students could succeed with hard work and did not realize the extent to which institutional practices contributed to personal failure and inequities. Due to my naivety and lack of critical consciousness, I failed to question or disrupt the dimensions of oppression contributing to student success outcomes and widening the achievement gap.

Fortunately, during my graduate studies, I was introduced to critical theories and social justice readings that challenged me personally and professionally. I adopted an equity philosophy through exposure to critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy. I leaned on my sociocultural tools of understanding and agency to embrace my role as a social change agent. Reflecting on my professional and academic journey, I recognize how my critical orientation enables me to see how I am implicated in some problematic practices. This

orientation helps me discern when and how to exercise agency to engage in actions that aim to address inequitable policies and practices. I share these stories for several reasons. First, my stories highlight the difficulties I experienced as a first-generation college student and the support I received from a caring first-generation administrator. Second, I now recognize how my critical conscious development contributes to my effectiveness as an administrator and scholar, and acknowledge that early in my career, I did not approach my work from a critical lens. These stories also reveal the limitations of access to higher education without a true investment in critical practices to support student success. Based on my interactions with other administrators who hold various roles in student affairs, it is not evident that all administrators approach their work from a critical lens. My motivation for conducting this research study was to center the voices and bring together perspectives from administrators who name a critical paradigm as foundational to their personal and professional lives. I believe the potential exists to encourage more student affairs administrators to actively incorporate a critical lens into their daily practice to support student success.

I have developed a critical theoretical lens through my graduate studies, which I bring to this inquiry. Based on this perspective, I prioritize exploring how administrators incorporate their first-generation identity to inform their work and efforts to mitigate institutional barriers. As an administrator, I have sought to expand my knowledge of the issues facing today's college students and worked to cultivate social networks inside and outside my organizational role to support first-generation college student success. My professional involvement with the FGLI Consortium and NASPA's Center for First-Generation Student Success provides opportunities to stay informed of the latest research, evidence-based practices, and advocacy goals around first-generation college student success. Additionally, through my inaugural role at a highly selective

institution, leading an office to enhance first-generation college student success, I brought an understanding to this research which also helped me connect with participants.

My insider status allowed me to connect with participants to build trust and understanding through our collective experiences. Although my familiarity with the topic of inquiry helped recruit and build rapport with participants, I am attuned to how my identity as a doctoral student and administrator could have influenced my interactions with participants and inevitably informed my understanding and interpretation of the data. I include my story and experience, not to center it but to consider how my perspective contributes to this area of research. My social identities, critical perspective, and professional experiences shaped my positionality and the decisions I made to guide this qualitative research study.

Methods Overview

To answer the research questions, I used a basic qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators and their work supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative research is used most frequently to collect data from interviews, observations, and analysis of documents to understand the lived experiences of others. Through criterion and snowball sampling, I conducted individual interviews with 20 administrators representing 15 highly selective colleges and universities in the United States. Each virtual individual interview lasted 75 to 90 minutes and was recorded via Zoom. The interviews were loosely structured and guided by a set of semistructured questions that allowed for adaptation and further probing based on participants' unique responses. This was done intentionally to gather rich data useful for this study.

Broadly, I conducted data collection and analysis concurrently and adjusted my interview protocols to account for emerging themes and new ways of thinking upon reflection throughout the data collection process. Following interviews, once the data were cleaned, coded, and analyzed, I emailed participants a summary spreadsheet of their individual transcripts with additional questions, the emergent themes, and my preliminary interpretations. I also provided all participants the option to review the full transcript from their individual interviews and an invitation to schedule another meeting to provide additional feedback to ensure I accurately interpreted and represented their experiences. Twelve of the 20 study participants responded and provided feedback electronically. In the findings chapters, I share participants' accounts of their experiences navigating higher education as undergraduate, graduate, and administrative staff. I also explain how they approach their work and provide greater detail about their efforts to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. To conclude, I share recommendations and implications and suggest future research to grow the literature about first-generation college student success drawing from administrators' perspectives.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. In this chapter, I introduced the research topic, provided a brief overview of the problem, and offered a short summary of the theoretical framework guiding this study. Furthermore, I described the purpose of this research and briefly reviewed the methodology along with the three research questions used to guide this study. I concluded this chapter by defining key terms, explaining the professional significance of the research study, and sharing my research positionality statement.

In Chapter II, I offer a review of the literature to situate the study in relation to existing scholarship and knowledge. I divide the literature review into three main sections, which are organized by topics. In the first section, I examine the construct of first-generation college students and the common characteristics of their experiences. In the second section, I draw from cultural and social capital theory, focusing on Bourdieu's (1986) research and how those theories inform Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework and draw from Yosso's CCW framework. In the third section, I situate Bensimon's (2005, 2007) and Blanchard Wallace's (2022) work around practitioner knowledge to explore how one's beliefs, values, and social identities inform their work with a focus on programmatic initiatives, resources, and institutional barriers. At the end of each section, I offer a summary to gather connecting ideas, and I conclude the chapter with an overall summary of the literature reviewed.

In Chapter III, I describe the study's research design and methodology and explain the decisions I made to guide this research study. I used a basic qualitative methodology for this study as it provides a broad, useful, and efficient method to "understand how people make sense of their own lives" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). I describe how I selected participants and use a group summary format to introduce the participants and share institutional characteristics. To conclude the chapter, I outline additional methodological details related to data analysis, limitations and strengths of this research, and trustworthiness.

I organized the findings into three distinct chapters. Chapter IV focuses on exploring the beliefs, mindset, and actions articulated by the participants. In Chapter V, I draw examples from participants' lived experiences informed by their educational journeys as undergraduate and graduate students and now as administrators working at highly selective colleges and universities. In Chapter VI, I describe the institutional barriers that participants name impacting

their work. Their words and stories are powerful and may allow for a better understanding of how their core convictions shape who they are and how they approach their work.

Additionally, in the interest of intergenerational learning and sharing, at the end of each findings chapter, I include a list of candid and supportive advice from study participants directed to other first-generation administrators leading programs to support first-generation college students at highly selective institutions. Finally, I conclude Chapter VII by analyzing these findings, bringing the data back into conversation with the literature.

Conclusion

University leaders and administrators are under intense pressure to broaden access and participation and enhance institutional support structures to ensure more students from historically excluded backgrounds, particularly first-generation college students, can access, succeed, and thrive in higher education. This population of students has garnered increased attention because first-generation college students make up a sizable portion of the college-going population, overlap with various social identity groups, and stand to benefit significantly from obtaining a college degree. Although the research and scholarship about first-generation college students continues to grow, there is little literature that centers the voices and experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators who lead programs to support first-generation college students. Administrators, who draw from critical theories, may be best positioned to advocate and engage in actions to challenge the status quo, center minoritized voices, and advocate for the benefit of first-generation college students and other students operating at the margins in higher education. Additionally, their professional experience, coupled with their insider knowledge of the unique needs and challenges experienced by first-generation college students, may lead to a better understanding of student persistence and success. I recognize the

immense potential of capturing administrators' stories through this qualitative research study to offer their counter-narratives, help shape the student experience, and improve institutional practices to benefit current and future generations of students and the field of higher education for years to come.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

> Higher education leaders need to pay more attention to the ways in which we are perpetuating or interrupting the status quo that is not functioning effectively. Intention is not enough; higher education leaders need to speak dangerous truths as these discourses have the potential to impact policy, procedures, and—in turn—people's daily lives.
>
> —Pasque, 2010, p. 176

The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators and their work to lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities. The following research questions guided this research study:

- How do critically minded administrators who were first-generation college students approach their work to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions?
- How do critically minded, first-generation administrators use their unique backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to create and lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions?
- What do critically minded, first-generation administrators working with first-generation college students perceive as barriers to their work at highly selective colleges and universities?

This literature review is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the issues impacting first-generation college students and what is being discussed and studied among scholars on first-generation college student success. The second section provides an overview of social capital theory, defining the two schools of thought (i.e., normative and social resource),

and focuses on the premises of Bourdieu's (1986) and Coleman's (1988) research and how those theories inform Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent and Yosso's community cultural wealth (CCW) frameworks. The third section provides information about the administrator role and draws from Bensimon's (2005, 2007) and Blanchard Wallace's (2022) research on first-generation higher education professionals to understand how one's beliefs and social identities inform their work and their perceptions of the institutional barriers impacting student success. Capturing the experiences of critically minded administrators, who were once first-generation college students themselves, could help offer a candid perspective about how students, particularly first-generation college students, are being served across highly selective institutions. I conclude with a summary of my research goals situated in the broader literature related to first-generation student success.

To explore the experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators and the utility of the institutional and empowerment agent framework, it is important first to situate the institutional context and factors that shape the first-generation college student experience, specifically at highly selective institutions. In this section of the literature review, I briefly describe the characteristics and actions influencing highly selective institutions and what they offer first-generation college students.

Highly Selective Institutions and What They Offer

In the United States, highly selective colleges and universities are considered the gold standard by which other institutions are evaluated. Highly selective colleges and universities include both public and private and specialized institutions that range in size and are geographically distributed across the United States. There are over 100+ colleges and

universities in the United States that make up this category, excluding military-affiliated or highly specialized music and art schools.

These institutions include the original eight highly selective private colleges and universities in the Northeast: Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University, which make up the Ivy League Athletic Conference. Similar academically competitive institutions such as Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, Stanford University, and the University of Michigan are commonly referred to as Ivy Plus institutions (Heuer, 2003). Highly selective colleges and universities are beacons of wealth and privilege and operate in a manner to best support students with the most social and cultural capital, wealth, and privilege, as demonstrated in Wilder's (2013) book, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities.* Historically, these institutions exclusively enrolled white students from college-educated, middle-upper socioeconomic backgrounds. In response to the declining enrollment of college-bound students and mounting external pressures to diversify the study body, university leaders at highly selective institutions have intentionally focused their efforts on the recruitment and enrollment of first-generation college students, many of whom hold one or more minoritized identities. For these reasons, these institutions represent a significantly distinct group of higher education institutions relevant to discussions of inequality and social reproduction (Jerrim et al., 2015). Although the enrollment of first-generation college students at highly selective colleges and universities has increased slightly over the past decade (Bauer-Wolf, 2022), the literature about this student population is scarce. More research is needed to understand how first-generation college students experience highly selective

institutions from the system and individual levels and the factors influencing their ability to succeed and thrive.

Institutional Factors

As shared previously, I have chosen to situate this research study in the context of highly selective colleges and universities. These institutions are highly regarded because of their global prestige, academic rigor, admission selectivity, and annual rankings in the U.S. News and World Report's (n.d.) Best Colleges Report, which has a commanding influence on undergraduate institutional rankings in the United States. In this report, colleges and universities are evaluated based on several factors, including admitted students' academic promise calculated by high school class rank, grades, and standardized test scores. Faculty and institutional resources, admissions selectivity, graduation rates, and alumni giving are also considered for the institution's overall ranking. Despite prevailing rhetoric of equality of opportunity, the enrollment of students of color and those from limited-income backgrounds at highly selective institutions have not improved at the rate necessary to mitigate centuries of exclusive admissions practices. Class disparities in enrollment are most concerning at highly ranked colleges and universities that traditionally enroll students from families at the top end of the economic spectrum (Jack, 2019; Jerrim et al., 2015). Although there remain many critiques about the utility of institutional rankings and the advantage given to prestigious wealthy institutions, highly selective colleges and universities are significant because they attract many high-achieving students and are relevant to discussions of inequity and stratification (Jerrim et al., 2015). Additionally, these institutions continue to significantly influence higher education and offer students an unparalleled educational experience.

Individual Factors

First-generation college students are enrolled in smaller numbers at highly selective institutions than at community colleges and large public institutions. According to the Fall 2018 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Cataldi et al., 2018) report, 6% of first-generation college students were enrolled at highly selective institutions. Recently, in response to public scrutiny about the increasing cost of higher education, a decline in the number of college-bound students, and demands for greater diversification of the student body, university leaders mobilized to put forth targeted admissions recruitment strategies and adopted no-loan financial aid policies, particularly at highly selective institutions. Bell (1980), in his critical race theory work, explained one of the tenets of CRT to be interest convergence, meaning that needed changes to support minoritized populations do not often happen until doing so also benefits those in power in some way. In this case, these institutional changes were in response to external pressures, which contributed to the diversification of the student body through the enrollment of more first-generation college students, many of whom come from minoritized racial groups, limited-income backgrounds, or both. To date, the percentage of first-generation college students has steadily increased at several highly selective institutions: Brown (15%), Cornell (19.9%), Harvard (20%), Princeton (17%), and Yale (18%). Although these figures are promising, they are noticeably lower than the number of first-generation college students enrolled at public institutions at 26% and 2-year institutions at 46% (Cataldi et al., 2018). Nevertheless, highly selective colleges and universities offer first-generation college students an abundance of resources and social networks not comparable to many public 4- or 2-year institutions.

More specifically, students enrolled at elite institutions benefit from greater access to faculty, institutional resources, and higher rates of persistence and degree attainment (Cataldi et

al., 2018). These institutions also have larger endowments, offer more academic resources to support students, and regularly boast higher graduation rates than other institutional types (Jack, 2019). For example, the 4-year graduation rate for first-generation college students at the University of Michigan was 84% in 2021, and the 6-year graduation rate was 93% (Forbes, 2022). To an extent, these figures reflect the academic caliber of first-generation college students and the influence of existing institutional structures designed to support their success to and through college. First-generation college students who choose to attend highly selective institutions persist, graduate, and obtain upward mobility at higher rates than their peers in other institutional settings.

Graduating from highly selective institutions also confers social advantages, such as access to influential alumni, the social prestige associated with high-status institutions, and opportunities for upward socioeconomic intergenerational mobility (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Arum et al., 2008; Chetty et al., 2017). Highly selective colleges and universities "also function as gatekeepers to advanced, graduate, and professional education and positions of civic and corporate leadership" (J. Dowd, 2011, p. 218). Students have access to a vast network of influential alumni and renowned faculty. Students who attend elite colleges and universities benefit from opportunities to socialize and learn among peers positioned to be future CEOs, entrepreneurs, and industry leaders or hold other positions of power and prestige. To complement their undergraduate degree and gain competitive advantages, students enrolled at these institutions can access transformative experiences such as conducting undergraduate research, traveling and studying abroad, presenting at academic conferences and coauthoring research papers with faculty members. Access to these resources and experiences can directly

contribute to students' personal and professional growth, network, and upward mobility (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Arum et al., 2008).

Alumni of highly selective institutions often have an advantage when trying to gain employment in lucrative career paths and often earn more money over the course of their lifetime compared to their peers who attended less selective colleges and universities, all things being equal (Zhang, 2008). Although there are inherent benefits to attending and graduating from elite institutions, research shows that first-generation college students experience unique challenges and institutional barriers on their journey through higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). As more first-generation college students are admitted to highly selective colleges and universities from a macro level, it is necessary to understand the institutional factors that contribute to or hinder their success. Equally important, from a micro level, it is useful to understand how first-generation college students experience higher education and the work of critically minded, first-generation administrators to support their success through programs and efforts to advance institutional change.

Literature About First-Generation College Students

There is a growing body of literature on first-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). To inform this research study, I draw from the literature about first-generation college students to detail the challenges associated with defining this student population and their increasing access and enrollment in higher education. Additionally, I include literature related to the unique precollege characteristics of the first-generation college student population.

A Population Hard to Define

For the purpose of this research study, first-generation college students are defined as students whose parents or guardians did not obtain a 4-year bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). If someone were to search the term first-generation college students, they would find several definitions used across institutions. As a result, one theme from the literature suggests there may be more first-generation college students enrolled in higher education than suspected (Davis, 2010). Unfortunately, there is not one universally accepted definition of who is a first-generation college student. Some definitions exclude students whose parents attended college but did not graduate, others exclude students whose parents or immediate siblings obtained a 2-year degree. Many definitions do not consider the relationship between students and their families, such as students who are emancipated minors or were not raised in a household with their biological college-educated parents. Students in these unique situations may not benefit from or have access to generational knowledge about the college environment and, in turn, struggle to navigate higher education without institutional support. These nuances and inconsistencies make it difficult for administrators to accurately track the first-generation college student population. More importantly, this complexity often puts the onus on students to self-identify without clear eligibility.

To help better define this student population, Davis (2010) advocated for using one definition consistent with the criteria established by the government for their federally funded retention programs. Initially, the term first-generation was used to identify students eligible for federal TRIO programs which is a set of federally funded programs designed to provide financial and academic support to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds gain access and institutional support to succeed in higher education (Council for Opportunity in Education, n.d.).

The term is no longer used exclusively to determine eligibility for federal access programs but to identify these students and connect them with programs to meet their unique needs. A recent study of higher education institutions showed that more than half, 56% of colleges and universities have begun to use the formal definition used by the federal government with some variation (Whitley et al., 2018). An institutional definition may make it easier to identify eligible students who may benefit from institutional support to increase their cultural and social capital so they may be as competitive as their peers.

A Population Seeking Access to Higher Education

First-generation college students are among the fastest population of college-bound students and are applying to college, particularly highly selective institutions, in record numbers. According to data released by the Common App in an article featured in *The Boston Globe*, Krantz (2021) noted the number of first-generation college students applying to more selective colleges and universities increased by 20% over the previous year. Similarly, the numbers of lower-income students and students of color applying to more selective colleges have also increased. Nearly one third of today's undergraduate student population self-identify as first-generation college students (Whitley et al., 2018). These data are often captured from a series of questions on the college admission application, which often do not explicitly name or provide a criterion to define first-generation college students. Before enrolling in college, the first-generation college student identity may be unfamiliar to some students or is not a salient identity compared to race, gender, or socioeconomic status. For these reasons, it is possible that some students decide not to disclose or identify with the first-generation college student community. These decisions may limit students' access to institutional resources and community structures designed to support their success in higher education and beyond. Although the lack of clarity

around the criteria used to define first-generation college students may create challenges and barriers to access and success, it is also important to explore the unique precollege characteristics that influence their college experiences.

A Population With Unique Precollege Characteristics

Similar to other student groups with minoritized identities, first-generation college students are not a monolithic group. They have vastly different social identities, which intersect and shape how they navigate and to what extent they succeed in higher education. Previous reports from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Cataldi et al., 2018) have presented findings regarding first-generation college students' characteristics relevant to understanding their experiences in and through higher education. First-generation college students are more likely to be female (Cataldi et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2006), come from racially minoritized backgrounds (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006), and come from limited-income households (Cataldi et al., 2018). In addition, first-generation college students must overcome structural educational circumstances which shape their access and experiences in higher education. Warburton et al. (2001) found that compared to their peers whose parents had postsecondary experience, first-generation college students were more likely to attend under-resourced high schools and subsequently less likely to be academically prepared for college. According to Reid and Moore (2008), first-generation students often "lack rigorous academic preparation as compared to their peers with college-educated parents because their parents do not understand the importance of taking challenging courses" (p. 242). This is disadvantageous because enrolling in advanced placement courses offers students the opportunity to develop and enhance their academic skills to prepare for rigorous college-level coursework, save time and

money by earning free college credit while in high school, and has the potential to help students raise their high school grade point average.

Additionally, depending on the resources available at high schools, students may have limited access and exposure to the critical cultural capital needed to support their success in higher education. For instance, a student who is comfortable interacting with their professors inside and outside the classroom, understands the value of engaging in undergraduate research or has been introduced to the various functions of university offices may have an easier transition than students who don't have this prior knowledge or exposure. Although precollege characteristics and experiences have a significant influence on the college admissions process, first-generation college students experience additional challenges once enrolled as they attempt to navigate unchartered territory in higher education.

The Impact of Navigating Uncharted Territory in Higher Education

It is well-documented that first-generation college students experience challenges and encounter institutional barriers associated with navigating uncharted territory in higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). Through a literature review, themes related to navigating the college admission process, financial situations, and social interactions highlight challenges that impact the student experience and contribute to student persistence, graduation, and engagement in college.

Navigating College Admissions

When applying to colleges, although many demonstrate academic promise, first-generation college students, particularly from limited-income backgrounds or racially minoritized groups, are less likely to apply to highly selective colleges or universities (Jack, 2019). This reality contributes to the well-documented undermatching phenomenon in which

competitive students from first-generation or lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not apply to highly selective institutions (Muskens et al., 2019). Many first-generation college students do not receive adequate guidance throughout the college admissions process and are often unfamiliar, discouraged, or shy away from applying to highly selective institutions. First-generation college students are overrepresented at 2-year institutions compared to both public and private 4-year institutions (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle et al., 2006). Relatedly, while navigating the college admissions process, many first-generation college students also experience challenges accessing information and support needed to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), apply for housing, register for classes, or sign-up for a meal plan. All these processes may be unfamiliar and difficult for first-generation college students with limited knowledge about the various steps required to apply and enroll in higher education (Reid & Moore, 2008). Students who have limited access to information may influence their decision-making, confidence, and experiences in college.

Navigating Financial Challenges

Of those who comprise the subset of students with minoritized identities, first-generation college students appear to be particularly at risk in higher education because institutional structures are not designed to support students who lack knowledge about the college environment. More specifically, students unfamiliar with the various academic, personal, and social decisions and interactions that will shape their experiences in college are at a disadvantage (Cataldi et al., 2018; Davis, 2010). For example, students unfamiliar with the associated costs of higher education, many of which are hidden costs and not covered by financial aid, may experience anxiety, stress, and feelings of inadequacy as they struggle to navigate unique financial situations. Although I am careful and encourage others not to conflate first-generation

college student identity status with limited-income identity status, it is well-documented that first-generation college students are much more likely to come from limited-income families. According to Chen and Carroll (2005), 50% of first-generation students were classified as low-income with a family income of less than $25,000 compared to 7% of students with college-educated parents. Students with limited financial resources may have to work more hours on or off campus, forgo extracurricular activities due to time constraints or associated costs, and take out more loans to finance their education (Choy, 2001). These factors also influence student decision-making and the overall college experience.

More importantly, financial stress negatively contributes to wellness, financial behaviors, and academic success outcomes (Potter et al., 2020). As a result, first-generation college students are more likely to leave college without obtaining a degree and incur more significant financial debt than their peers (Choy, 2001). In the 2018 NCES report on college access and persistence of first-generation college students, researchers found that more than 33% left college without obtaining a college degree compared to 14% of their peers with college-educated parents. Student departure, particularly among first-generation college students, can be attributed to several factors, including a lack of college readiness and financial challenges (Cataldi et al., 2018; Davis, 2010). To minimize the impact of financial challenges on student retention engagement and success, more could be done at the institutional level to expand resources to ensure that minoritized students can engage and experience the full college experience.

Navigating Social Interactions

To better support student engagement and integration, it is important that first-generation college students have opportunities to connect with other students who share common interests and identities and understand their lived experiences. Administrators can play an important role

in helping to create environments for students to learn how to navigate otherwise foreign spaces and find community among their peers. To better understand how first-generation college students navigated and experienced historically white, private colleges and universities in the Northeast, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative research study with 14 undergraduate students. Guided by social and cultural capital theory, the semistructured interview format encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and identify the resources contributing to their navigation and success in higher education. The researchers offered three themes for further consideration to help first-generation college students realize their potential. Students reported feeling a sense of cultural dissonance and a lack of community which they attributed to their social and cultural backgrounds. More specifically, students needed assistance navigating the unspoken rules and norms which govern student interactions inside and outside the classroom. Second, students demonstrated resilience as they handled the complexities of college life and relied on faculty and administrators to help make sense of their home and school identities which often came into conflict. They often relied on support structures provided by the institutions and wished they had more support from faculty and administrators who understood their lived experiences. Lastly, first-generation college students experience challenges managing relationships with their families as they navigate their evolving identity as first-generation college students.

These findings demonstrate the complexities and nuances of being a first-generation college student, particularly at an elite, historically white institution influenced by majority norms, knowledge, and values. If students feel knowledgeable of the college environment and have the tools needed to navigate the institution and form relationships with faculty, administrators, and peers, through extracurricular engagement they are more likely to persist and

be engaged. First-generation college students may significantly benefit from programs and resources informed by administrators who understand the obscure rules and expectations of social interactions, which largely influence student engagement. Existing research demonstrates that first-generation college students can benefit more from academic and social engagement compared to their continuing generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). First-generation college students who are involved in clubs and organizations, undergraduate research, or work on campus, may have higher student success outcomes such as retention and degree completion, but also experience a higher sense of belonging and community (Strayhorn, 2012). In higher education, another theme in the literature highlights the influence of social and cultural capital on understanding educational inequities and college success, particularly among students from first-generation college backgrounds.

Summary of First-Generation College Student Literature

Through a review of the literature, it is evident that first-generation college students have unique precollege characteristics that influence how they approach the college admissions process and access information about higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). Once enrolled, they encounter institutional barriers associated with navigating uncharted territory in higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). Although the number of college-bound, first-generation college students continues to increase, specifically at highly selective institutions, more could be done to ensure they have access to information and individuals who can help them navigate, transition, and succeed in higher education (Jack, 2018). Institutions of higher education continue to operate in a manner to privilege students with the most access to the desired social and cultural capital (Kezar, 2011). To address this reality, institutional support structures designed to help first-generation college students connect with

administrators who understand their lived experiences and can connect them to institutional resources and transformative experiences may be beneficial. Access to higher education without institutional resources and tailored programs designed to address the unique needs and challenges experienced by first-generation college students is harmful and detrimental to efforts to promote student persistence, success, and graduation.

The Influence of Cultural and Social Capital

Although not named explicitly in most definitions used to identify first-generation college students, social and cultural capital are important factors that shape their experiences in higher education and beyond. In this section of the literature review, I provide an overview of social and cultural capital theory, offer contemporary theories for consideration, and draw connections to Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) conceptualization of institutional and empowerment agents and its utility to support first-generation college student success.

The concept of social and cultural capital has been used by educational researchers aiming to improve educational outcomes. Bourdieu (1986) defined *social capital* as the:

> actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively – owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the world. (pp. 248–249)

Additionally, *cultural capital*, a term originally introduced by Bourdieu (1986) and later expanded upon by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), can be described as the qualities, skills, and knowledge desired by the dominant group passed down through the family. This knowledge is transferred intergenerationally through words, behaviors, and experiences throughout the

socialization process initiated in the home. Cultural capital is of high value and used by those in power to sustain existing social structures and hierarchies to reward those who possess knowledge of the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of higher education that favors dominant cultural values, norms, and behaviors, both social and cultural capital are attached to social class and offer a form of fluid currency leveraged by those in power for their benefit at the expense of others without power. Next, I draw from the literature about social and cultural capital to describe the two schools of thought that shape these perspectives.

Social Resource Perspective

Social capital theory is often used to analyze and develop an understanding of the disparities which shape the educational experiences of students based on their various social identities (i.e., race, gender, socioeconomic status; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). It is also useful for understanding the experiences of first-generation college students and their efforts to persist (Padgett et al., 2012). Research on social capital is most frequently based on Bourdieu's (1986) social resource perspective and Coleman's (1988) normative perspective of human capital. Human capital is based on an individual's resources and does not rely primarily on the quality or quantity of relationships with others. Bourdieu (1986) theorized that knowledge—art, food, entertainment, music—of the middle and upper class are considered valuable cultural capital in a hierarchical society. In turn, the class hierarchy is preserved by the intergenerational transfer of social and cultural capital. In a hierarchical capitalist society, it is relevant to consider the dominant values or ways of operating embedded in various social groups. The cultural values, beliefs, and tastes of a social group contribute to one's habitus, which may influence how one perceives themselves and others and moves through the world. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) defined *habitus* as "a system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action" (p. 40).

Institutional cultures and habitus work in tandem to influence student behaviors and a sense of belonging. Students who share dominant cultural values, norms, and beliefs consistent with the dominant cultural history of the institution may experience an easier transition to higher education, particularly in highly selective institutions. Conversely, students from socially minoritized communities may encounter cultural values and norms different than their own and in turn, may experience cultural dissonance and struggle to navigate elite academic spaces. This is particularly relevant for first-generation college students who may have limited access to resources and the experiences to increase their social and capital related to college success.

Bourdieu's definition of social capital relies on membership in social groups that provide access to cultural, economic, and symbolic capital, which is contingent upon the size and ability of the network to mobilize institutional resources. The quality and quantity of the resources in one's social network comprise Bourdieu's operational definition of social capital (Dika & Singh, 2002). More specifically, with a stratified society that privileges individuals in closer proximity to wealth and power, it is theorized that the norms, knowledge, and values of those in the upper classes are most desirable and valuable. More simply put, social and cultural capital is reproduced because some communities are considered culturally wealthy and others are not (Bourdieu, 1986). Key to this argument is that institutional norms operate in ways to privilege and reward students with high-value social/cultural capital and undervalue the norms, behaviors, and knowledge of students from minoritized groups in higher education.

Normative School Perspective

In direct contrast, Coleman's (1988) normative school perspective, which is rooted in the structural-functionalist school, also draws from human capital theory but focuses on parental involvement and social structures. Parental involvement is central to the development,

maintenance, and transferal of social capital (Coleman, 1992). It emphasizes that the family structure is instrumental in maintaining social networks and regulating behaviors. According to Coleman, social capital is defined by its function or outcome which is influenced by the interactions and connections between people (Coleman, 1992). Coleman suggested social capital is derived from being embedded in a specific family, community, and societal network, which is contingent upon the actions of certain actors and the trust formed between community members, and the sanction or rewards given to those who follow established community norms (Coleman, 1992). Applied to higher education, the normative perspective, which continues to influence educational research and discourses about minoritized students, is often used to suggest "academic learning, intellectual development and persistence to degree completion are dependent upon a student's level of personal engagement or social integration into the social and intellectual fabric of the school" (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 13). This perspective ignores the fact that all students, particularly those from minoritized backgrounds, do not enter college with access to the highly valued social and cultural capital disseminated through intergenerational knowledge. The normative perspective also does not account for students' ability to access the social and cultural capital needed to navigate and succeed in higher education through the networks they develop and leverage while in college.

Critiques of Cultural and Social Capital

In the context of social inequity and higher education, Coleman's (1992) normative perspective on social capital theory does little to assign high value to the skills or experiences students from historically minoritized backgrounds have and leverage to navigate higher education and life. Specifically, the normative perspective places responsibility on the family to train and regulate behavior to ensure students assimilate into the dominant culture through access

to community social capital, yet often fails to acknowledge the influence of dominant cultural and structural forces operating in educational institutions. Coleman's theorizing on social capital also does not consider the extent to which students exert agency to influence their environment and act in ways outside the norms and rules established by their parents and community (Morrow, 1999). Additionally, Bourdieu's social resource perspective implies that students from racially or socially minoritized backgrounds must acquire the social and cultural capital valued by those in the upper class to be successful in higher education. This perspective is problematic because it assumes that students from minoritized communities do not possess valuable cultural and social capital that can contribute to their academic and personal success. Both Coleman and Bourdieu's foundational work suggests that social capital is primarily passed down through generations. Thus, using this lens, college-educated parents are more equipped to help their children navigate the uncertainty that college attendance might bring (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Although this statement holds some validity, it does not adequately account for the need and opportunity for minoritized students to develop the social and cultural capital needed to navigate higher education, specifically through engagement with nonfamily members or for the purpose of this study, administrators working at highly selective institutions.

In this research study, it is useful to consider the formation of social capital, because according to Coleman's (1988) perspective, "both social capital in the family and social capital in the community play roles in the creation of human capital in the rising generation" (p. 109). This perspective is incomplete because it does not fully call into question the various ways that individual actors or institutions operate to maintain the status quo for the benefit of those from privileged backgrounds. Also, the normative perspective does not account for the inherent strengths, skills, and knowledge that students from minoritized backgrounds, particularly first-

generation college students bring to the college environment (Bensimon, 2005; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Yosso, 2005). Finally, too often, the cultural component of social capital is neglected, which does little to acknowledge the use or abuse of power or exclusive practices operating in the neutral confines of higher education. To better understand how to best support students operating in the margins (i.e., students from underserved or historically minoritized communities), this research study, in part, may help reveal the opportunities or challenges available to support first-generation college students at highly selective institutions.

Although the social and cultural capital theory has been used extensively in research to explicate educational disparities as disaggregated by race, class, gender, ethnicity, and, more recently, first-generation college student status (Davis, 2010; Lareau, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001) some scholars have suggested its use has been misused or incomplete (Dika & Singh, 2002). Specifically, most research that employs a cultural or social capital framework has been used from a deficit lens to position students from minoritized backgrounds or underserved communities as inferior or culturally deficient (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2005). As discussed previously, the challenges faced by first-generation college students have been well documented (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). However, deficit-based approaches tend to overlook institutional barriers often informed by dominant values and norms while placing the problems and solutions on the individual and their communities. As a result, institutional programs informed by deficit-based approaches fail to generate effective institutional changes necessary to meet the needs and address the challenge experienced by first-generation college students. For these reasons, it is important to consider alternative theories to fill the gaps not addressed by cultural and social capital theories. More specifically, Yosso's (2005) CCW model can offer complementary, asset-informed, and strength-based perspectives to

better understand the experiences and relevant strategies useful to support first-generation college students in higher education.

Incorporating contemporary theories that attend to the specific contexts and lived experiences of minoritized groups is useful because it may help illuminate the educational experiences and opportunities of students from minoritized racial or social backgrounds. Additionally, the CCW model suggests individuals view minoritized students from an asset orientation and reject the dominant deficit perspective circulating throughout higher education. Key to this is identifying and understanding the practices of administrators who approach their work from a critical lens. More specifically, it would be greatly beneficial to increase the existing levels of knowledge regarding what can and should be done to facilitate success among first-generation college students. Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework can enhance our understanding of the behaviors and actions needed to drive institutional change to support student success.

Examination of the Institutional and Empowerment Agent Framework

Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001) explored the educational experiences of *low-status students*, whom he defined as youth from working-class and ethnic minority communities. In particular, his research focused on the social support networks and help-seeking experiences of low-income Mexican youth from immigrant families. He explained how based on one's social status, all youth may not have access to the same opportunities, information, and resources afforded to youth from middle-class backgrounds. He argued teachers and counselors play an important role in providing low-status youth with access to social capital by serving as institutional agents. Stanton-Salazar (1997) conceptualized institutional agents as people who "have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly or negotiate the transmission of

institutional resources and opportunities for the benefit of low-status youth" (p. 6). In 2011, Stanton-Salazar updated his theory to include the concept that an institutional agent is someone who has influence and holds a position of prestige or authority. Institutional agents use their position to access resources and design programs inclusive of minoritized students. In 2011, Stanton-Salazar expanded upon his work and presented a social capital framework that describes the "role requirements, skills-set, and ideology assumed by an institutional agent when providing a certain kind of support" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1080). This social capital framework delineates institutional agents into four categories of roles that can be enacted by the individual: direct support, integrative support, system developer and system linkage, and networking support. These groupings of roles are further divided into 14 subgroups according to the kind of support the institutional agent provides to minoritized students.

1. Direct support includes:
    a. Resource agent (i.e., person and positional resources)
    b. Knowledge agent (i.e., knowledge in navigating the system)
    c. Advisor (i.e., information gathering, problem-solving and decision making)
    d. Advocate (i.e., promoting and protecting students' interests)
    e. Networking coach (i.e., teaching, modeling, and developing)
2. Integrative support includes:
    a. Integrative agent (i.e., helping students integrate and participate in professional and institutional venues)
    b. Cultural guide (i.e., guiding and teaching in a cultural sphere)
3. System developer includes:
    a. Program developer (i.e., systematic program development)

b. Lobbyist (i.e., resource for student recruitment and support
c. Political advocate (i.e., political action group member)

4. System linkage and networking support includes:
    a. Recruiter (i.e., active student recruitment for program or department)
    b. Bridging agent (i.e., knowledgeable of and works with a strong network to connect students to other institutional agents)
    c. Institutional broker (i.e., holds resource knowledge and negotiates among parties)
    d. Coordinator (i.e., assesses needs, then identifies, provides, and ensures resources for students)

This framework highlights both the skill set and types of relationships that institutional agents might have with minoritized students. Based on the roles and skills noted previously, enacting these various roles carries different responsibilities and actions in collaboration with or on behalf of students. For example, someone who serves as an academic advisor may function to provide students with information about academic requirements and course offerings or advocate on behalf of a student during an academic dismissal hearing (i.e., advisor, advocate, and knowledge agent). Whereas in another capacity, the administrator may work at the system level to garner institutional resources to directly impact student success without working directly with students on an individual level (i.e., program developer, institutional broker). Given the various responsibilities (i.e., budgeting, advocacy, program development, networker, integrative support, etc.) required to lead support programs, critically minded, first-generation administrators may function in one or more of these capacities to support first-generation college student success.

Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined empowerment agents as individuals who operate "with a consciousness and the means by which to transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole" (p. 34). Empowerment agents act in the same capacity as institutional agents but they are motivated to engage in system-altering ways (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Through their collaborative work with minoritized youth, they aim to disrupt the practices and procedures that limit access and opportunities for these students. Critical to the work of empowerment agents is their intentional work to build a diverse network of individuals positioned to connect minoritized students with access to institutional resources and opportunities to support their success. Both institutional and empowerment agents manifest these roles through the following actions.

Role of Institutional Agents

As mentioned previously, institutional agents are nonkin individuals who work in ways to provide minoritized students with access to institutional resources and social networks to increase their cultural and social capital. Put another way, "It is only when these individuals use their capital to transmit high-value resources— opportunities, privileges, and services—to underserved students that they become institutional agents" (Bensimon & Dowd, 2012, p. 3). Over the past decade, the research on the institutional agent role has increased to include several dissertations (Brown, 2015; Carrasco-Nungaray 2011; Hernández, 2018; Jimenez, 2012; Pendakur, 2010). Brown (2015) and Carrasco-Nungaray (2011) found students benefited from establishing trusting relationships and sharing the highs and lows of their educational journey. Hernández's (2018) research focused on white, first-generation college students from rural backgrounds now attending a historically white institution. She found that sharing funds of knowledge was beneficial to supporting first-generation college students in their transition and navigating through the institution. Both Jimenez (2012) and Pendakur (2010) focused on faculty

and administrator participants identified by students as institutional agents. Jimenez's (2012) dissertation site was in a community college setting and Pendakur (2010) used a life history methodology to highlight the role of faculty and staff serving as institutional and empowerment agents at a highly selective, private, traditionally white institution. Notably, a social capital framework is used in each of these dissertations.

Additionally, a growing body of research has been conducted to delineate the various ways faculty and administrators function as institutional agents to specifically support students of color (Cole & Barber, 2003; Muses & Quaye, 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2007). For example, Smith et al. (2007) concluded Black students attending a historically white research institution benefited from interactions with institutional agents who disseminated information, helped explain faculty expectations and demystify cultural norms. The institutional agents were instrumental in helping students navigate institutional norms and increase their social and cultural capital. Similarly, Padgett et al. (2012) suggested individuals with higher levels of social capital are suited to develop and sustain interpersonal relationships and have an advantage in higher education. Simply put, students with more knowledge of the college environment are also better positioned to persist and overcome obstacles encountered.

Additionally, it is well documented that students, particularly those from historically underrepresented or excluded backgrounds, benefit from interactions with faculty, staff, and administrators whom they identify with and or share common educational experiences through higher education in various institutional settings. For example, in a single case dissertation study using social capital as a theoretical framework, Brown (2015) conducted interviews and observations with 10 institutional agents employed at a historically Black college and university (HBCU). Brown (2015) found administrators were able to build rapport and trust with African

American male students by discussing the challenges and obstacles encountered while in college. Through this insight, students drew connections to their own lived experiences and identified success strategies to help overcome the challenges they encountered in higher education. Findings from this study also suggest that African American male students are more likely to successfully navigate and become academically successful with the support of institutional agents. Although these studies make important contributions to the knowledge base, my research study can add to this body of work. Moreover, through my review of the literature, I have not found any research that uses the institutional and empowerment agent framework with a focus on the role of critically minded, first-generation administrators to explore their efforts in supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities. Although there are several research studies that focus on the institutional agent role, more research needs to be done to explore and better understand the actions of empowerment agents to drive student success and institutional change.

Role of Empowerment Agents

Empowerment agents function in the same capacity as the institutional agents but are guided by a social justice mindset in their efforts to support minoritized students. More specifically, although empowerment agents work to help support individual student success, they also work intentionally and strategically through their positions of authority and privilege to advance institutional change for the benefit of minoritized students. Equally important, the structure and resourcefulness embedded in their own social networks of individuals and resources, which can be leveraged for the advancement of minoritized students, is critical to their work and ability to function as empowerment agents (Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Table 1 distinguishes the defining characteristics of institutional and empowerment agents.

Table 1. Actions of Institutional and Empowerment Agents

Agent	Action
Institutional	Enable low-status students to see the direct correspondence between their goals and how to achieve them.
Institutional	Develop awareness in low-status students regarding resource acquisition for control over life
Institutional	Facilitate and enable the development of key coping strategies (including problem-solving capacities, networking skills, and help-seeking orientation
Empowerment	Help low-status students develop critical consciousness and sociological mindset regarding societal oppression (structures and systems) *decoding the system*
Empowerment	Helping low-status youth understand the particularities and power of counter-stratification in multiple sociopolitical contexts
Empowerment	Engage low-status youth in collaborative networking to change the world and enact meaningful social change
Empowerment	Ideologically driven by social justice mindset, counter-stratification goals, and Freirean critical consciousness

Note. Adapted from "The Search for Transformative Agents: The Counter-Institutional Positioning of Faculty and Staff at an Elite University," by S. Pendakur, 2010, Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina.

Stanton-Salazar (2011) noted that although many individuals, particularly in educational settings, are positioned to serve as empowerment agents, few consistently assume this role partially because it requires a "critical consciousness" and the "means by which to transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole" (p. 34) in a stratified educational system. Critical consciousness is derived from Freire's (1970),body of work, which represents a process of understanding the social structural forces operating to position minoritized students as inferior or deficient and are motivated to work against the hegemonic forces to create more equitable outcomes. This praxis-oriented approach requires both a critical awareness and the ability to act with and on behalf of others to bring about transformational change. It is important to note that

this critical ideological orientation is necessary to also help students develop an understanding of the social structural forces working to position them at the margins and impede their efforts to accomplish their educational goals. In the context of higher education, empowerment agents are instrumental to support students and drive institutional change through the adoption of inclusive policies, practices, and cultures to help minoritized students succeed (Kezar, 2011). This work is particularly necessary to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions, where they may be surrounded by a stratified and exclusive campus culture. Although the empowerment agent's role is vital to create more equitable, inclusive, and affirming educational spaces, this topic is understudied in educational research.

Notably, Pendakur's (2010) dissertation study offered unique insight into the conceptualization of the institutional and empowerment agent role. Through this research study, the author used a reputational sampling strategy to identify the potential pool of faculty and staff identified by 23 first-generation college students, many of whom were students of color from working-class backgrounds enrolled at a highly selective institution. Through ethnographic interviews shaped by a life history methodological approach, Pendakur sought to discover what contributed to their state of critical consciousness and a mindset centered on the counter-stratification of the six faculty and staff who elected to participate in her study. Counter stratification is the strategy that deliberately counters rigid hierarchical and oppressive reproductive social structures (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). Additionally, she aimed to empirically ground Stanton-Salazar's theoretical (1997, 2011) work by offering insight into the actions and behaviors the participants engaged in their roles as institutional and empowerment agents. Of the six participants, three identified as faculty, two identified as staff members, and

one came from a faculty background and currently served as an administrator to oversee the faculty hiring process.

Through data collection and analysis, Pendakur (2010) identified the pivotal educational and life experiences that informed and shaped the critical worldviews of the participants. More importantly, particularly as it relates to their work to support minoritized students, Pendakur found that none of the six participants held a deficit perspective about students and identified themes of asset orientation, belief in creating community and giving back, and maintaining critical consciousness as instrumental to their efforts to support minoritized students. Through my research study, I hoped to build upon this work by including more administrative representation, and I am suggesting a more asset-oriented and collegial way of presenting the research to inform practice across highly selective institutions.

Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework is a useful tool to uncover the actions and behaviors of administrators who approach their work from a critical systems perspective to bring about institutional change and support student success. Although there is a growing body of literature—most notably, dissertations—that draw from this work, additional research that focuses more on the mindset and experiences of first-generation administrators may inform our understanding of first-generation college students' experiences at highly selective institutions. Additionally, those who are motivated by a critical consciousness can enhance our understanding of ways to support student success and drive institutional change. for the betterment of students from minoritized backgrounds, particularly those who identify as first-generation college students. In the final section of this literature review, I will delve more into the roles and responsibilities of administrators and the significance of their identities and lived experiences informed by Bensimon's (2005, 2007) work around

practitioner knowledge and Blanchard Wallace's (2022) research on first-generation professionals.

Student Affairs Practice

Higher education institutions were not constructed and currently do not function in ways to support the success of all students (Kezar, 2011). As a result, there are many student affairs administrative roles that were created to support minoritized affinity and identity-based groups. Student affairs is the "organizational structure or unit within an institution responsible for students' out-of-class life and learning" (Winston et al., 2001, p. xi). As covered in Chapter I, student affairs administrators are professional staff, often operating in nonfaculty roles, who support students through extracurricular programs, events, resources, etc., in various institutional settings across higher education. They often work in student-facing roles in various units such as residential life, orientation, student activities, counseling services, and campus recreation. Due to the various roles administrators hold and the breadth of their responsibilities across all aspects of the student experience, student affairs administrators make up the largest segment of the workforce in higher education (Jo, 2008). Depending on the organization structure, student affairs administrators may be titled in entry-level, mid-level, or senior roles. Additionally, the scope of their work and level of autonomy may be differentiated by skill, training, education, and functional specialization. In the literature, student affairs administrators are often described based on their title or position in the organization, educational level, or professional years of experience required for the position (Rosser, 2000). Although the literature about student affairs captures the historical formation and current-day contexts influencing the field, administrators may enhance their understanding and practice by exploring the influence of their identities and experiences to inform their actions and behaviors in support of student success. To add to this

understanding, through this research study, I hoped to collect the voices of administrators who were first-generation college students themselves.

Literature About First-Generation Professionals

As shared previously, the scholarship about first-generation identity has not been explored much past the undergraduate student experience. This is surprising because we know that some of the same problems that plagued the undergraduate experience do not go away after graduating from college (Blanchard Wallace, 2022). First-generation college students become first-generation professionals. Issues related to navigating new institutional spaces, building social and cultural capital, and learning institutional norms, mores, and culture persist in the workplace. To aid our understanding about the barriers and assets that first-generation professionals experience in the workplace, Terry and Fobia (2019) conducted a qualitative research study with government employees. The researchers concluded first-generation professionals in government experience challenges navigating authority structures, networking, and developing professional pathways to gain advanced experiences. The researchers also found that the professionals exhibited high degrees of resilience and navigational adaptability. Resilience and navigational skills are forms of cultural capital highlighted in Yosso's (2005) CCW model.

Administrators come from various ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and there is a growing segment of administrators who were once first-generation college students (Blanchard Wallace, 2022). First-generation administrators are individuals who work in higher education and were once first-generation college students themselves throughout their undergraduate careers. First-generation administrators are influences and trailblazers who often rely on their lived experiences to help them navigate new situations and build relationships with

others (Blanchard Wallace, 2022). For example, Paquette (2018) found first-generation university presidents relied on their experiences as first-generation college students to inform their approach to work. The presidents placed a high value on people and worked to cultivate and sustain relationships with others inside and outside the institution. They were motivated to build a vast network to advance their work. Similarly, Meade (2012) conducted a qualitative research study with 14 first-generation academic advisors and concluded that study participants worked to build relationships with students and impart some of the cultural capital that first-generation college students may need to succeed. Both of these research studies offer insight into the actions of first-generation administrators and the potential to enhance support for first-generation college students.

Although first-generation college students have begun to receive much attention from policymakers, higher education leaders, philanthropists, and educational researchers, literature and research focused on first-generation administrators is scarce. Even though these administrators have experience successfully navigating and succeeding in higher education, the first-generation college student identity and the associated feelings continue to persist past graduation (Blanchard Wallace, 2022). Like the experiences that first-generation college students encounter when attempting to navigate a new institution, first-generation administrators must also work to learn the institution's cultural norms and expectations, establish collaborative relationships to be effective in their roles and navigate institutional barriers. For these reasons, it is important to recognize that the first-generation student identity, like other aspects of one's identity, influences how individuals are perceived by others and navigate spaces as graduate students, professionals, faculty, university presidents, etc. Unfortunately, through a review of the literature, I was not able to find much literature that explores the experiences of first-generation

professionals. To address this gap, I broadly examined the literature about first-generation professionals to identify themes related to practitioner knowledge and institutional barriers to student success.

Practitioner Knowledge to Support Student Success

In the field of higher education, scholars have called for critical ways to support the success of students from minoritized or underrepresented backgrounds. For example, Bensimon (2007) suggested institutions and administrators need to actively engage in actions to transform institutional cultures and structures to shape students' educational experiences and career trajectories. She also made the case for additional research to center the experiences of practitioners and their influence on minoritized students. Blanchard Wallace's (2022) research was a timely response because it captured the voices of 16 first-generation professionals and their experiences navigating higher education as students and now as faculty, administrators, and researchers in positions inside and outside higher education. Similarly, research that names the potential for staff and faculty to be effective institutional or empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011) has also highlighted more critical paradigms being used to understand how minoritized students experience higher education. Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011) made the case for envisioning an educational system in which more conscientious practitioners (i.e., administrators and faculty) are disruptive to a stratified educational system and work to bring about institutional change. The focus on critically minded, first-generation administrators and their work to advance equitable educational outcomes and experiences for the betterment of first-generation college students, is particularly relevant at highly selective institutions, which have traditionally not been inclusive to all students.

Examination of Practitioner Knowledge

In the context of highly selective institutions, given the pervasive culture of dominance and privilege and the ways in which first-generation college students are socially marginalized and excluded, it is important to examine the influence of one's values, knowledge and lived experiences and the implications for student success (Bensimon, 2007). Administrators who are unaware of the deficit-based perspectives they hold or fail to interrogate shape how students from minoritized backgrounds view and experience higher education. This reality is problematic and harmful. Similarly, administrators who are willing to use their access to institutional resources and privilege to interrogate the ways that institutional policy, practices, and procedures hinder or mitigate inequities among minoritized students can be instrumental in transforming institutional cultures to support student success. Yet, the impact of practitioner knowledge is understudied and often ignored in the literature about student success (Bensimon, 2007). Bensimon (2007) argued:

> If our goal is to do scholarship that makes a difference in the lives of students for whom higher education has been the least successful in education (e.g., racially minoritized groups and the poor), we have to expand the scholarship on student success and take into account the influence of practitioners - positively and negatively. If we continue to concentrate only on what students accomplished or failed to accomplish when they were in high school and what they do or fail to do once they enter college, our understanding of success will be flawed, as well as incomplete. (p. 445)

To enhance administrators' understandings of student success, it is helpful to add to the body of literature and create opportunities for administrators to reflect on their lived experiences and examine the ideologies that guide their work with students. Blanchard

Wallace's (2022) research offers a good place to start. Critically minded, first-generation administrators have unique cultural and academic pathways that may inform their work. Equally important, they may view inequitable outcomes as a sign of the institution's dysfunction rather than place blame on minoritized students and their communities. Additionally, their knowledge of the exclusionary practices and institutional cultures that impede student success may provide a valuable perspective on the strategic challenges facing universities and students in general.

This research study is in response to Bensimon's (2007) call to incorporate practitioner knowledge and their experiences to inform our work to better support minoritized students, particularly first-generation college students. The insight shared by critically minded, first-generation administrators have the potential to enhance support structures and transform the institutional culture to benefit all students.

Chapter Conclusion

Through a review of the literature about student success and first-generation college students it is evident that researchers approach their work from different perspectives. A growing body of literature has focused on student characteristics and experiences through higher education (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006). More recently, researchers have shifted their focus to examine the roles and responsibilities of institutions to promote the integration and success of first-generation college students (Bensimon, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2011). This research study blends the two topics to explore the experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators and their work at highly selective institutions. Although precollege characteristics, enrollment, and the persistence of first-generation college students have been studied using a variety of theoretical frameworks including social and cultural capital theory, unfortunately, much of the research and narratives are used in higher

education contexts to cast students from minoritized backgrounds as deficient, inferior, or lacking the necessary social and cultural capital needed to succeed and thrive in higher education. This is problematic and harmful to the students we intend to serve. Moreover, the literature suggests that some theories are not appropriate to explain the experiences of college students from minoritized backgrounds. This concern is particularly relevant in the case of first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions who are trailblazers working to navigate unfamiliar environments shaped by dominant social and cultural knowledge, norms, and values embedded in higher education. These students work to persist and graduate without the benefit of their parents' generational knowledge about the college environment. Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework is appropriate to conceptualize the role of administrators, who are needed to distribute cultural and social capital but also to disrupt harmful institutional practices that hinder efforts to support student success, particularly to the benefit of first-generation college students.

It is evident that administrators who function as institutional and empowerment agents play important roles to help students from underserved populations succeed in higher education (Hernández, 2018; Pendakur, 2010; Sikes, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). By exploring the experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators I used the institutional and empowerment agent framework and components of Yosso's (2005) CCW framework to identify ways critically minded, first-generation administrators work to support first-generation college students and drive institutional change.

Through this research, I hoped to add to the literature and amplify the voices of critically minded, first-generation administrators, who were first-generation college students themselves. I believe there is much to be learned from those who are most familiar with the issues impacting

first-generation college students. As a first-generation administrator who sits in a position of power and privilege juxtaposed with lived experiences of marginalization and oppression, I recognize the need to ask critical questions and work to counter inequitable systems. This research study is relevant and timely as the number of first-generation college students applying and enrolling in higher education, particularly at highly selective institutions, continues to grow. More importantly, many first-generation college students hold other minoritized social identities and stand to gain the most as they work to persist and graduate despite institutional barriers and exclusive institutional cultures and practices. I am hopeful that this research is one of many attempts to reveal strategies to support student success, mitigate institutional barriers, drive institutional change, and contribute to the national conversation to help reimagine how we can better support first-generation college student success in higher education to benefit all, today, tomorrow, and forever.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

I employed a basic qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of critically minded first-generation administrators and their work supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. This chapter details how I gathered the information needed to address my three research questions. I begin by outlining the research questions and then describe how my research paradigm informed my approach to this research study. Then, I describe the conceptual framework, methods, and population of interest. Rather than provide an individual summary of participants or institutions, I provide a group summary of the participants and their respective institutions. I chose to use a group summary format to provide anonymity for all participants and encourage the reader to focus on the culture of highly selective institutions rather than the institution's name or reputation. I conclude with an overview of data coding and analysis, strengths, limitations, assumptions, and ethical considerations.

Research Questions

To best explore and capture the study participant's experiences, this research study was guided by the following three research questions:

- How do critically minded administrators who were first-generation college students approach their work to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions?
- How do critically minded, first-generation administrators use their unique backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to create and lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions?

- What do critically minded, first-generation administrators working with first-generation college students perceive as barriers to their work at highly selective colleges and universities?

I designed the first question to allow study participants to explore how, if at all, their critical orientation influenced their approach to work. I intended for the second question to build upon the first to understand how study participants examined how their experiences, backgrounds, and knowledge informed their work supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. I designed the third question to learn how study participants identified and articulated perceived barriers to their work. I used Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) framework to analyze and make sense of the data. Additionally, at the end of each findings chapter, I share advice and recommendations from study participants to support those who engage or wish to enhance support for first-generation college students.

Conceptual Framework

As shared previously, I approached this research study and my work in higher education with a critical lens. I was curious about understanding how first-generation administrators perceived their work in elite academic spaces. This understanding drove my motivation to explore ways administrators can and do engage in work to disrupt oppressive systems to benefit minoritized students. For this reason, I saw this study as political and subjective. My personal experiences were reflected in many of the stories shared by study participants, some of whom were friends, acquaintances, and now new colleagues. In this conceptual framework section, I share my motivation and rationale, which are heavily influenced by my experiences as a first-

generation college student, graduate, and administrator who worked at a highly selective institution and continue to navigate elite spaces. I explain the research paradigm and theoretical frameworks that helped guide this study. These components are instrumental because they provided a lens for me to make meaning and better understand the responses from 20 critically minded, first-generation administrators who generously and courageously shared their stories for this study.

My desire to conduct this study was influenced by my personal and professional experiences as a first-generation college student, graduate, and administrator. At the time of the study, I had worked in higher education for over 17 years and held several roles in various institutional settings. Regardless of my title or documented job responsibilities, I have intentionally sought ways to support students from historically excluded backgrounds through policy formation, support programs, advocacy, and management of institutional resources. Through my graduate studies, I adopted a critical orientation that compelled me to interrogate educational norms, values, and practices that shape higher education. As a result, I brought a critical lens to this study. The critical paradigm aligns with my desire to "seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24) with a critical lens to the structures and systems operating in higher education. Glesne (2016) recommended a paradigm should drive the research design, questions, and aims. A critical approach is also consistent with the tenets of qualitative research when used to explore, contextualize, and interpret how participants make meaning of their experiences and interactions with the world. Rather than quantify or prove a predetermined hypothesis, I invited study participants to share their opinions, subjective accounts, and perceptions of reality, which helped me nuance the descriptive and complex views that made up this research study (Creswell, 2013). Inherent in my critical

paradigm was a social justice agenda that challenged oppressive practices and called for social change through individual and collective action.

Moreover, using a critical paradigm allowed me to position myself in the research. As a seasoned administrator who shares the first-generation college student identity and other minoritized and privileged social identities, I integrated my own background and knowledge to contribute to the data (Creswell, 2013). I recognized knowledge was created through interactions between researchers and participants, so I worked to lessen the distance between participants and me by building rapport and openly sharing my experiences. I also held the ontological belief that one's perception of the world is influenced by an evolving and complex sociopolitical context. I acknowledged although all participants had unique backgrounds and stories, their experiences were influenced by historical and social factors, including their first-generation college student identities, among other socially constructed identity categories. A person's social identities and positionality can influence how they move through the world and their interactions with others. This belief prominently guided the purposeful sampling of participants and approach to qualitative data collection. Through semistructured interview questions and an open-ended prompt, I encouraged study participants to reflect and construct meaning from their personal and professional experiences.

I was also motivated to learn more about their first-generation college student experiences and to explore if and how it informed their knowledge, skills, and disposition toward their work. Furthermore, I was eager to explore if and how study participants worked to drive institutional change through individual or collective actions. These goals, coupled with my lived experiences and a critical paradigm, influenced how I connected with participants, the methodology used, and the data analysis and interpretation. Thus, the congruence of my critical

paradigm and the qualitative research design allowed me to best capture and understand the perspectives of 20 administrators, who were first-generation college students themselves, to inform my own work and future practices to enhance student success strategies.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, I drew from two frameworks to make meaning of study participants' responses. Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework and Yosso's (2005) CCW frameworks were used for analysis in this study. Each framework draws from social capital theory, rejects deficit-based framing, and has been used to explore experiences of faculty, staff, and administrators who support minoritized students. Although I did not explicitly use the terminology of these frameworks during the individual interviews with participants, by inquiring about the motivating factors that informed their decisions to attend college, their interactions and experiences in college, and the influence of their first-generation college student identity as administrators, I was able to use the frameworks to analyze, interpret, and report research findings based on study participants' individual and collective responses.

Methods

In this section, I outline the study's research design including the rationale for qualitative methodology, the process to identify highly selective institutions, and the criteria used to recruit and select study participants. I also offer group summaries of the study participants and the respective institutions where they worked at the time of the study. I conclude this chapter with information about the data collection procedures to manage and analyze the data and offer additional information about the strengths, limitations, and assumptions of this research study.

Basic Qualitative Inquiry

Due to the complex and multifaceted characteristics associated with the first-generation college student identity and the understudied nature of this research topic I wanted to explore, this study was grounded in qualitative inquiry. I used a basic qualitative methodology to capture and document the study participants' experiences. I was drawn to qualitative methodology because the root of this inquiry focused on participants' professional internal perceptions, behaviors, and understanding. Through the use of open-ended questions through the individual interviews and preinterview questionnaire, qualitative inquiry allowed me to focus on participant's experiences with a particular focus on: "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Qualitative data help describe situations and capture participants' experiences in their own words. It includes collecting data from participants' nonverbal and verbal remarks, field observations, and documents review (Patton, 2002). A qualitative methodology aligned with my research goals because I was most concerned with gathering rich data from a suitable sample size to understand better how critically minded, first-generation administrators made sense of their lived experiences.

The research questions that influenced the interview questions were designed to encourage study participants to reflect on and describe their experiences as first-generation college students navigating higher education while in college and, at the time of the research study, as an administrator. During individual interviews and in a written, open-ended prompt, participants were also encouraged to describe if and how their critical orientation influenced their approach to work. Additionally, participants were asked to describe their experiences leading programs to support first-generation college students at a highly selective institution and discuss

if and how their background and experiences informed their work. The nature of the inquiry, guided by critical research questions, lent itself best to basic qualitative research methods. In the next section, I review the exact steps I used to identify the research site, in this case, highly selective colleges and universities in the United States.

Research Site

Although the potential existed to identify and talk with many administrators who worked to support first-generation college students enrolled in various institutional settings, to frame this study, participants had to self-identify as first-generation administrators and, at the time of the research study, work to lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities. To identify potential study participants, I first had to establish the criteria to identify highly selective institutions. Over 100 colleges and universities in the United States are deemed elite or highly selective based on various factors. I made several decisions to narrow the list and make it more manageable. I used the U.S. News & World Report (n.d.) Best Colleges Report to identify institutions with a selection rate of less than 30%. I decided to eliminate any specialized schools (i.e., military-affiliated, music, or performing arts schools) because, upon further investigation of their institutional websites, I realized most did not have a designated office or administrative role in supporting first-generation college students. My process generated a list of roughly 80 highly selective colleges and universities. I then began the arduous task of looking at each institution's website to find the contact information for the individual or individuals who worked in an office or center charged with first-generation college student support. Some websites were better than others, and in some instances, I emailed multiple people to find the appropriate person's contact information. I was pleasantly surprised that some people responded quickly to my inquiries to share updated contact information and

expressed interest in the research study. After a few days of reviewing institutional websites, I created a spreadsheet that included the institution's name, website link, and contact information for 76 individuals representing 48 institutions. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from my graduate institution, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I contacted potential study participants in August 2022. In the next section, I discuss my process for recruiting and selecting study participants.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

I used a combination of purposeful sampling procedures (i.e., focused criterion and snowball sampling) to recruit and select study participants. I selected both sampling procedures because they helped identify information-rich cases, which could have enhanced my understanding of the topic of study (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is useful for studying participants who highly represent the phenomenon of interest because they may offer greater insight and a clearer understanding. Criterion sampling helps identify participants who meet predetermined criteria. In this instance, criterion sampling was used intentionally to recruit participants who self-identified as: (a) critically minded, (b) first-generation administrators, and (c) worked to lead programs to support first-generation college students at a highly selective institution in the United States. To also help recruit study participants, I used snowball sampling. Snowball sampling involves starting with one or more participants who meet the selection criteria and can identify and refer other individuals, who meet the selection criteria, to participate in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2002). Three of the 20 participants were identified through snowball sampling. Because I wanted to specifically recruit first-generation administrators who operated from a critical perspective, in my recruitment email (see Appendix A), I included the following questions:

- Do you currently lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at a highly selective college or university?
- Do you identify as a first-generation administrator, formerly a first-generation college student?
- Do you bring a critical systems perspective to your work?
- Do you desire to enact social change through your work?

The recruitment email allowed participants to self-determine if they met the selection criteria and provided additional information about the research study, including the consent forms. I sent a recruitment email to 120 potential study participants. As I received responses, I screened to determine which participants did not meet the criteria based on first-generation identity status and work function. I ended up with a list of 54 potential study participants. Afterward, I sent a follow-up email with a Calendly link, an external scheduling platform, to schedule an individual interview. I also asked the potential study participants to email a copy of their signed consent forms before their scheduled interview time. Twenty study participants met the selection criteria, completed the preinterview questionnaire, submitted a signed consent form, and participated in an individual interview. The 20 study participants represented 15 highly selective colleges and universities in the United States. As an incentive for their participation, I provided a small token of appreciation in the form of a $25 Visa gift card or the option to receive a copy of the book *First Generation Professionals in Higher Education* by Mary Blanchard Wallace and Associates. Twelve study participants requested a Visa gift card, seven study participants requested a book, and one participant declined to receive either item. After completing their individual interview, 19 of the 20 study participants received either an electronic Visa gift card or the book mailed to their preferred address. To date, all books and gift

cards have been delivered, and only seven Visa gift cards have been used. Now that I have thoroughly discussed the participant recruitment and selection process, in the next section, I review the three data collection methods used in this research study.

Data Collection Procedures

I used three primary methods to collect data electronically and virtually for this research study. Next, I describe the process and utility of each data collection instrument.

Preinterview Questionnaire

I designed and disseminated via Qualtrics, an online survey tool, a preinterview questionnaire to capture participants' demographic information and responses to an open-ended prompt and Likert-scale question (see Appendix B). The open-ended prompt asked participants to respond to the following in less than 150 words: Briefly describe your understanding of social justice, equity, or critical theory and how this understanding may or may not influence your work with first-generation college students enrolled at a highly selective institution.

As depicted in Table 2, participants were also asked to respond to the following Likert-scale question: With respect to your work to support first-generation college students at your institution, indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements. Participants' responses to the preinterview questionnaire provided a useful data point that was incorporated into the individual interview for their further reflection and elaboration.

Table 2. Preinterview Questionnaire

Statement	I am driven by a social justice mindset	I am motivated to challenge the status quo	I approach my work with a critical lens	I engage in actions to disrupt oppressive institutional policies and practices
Strongly agree	16	15	15	10
Somewhat agree	3	5	5	8
Neither agree nor disagree	1			
Strongly disagree				2

Individual Interviews

To capture the voices and experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators, I conducted one semistructured interview via Zoom, a virtual communication platform, with each participant. With participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and ranged from 75 to 90 minutes, with the average interview lasting 82 minutes. To help guide and initiate discussion during the interview, I prepared a list of questions arranged by topic based on my three research questions (see Appendix C). Patton (2002) noted there are six kinds of question options to ask participants during individual interviews to gather the most pertinent rich data. Given the information I hoped to gather from study participants, I decided to include questions that focused on their knowledge, experience, background, values/opinions. The virtual semistructured interview format allowed me to work off a list of loosely constructed questions that spoke to the research problem and offered flexibility to probe further or transition to new questions based on the insight offered by each participant (Creswell, 2013). I chose to conduct all interviews via Zoom due to three destabilizing and traumatizing social incidents: (a) the COVID-19 global health pandemic, (b) harmful incidents of racial injustice particularly experienced by Black and Brown people, and (c) the rapid departure of many employees from

higher education positions. The impact of these incidents has caused the student affairs profession to shift in unprecedented and unpredictable ways. Acknowledging the need for administrators to lead and adjust during these challenging times, it was hard for me to predict how a typical work pattern in the summer may have changed and impacted one's availability to participate in this study. I was conscious and sensitive to the realities and wanted to minimize potential barriers. Virtual interviews offered participants the most flexibility based on time demands and geographic needs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, many administrators appreciated meeting virtually via Zoom due to their flexible work arrangements.

Notes and Analytic Memos

In addition to recording each interview, I took strategic and focused notes during the interview. The hand-written notes were another helpful data point to capture my early thinking in the moment, which was useful for analysis after the interview. Taking notes during the interview required a careful balance of attentiveness to the participant's verbal and nonverbal comments and notes for myself. During and after each interview, I made notes of similarities and divergent points in the data, recorded the time, highlighted powerful quotes, and included additional questions for further inquiry and analysis. After each interview, I wrote a short memo that included my initial reflections, concerns, follow-up questions, observations, potential codes, and emergent themes.

The three primary data collection methods allowed me to encourage study participants to speak in their own words and afforded me the flexibility to respond and adapt as needed. In the next section, I provide a group summary for additional contexts about the 20 study participants and their respective institutions.

Participant and Institutional Group Summary

Confidentiality and anonymity were critical due to the sensitive nature of the provided data. I know first-hand the high personal, professional, and political cost of challenging dominant ideologies and exclusive practices in higher education spaces. Although this study was not designed to gather identifiable information about specific individuals or institutions, I was attentive to the need to create space for administrators to participate anonymously without jeopardizing their professional reputation or career. As shared previously, in highly selective colleges and universities, there were a few offices and administrative roles devoted to supporting first-generation college students and a growing close-knit community of administrators. I acknowledged and understood the risk associated with offering any critiques of the very institution in which study participants were employed. This point was made evident when three participants expressed interest in my research study, but they first wanted to explain the steps taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. For these reasons, throughout this dissertation, all identifiable information was omitted, and identity masking was used to help ensure participants' privacy and anonymity. I used pseudonyms for study participants and institutional names and did not make any reference to institutional geography, administrative titles, or office/center names. Furthermore, to protect participants' identities, I decided not to list the profiles of each participant. Instead, in the next few paragraphs, I offer an extensive group summary of the 20 participants representing 15 highly selective colleges and universities across the United States. In the Chapters IV–VI, I share more about the study participants' backgrounds, mindsets, and strategies used to support first-generation college students and drive institutional change.

Study Participants Group Summary

The 20 study participants self-identified as critically minded, first-generation college administrators. Study participants identified as men and women. Most were raised and socialized in working-class to lower-middle-income socioeconomic backgrounds. One study participant who immigrated to the United States during their adolescent years noted their family's socioeconomic status changed from middle-income to lower-income when they emigrated from their home county. The vast majority of study participants represented different minoritized racial, ethnic, and social identity groups, and only two identified as white. Several study participants came from rural communities, and a few were raised by their immigrant parents.

When asked about their educational background, five study participants disclosed they were singled out for their academic abilities. They were placed on the college-bound track or received scholarship support to attend a private high school. Three study participants attended a highly selective institution for their undergraduate studies, three were transfer students, and one study participant attended a historically Black college and university (HBCU). When applying to college, most were recipients of substantial financial aid and scholarship support due to their socioeconomic background or academic abilities. Five study participants mentioned receiving academic scholarships to cover the cost of tuition; two were McNair fellows, one was a QuestBridge leadership scholar, and one was a Gates millennium scholar. While enrolled in college, all reported some degree of involvement on campus through their work-study jobs or with student organizations. All reported working during their time in college, and many held leadership roles as tour guides, orientation leaders (OL), and resident assistants (RA). Two study participants were recruited to play sports in college, and six were proud fraternity or sorority members.

Collectively, all study participants had received a master's degree, seven had terminal degrees, and two study participants were enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of study. Additionally, study participants' years of professional experience working in higher education were vast. Two student participants had less than 5 years of experience, seven had between 6–10 years of experience, six had between 11–15 years of experience, and five had more than 16 years of experience working in higher education. Most had worked exclusively in higher education, but some worked previously in social work, K–12 education, or the nonprofit sector.

Institutional Group Summary

The 15 highly selective colleges and universities represented in this study also shared similarities and differences. As shared previously, highly selective colleges and universities include private and public, large, mid-size and small, rural, suburban, and urban highly selective institutions across the United States. Most institutions are classified as Research 1 institutions, and there is a small representation of liberal arts institutions. None of the participants' institutions met the criteria to be considered minority-serving institutions. On average, the first-generation college student population on participants' campuses was between 12–25%, with one administrator noting a significant increase in their incoming class comprising 61% first-generation college students. The high percentage of first-generation college students for one participants' campus was an anomaly among highly selective colleges and universities.

More than half of study participants were in inaugural roles, and few of their offices/centers had existed for more than 5 years at the time of the study. Due to the short tenure of these offices/centers, many were engaged in work to streamline the highly decentralized nature of their institutions, build strong relationships across campus, and raise awareness of the distinct needs and strengths of first-generation college students. Additionally, participants

discussed their efforts to help shape the narrative about first-generation college students, challenge deficit-based perspectives, and work strategically to secure and allocate institutional resources to meet student needs. Most participants were situated in the divisions of academic affairs, student affairs, enrollment management, diversity, equity, and inclusion and worked in various functional areas of the institution, including career services, residence life, multicultural affairs, academic advising, and first-generation student support. Three offices/centers were completely donor-funded and most exclusively supported undergraduate students. Eight had applied and received designation as First-gen Forward institutions, a designation program launched by The Center for First-generation Student Success, acknowledging higher education institutions for their commitment to first-generation student success.

The group summary about study participants and their respective institutions was intended to provide contextual information to help illustrate and elucidate the individual and collective factors that shaped study participants' experiences and work at highly selective institutions. Next, I describe the data coding and analysis process, discuss the study's limitations and strengths, and explain the steps I took to ensure ethical considerations.

Data Management and Analysis

The beauty and challenge of qualitative research is the opportunity to capture a large volume of rich and descriptive data (Glesne, 2016). To avoid being overwhelmed by the amount of data collected, I developed a process to systematically collect, clean, code, organize, and analyze data collected from engagement with the 20 study participants.

Data Management

As shared previously, I used Zoom to conduct and record all interviews virtually. I also paid for a speech-to-text transcription service, Otter.ai, to audio record the interviews, and I later

used it for transcription. Based on previous experiences, I found the transcription from Otter.ai to be more accurate than the transcription provided from Zoom. To familiarize myself with the data, I watched the video recording and listened to the audio recording at least twice, then transcribed the first five interviews by hand. Although transcription is a time-consuming process, Patton (2002) recommended researchers transcribe at least some of the data to "more deeply immerse yourself in the data as a first step during analysis" (p. 381). Once I felt more familiar with the data, I decided to use Otter.ai to transcribe the remaining 15 interviews. I found Otter.ai to be fairly accurate, although I did have to clean the data and make moderate edits to each transcript. To assist with the editing process, I simultaneously watched and listened to each recording and made edits to the transcript along with notes in the margins for myself. After each interview, I made preliminary jottings and precodes to start to process the data for future reference (Saldaña, 2021).

Additionally, I listened to each audio recording on my cell phone while walking and on my hour-long commutes to and from work. While I listened to the audio recordings on my evening walks or work commute, I laughed out loud, shook my head in agreement or frustration, and when an ah moment struck, I used my cell phone to record messages to myself that I later transcribed using Otter.ai. After listening and watching the recordings, cleaning the transcripts, and merging my notes with the appropriate transcripts, I printed single-sided copies of each transcript. Although this process was lengthy, I found it extremely valuable because it helped me become more familiar with the data and allowed me to make notes about my thoughts on the printed transcripts as I prepared for multiple rounds of coding and continuing data analysis. To protect the data collected, all original recorded audio and video files, along with transcripts and other notes related to the study, were uploaded to UNCG's Box service, a secure, password-

protected cloud-based platform. I stored the printed transcripts in a locked cabinet in my home office. In this section, I discussed the process I used to manage the data, which included storing the audio and video files, listening and watching the recordings, editing the transcripts, and taking notes throughout, which is an integral part of the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Glesne (2016) explained the aim of data analysis "is to organize what you have seen, heard, and read so you can figure out what you have learned and make sense of what you have experienced" (p. 183). Data analysis is an iterative process of moving between the raw data from the research study, literature, and theoretical frameworks at the onset of data collection. According to Maxwell (2013), the data analysis process should begin immediately after the first interview. As evident from the description of my data management process, I began trying to make sense of the data by reading, watching, and listening to all files from the research study while continuing to conduct interviews with participants. Early and continual engagement with the data allowed me to promptly identify patterns and gaps in the data and develop tentative ideas about categories and emergent themes (Saldaña, 2021). To further facilitate the analysis and interpretation of data, I used two first cycle coding methods, elemental coding, which includes in-vivo and descriptive coding, and affective coding, which includes values coding as part of the thematic analysis. Next, I outline my steps to facilitate the data analysis process.

Initial Coding

According to Saldaña (2021), in qualitative data analysis, a code is generated by the researcher using a "single word, phrase, or short sentence to capture the essence of every datum in the corpus" (p. 5). Coding is an analysis and a method of discovery. Although I knew coding software existed, I decided to code by hand and used Microsoft Excel software to help organize

the data. Saldaña (2021) recommended coding manually to allow for greater manipulation and control over the data. To facilitate the data analysis process, I used a combination of inductive and deductive codes. Saldaña (2021) described inductive coding as a "learn as you go" (p. 41) approach and deductive coding occurs when you "begin the analytic enterprise with a set of a priori (predetermined) codes" (p. 40). Later in this section, I describe how I used a priori codes.

My research goals guided the analysis to help me understand how study participants described and made meaning of their approach to supporting first-generation college students enrolled in highly selective colleges and universities. Additionally, I drew from my critical paradigm and theoretical approach to guide the coding decisions. For example, I decided to use thematic analysis because I was interested in identifying patterns to better understand the inquiry of study (Boyatzis, 1998). Lastly, using a thematic data analysis process that incorporated in vivo and values coding aligned with my methodological approach to validate and include the participants' descriptions of their unique circumstances and their lived experiences, including their attitudes, beliefs, and values.

In the first coding round, I used in vivo coding as an inductive strategy for data analysis to illuminate and honor the views shared by study participants. In vivo coding is useful to capture the terms used by participants as codes to amplify their voices and "ground the analysis in their perspective" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 92). An in vivo coding approach aligns with frameworks that draw from and are intended to illuminate the experiences of those operating at the margins. Centering the experiences of minoritized individuals is central to the overarching values and practical goals of institutional and empowerment agents, CCW, and practitioner knowledge frameworks (Bensimon 2005, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2011; Yosso, 2005). After the first cycle of in vivo coding, I had a list of over 75 codes. Then, I applied values coding to the

initial list of codes and continued to edit down in subsequent cycles sifting continually through the data. According to Saldaña (2021), values coding is useful to help identify codes that reflect the study participant's "values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing [their] perspectives or worldviews" (p. 167). Values coding at this juncture was useful to review and start identifying potential categories informed by codes reflecting participants' perceptions of their world, which enabled me to collapse the data further to prepare deductive a priori coding. The process was not linear as I moved back and forth through the data many times while reviewing my notes, listening to audio files, and watching the video again to help me decide how to organize the large data chunks. At this point, I had 58 codes, and I introduced a priori codes generated from my review of the literature highlighted in Chapter II and from the conceptual framework introduced earlier in this chapter. A priori coding allowed me to determine whether specific institutional and empowerment agents and CCW constructs were present in study participants' stories. After further coding, I combined and collapsed the codes from the initial coding cycles into a list of 22 codes. Then, I prepared to move to the second cycle of coding, where I intended to identify connections in and across the data (Saldaña, 2021).

Second Cycle Coding

In keeping with the study's guiding frameworks, I used participants' exact words to help derive categories. Drawing from thematic analysis, I began to analyze sections of the data based on aspects of my research questions and looked for patterns across the data set. At this point, I found it helpful to move from the Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to using post-it notes on a butcher block sheet of paper to look for primary categories. After multiple attempts at shifting, reorganizing, and condensing commonly used words, I could visually observe links between the categories, which helped me identify three major themes that encompassed my research

questions and reflected study participants' words and perspectives. Saldaña (2021) described a theme as "an extended-phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about or what it means" (p. 258). Table 3 highlights the three themes and 12 subthemes that reflected an overarching pattern of meaningful data derived from this study. In Chapters IV–VI, I discuss the three main themes and 11 subthemes in greater detail to explore possible alignment between theory and practice.

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. My Presence is a Disruption for Good	1. Critical Orientation and System-Aware Perspective 2. Asset-Based Approach 3. Centering First-Generation College Students 4. Institutional Capacity Building
2. I am Called to Do This Work	1. Drawing from Experience and Knowledge 2. Paying it Forward 3. Influential Mentors and Advocates
3. Many Barriers to Navigate	1. Infrastructure and Capacity 2. Decentralized Resources 3. Unhealthy Culture 4. Restricted Financial Support

Strengths, Limitations, and Assumptions of the Study

There are several strengths, limitations, and assumptions of the current study that were important to understand. I explain each in greater detail in the following sections.

Strengths

Although I worked intentionally to make informed decisions to ensure that all aspects of the research study accurately reflected, honored, and respected the voices and confidentiality of each study participant, I was aware of variables that may have influenced interpretation of the data and findings. This study featured several strengths, including the design of the study, the experience and knowledge I brought to this study, and my professional network. The qualitative

approach for this study incorporated three data-collecting methods. The data I collected from the preinterview survey, individual interviews, and analytical memos provided me with rich data that facilitated in-depth insight into the experiences, perspectives, and behaviors of each study participant. My decision to include recommendations and advice from participants offered candid and authentic feedback intended to enhance first-generation student support and contribute to the success of the administrators charged with nurturing their success. This decision also kept the voices of critically minded, first-generation administrators central, which guided me in generating implications directly relevant and grounded in the experiences of study participants. Additionally, this study helped amplify and give greater visibility to critically minded, first-generation administrators, to contribute to the literature and conversations about first-generation student success.

In addition to the study design, my insider status and role as a researcher added strength to the research study. At the time of the study, I had worked in higher education for over 17 years and brought knowledge and expertise about conditions necessary to support minoritized student success. I have deep personal and professional knowledge about the experiences of first-generation college students and administrators working at highly selective institutions. Throughout my career, I built a strong reputation and professional network, which I leveraged to pilot the interview questions and also engaged extensively with study participants and other colleagues familiar with the topic matter to help confirm and validate my findings. Lastly, due to my positionality, I had direct experience navigating higher education as a first-generation college student and administrator; thus, I brought my own experiences to build rapport with participants and contribute to understanding the study topic. Although the study design and my professional and personal backgrounds, knowledge, and experience were strengths I brought to this study, I

also note several limitations that may have influenced the data collection, interpretation, and findings.

Limitations

Many administrators and university leaders faced challenging and work-altering demands brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic, increasing student demands, and the influx of employees resigning from their jobs or leaving the profession. Numerous articles have been featured in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noting an alarming trend among higher education administrators dealing with burnout, dissatisfaction, or pivoting out of the student affairs profession to assume roles outside of higher education. Two study participants highlighted this fact when they notified me they recently changed jobs and intentionally decided not to work at a highly selective institution. One other study participant decided to leave the profession altogether. Therefore, the findings may highlight a greater dissatisfaction or criticism reflecting this unique moment. Additionally, this work drew from the experiences and perspectives of 20 critically minded, first-generation administrators employed at 15 institutions that are not reflective and representative of all colleges and universities. Moreover, although Creswell (2013) considered "the hallmark of good qualitative research is particularity rather than generalizability" (p. 204), some may consider the sample size, sample criteria, and a specific focus on highly selective colleges and universities as a possible limitation of this study. Nevertheless, I decided to move forward with this study because this was a unique personal and professional opportunity to document the experiences of a population often overlooked in higher education research, first-generation administrators.

Assumptions

While conducting this study, I assumed study participants were open and honest in their responses. I also assumed first-generation administrators who approached their work with a critical lens faced different work encounters than other administrators who did not share this identity or critical orientation. Based on their lived experiences and knowledge of the challenges encountered by first-generation college students, I also assumed first-generation administrators who operated from a critical system perspective took unique approaches to working with first-generation students enrolled at highly selective institutions.

Ethical Considerations

As a researcher and administrator, I had to consider the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' identities and experiences and their critiques, fears, needs, and desires (Creswell, 2013). I honored these elements throughout the sampling, data collection, analysis, and reporting process. To protect study participants, I obtained IRB approval and completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) education training through my home institution, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. As required by IRB, all participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study, and everyone was assigned or picked a pseudonym. Additionally, rather than listing individual profiles, a common dissertation practice, I presented a group summary to avoid disclosing any identifying information about participants or their institutions.

As a researcher and doctoral student, I was also aware of my position of power and privilege and worked to minimize the distance between the participants and me. I worked to build rapport and had immense gratitude to study participants for trusting me with their time and stories. In the spirit of reciprocity, it was my personal commitment to try to engage and support

study participants. For instance, I have shared additional resources with three participants to support their work, and I have invited another study participant to facilitate a dialogue with my colleagues. To acknowledge and minimize my own biases and subjectivity throughout this research process, I kept an audio journal to record my reflective thoughts, which was an effective strategy to process and develop my ideas further when time allowed.

Glesne (2016) recommended "the enlistment of others to obtain their perspectives on your interpretations and to provide feedback" (p. 212). Because I knew a few of the participants from my professional network, I used the following validity measures to counterbalance my positionality. I engaged in peer debriefing and member checking to strengthen the research design and help establish the validity of the data and results. Before starting the study, I piloted the interview questions with two colleagues who identified as critically minded, first-generation administrators with experience leading programs supporting first-generation college students. They were also well-established and considered experts on first-generation college student success. These exploratory interviews helped me gain some more practice in conducting interviews and were useful to ensure the interview questions were constructed to answer my research questions.

I also used peer debriefing to help me articulate, process, and explain the interpretation of the data and findings (Glesne, 2016). To assist in this process, I copresented at a conference and shared the preliminary findings from the research study. Three of the study participants attended the conference. Individually, these study participants encouraged me to share more about how I planned to build upon this research and write more about the internal motivation and conflict experienced by first-generation administrators and their work at highly selective institutions. One

participant shared they appreciated that I made the decision not to list individual participant profiles because they were worried that others would identify them based on their race.

Additionally, I used member checking during the interview by repeating back what I heard the study participant say and asking them to clarify what they meant by their remarks (Glesne, 2016). I also offered to provide full copies of their interview transcripts and an invitation to schedule follow-up meetings with study participants to ensure I accurately reflected their views and experiences. Several responded and expressed appreciation, but no one requested to view a copy of their transcript. As another precaution, I also provided participants with a summary of the themes and findings and invited participants to share their thoughts and feedback. In their responses, some participants expanded upon the advice offered to administrators, some validated the themes, and a few reiterated or clarified some points. For example, one participant noted she was born in the United States, but her parents emigrated when she was very young. Another explained their complicated relationships with their parents, and all provided additional information about their institution, such as the percentage of first-generation college students enrolled, if they were in an inaugural role, and if their role was donor funded. I also collected additional demographic information about race/ethnicity, which was not included in the preinterview questionnaire. The previously described tools helped enhance data accuracy and trustworthiness (Glesne, 2016).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the research questions and described how my research paradigm informed my approach to this research study. Then, I described the conceptual framework, methods, and population of interest. To protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality, I provided a group summary of study participants and their respective

institutions. I concluded the chapter with an overview of data coding and analysis, limitations, strengths, assumptions, and ethical considerations.

As I prepared to reveal the findings of this research study, I was reminded of Freire's (2005) recommendation to approach dialogue with "an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge" (p. 18). I considered this study a dialogue I initiated with study participants, myself, and future practitioners to generate new knowledge, perspectives, and ways of being. Due to my education and professional experiences, I assumed there were college administrators—specifically, first-generation administrators—who adopted a critical mindset and engaged in practices that attempted to disrupt social inequities and systematic oppression (Freire, 2005) through their work in support of first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities. The stories, perspectives, and words reflected in the Chapters IV–VI offer unique and timely insight to guide our efforts to support first-generation college students better. In response to changing demographic trends among this growing population of college-going students, many of whom hold more than one minoritized identity, administrators must use a critical lens to think differently about student success and accept responsibility to help drive institutional change to ensure all students may succeed and thrive in higher education. This study was a great start to aid in this effort.

CHAPTER IV: MY PRESENCE IS A DISRUPTION FOR GOOD

> My mere presence in this space agitates the system. This institution was not designed for students like me, but I'm working to make it more welcoming, so minoritized students don't feel like guests invited over for company.
>
> —Rochelle, Study Participant

The purpose of this chapter is to address Research Question 1: How do critically minded administrators who were first-generation college students approach their work at highly selective institutions? Since the early 2000s, in response to a growing number of first-generation college students enrolling at highly selective colleges and universities, institutions have begun to expand support for first-generation college students to include dedicated administrative roles and resources in addition to support offered by TRiO programs. Individuals in administrative roles have the potential to help transform the university culture in ways to improve student success outcomes and address gaps in student support to impact the college experiences of minoritized students positively. Although administrative roles are definitely needed, based on my personal and professional experiences, I know that adequately supporting first-generation college students depends mainly on the mindset and actions of those charged with nurturing their success. This belief motivated me to engage in this qualitative research study to explore the experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators. More specifically, I sought to explore if and how a critical orientation informed how study participants approached their work.

Through purposeful sampling procedures, specifically focused criterion and snowball sampling, I conducted individual interviews with 20 study participants employed at 15 highly selective colleges and universities in the United States. I collected data through an open-ended prescreening questionnaire, individual interviews, analytical memos, and notes. Stanton-

Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework was used as an analytical tool to identify the shared attributes and actions study participants engaged in to support first-generation college students and drive institutional change.

In this chapter, I discuss the first theme exemplified by this comment shared by Rochelle, My Presence is a Disruption for Good. The themes are exact quotes from participants to honor their voices. I begin by explaining how participants' critical orientation and system-aware perspectives, coupled with asset-based approaches, influenced how they approached their work. Then, I present ways participants engaged in disruptive practices to center first-generation college students and built institutional capacity to equitable support student success. I conclude with a synopsis to illuminate how participants' critical conscious mindset led to disruptive actions and good trouble for the benefit of first-generation college students. At the end of each findings chapter, I provide a short list of advice and recommendations generated by study participants.

The first theme highlights how study participants conceptualized and verbalized their critical approach to their work. All 20 study participants spoke candidly and passionately about their motivation and desire to disrupt standard practices and the exclusive culture of highly selective institutions to better support first-generation college students. Participants espoused a critical orientation and shared a concern for issues of power, privilege, and systems of oppression. Central to a critical orientation is adopting an asset-based approach to honor the rich knowledge, skills, and talents minoritized students bring from their home communities (Yosso, 2005). An asset-based approach is counter to the dominant deficit-based approach often used to describe, stigmatize, and neglect students from historically excluded backgrounds. To better meet the unique and diverse needs of first-generation college students, participants put these

students at the center of their work and provided access to tailored resources, information, and transformative experiences to support their success. The last component participants articulated as important to their work was a strong desire and effort to build institutional capacity to provide more equitable outcomes and experiences across all racial and minoritized identity groups.

Critical Orientation and System-Aware Perspective

When asked to describe how they approached their work, all participants sought to convey a critical orientation using words such as social justice, equity, racial justice, power, privilege, oppression, radical transformation, and liberation. Put another way, all participants demonstrated a system-aware perspective and possessed an ideological framing and understanding of the inequities embedded into the fabric of institutional structures. At the institutional level, many participants acknowledged acts of exclusivity, bias, and discrimination that continued to influence how students from historically marginalized communities experienced the environment, particularly at highly selective institutions. Paying keen attention to the historical influence of these exclusive undertones, three participants spoke candidly about the legacies of highly selective institutions. Kush noted administrators must remember who built these institutions and whom they intend to serve, sharing:

> Higher education, like many institutions, was built with a very specific audience in mind; white, Christian-centric, ableist, hetero, cis men from wealthy backgrounds. While the landscape of higher education has changed some, the foundations have not and still influence policy, procedure, and practice.

Kush suggested it was necessary to consider the residual effects of exclusive institutional practices, which are often not interrogated.

Maria offered a similar point as she recounted a particularly challenging conversation she had with senior administrators on her campus to encourage them to consider the institutional culture and deficit-based mindset of those who upheld the system versus challenging it. She recommended asking critical questions. She shared:

> The histories of highly selective institutions are important because they influence all aspects of the student experience, in this instance, academic policies. We must ask who made these policies. What did the student body look like when the policy was created? What would it mean for us to change the policies? Sometimes we will get pushback . . . that this change will weaken the institution's brand or that students won't take the policy seriously. . . . But we need to ask ourselves which students are we accommodating?. . . . We need to acknowledge these truths because until we can reckon with those truths, we are not going to be able to make the dramatic shifts that [will] help open up our institutions in very real ways. . . . Right now, some students still find our institutions to be hostile and inaccessible.

Maria's recommendation to critically examine the histories of highly selective institutions and adopt a willingness to ask critical questions is important to disrupt standard operating practices and hold administrators accountable for creating equitable experiences for all students. If critical questions are not asked, the root of the problem will not be found, which means the tools needed to make the change will not be identified.

Like Maria, Rochelle believed it was her responsibility to challenge the system and ask critical questions to improve and help ensure all students feel welcomed. She shared candidly:

> I have this fire within me to challenge systems and ask questions. I'm not rebellious, but I approach my work with a high degree of curiosity. I often ask, how can we better this

> system? How can we make it better for everyone and not just a certain group of people? How can we, as administrators, make it more welcoming? How can you make sure that students feel as if they belong here, that this is their community and they're not just a visitor or someone who was invited over as company?

Rochelle's curiosity was fueled by a desire to improve the environment to better support and fully welcome minoritized students.

Selma also used her role in the institution to ask questions and focus efforts on exploring why minoritized students were not performing at the same rate as their peers. She explained:

> I look at systemic issues (i.e., first-generation college students are disproportionately flagged for academic integrity violations or are placed on academic probation or suspension), and I don't accept this as a part of the student experience. Most of these students are Black and Brown and come from lower-income backgrounds. I won't let us gloss over the data or assume there is something wrong with these students. I ask why? What are we doing wrong?. . . . Although I'm new in my role, I don't shy away from asking tough questions. I work to hold us accountable to create a more equitable student experience.

As evident by these examples, both Rochelle and Selma were concerned with the institutional environment that contributed to conditions experienced by minoritized students.

Framed differently but to the same point, Dexter acknowledged the "current world order is predicated upon the systematic disenfranchisement of minoritized groups of people." Dexter's statement was relevant to the points previously raised because it spoke to the influence of oppressive environments and the significant influence of race and social class. As of 2023, although highly selective institutions have greater racial and socioeconomic diversity than in the

past, unexamined white cultural and class-based ideologies contribute to the structural realities of privilege and oppression reproduced through higher education. Although race and social class were not the primary focus of this research study, race and social class are essential to consider because a more nuanced picture of first-generation college students is painted. Although the first-generation college student identity is not monolithic, many first-generation college students come from lower-income backgrounds and hold various intersecting minoritized social identities (Cataldi et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2006). Students' social identities, which include race and socioeconomic status, shape all aspects of the academic journey, particularly in highly stratified educational spaces.

When sharing how they approached their work, several participants noted they were hypersensitive to how highly selective institutions were structured to advantage certain students over others. They also acknowledged all university staff and faculty were not attuned to these realities. The lack of awareness is problematic because everyone has the potential to uphold or disrupt the conditions that contribute to inequitable student outcomes. Minerva sternly and explicitly implicated all university employees to work toward equity aims, saying:

> It is our responsibility, as members of a society and as employees of colleges and universities, to actively work toward creating an environment in which individuals from all backgrounds, but especially those from historically excluded groups, can thrive. We have to combat structural inequities entrenched in our societies and institutions.

Minerva spoke to the need for everyone to play a leadership role in advancing equity. This collective responsibility is necessary to create an institution-wide culture of equitable student success. Nicole emphasized a similar point, noting, "I do not think we are [going to] be able to make any kind of significant change or advancement towards equity without approaching this

work from a critical lens or a social justice orientation." Both Minerva and Nicole called for awareness, understanding, and action to address inequities in student success outcomes. As part of this work, participants also acknowledged the need to focus efforts on improving the institution, which is key to bringing about transformational change.

LeeAnn similarly saw her work as equity driven and focused on changing the institution. She shared:

> I approach my work from a critical orientation with an equity lens. My goal isn't to fix our students or try to make first-generation, lower-income students, like the rest of the students at my university, the students who have more privilege and more affluence. My goal is to try to change the university, our policies, and our practices when I can to better meet the needs of students. I think the university wants to do better, but there is still work to do to get to an ideal place.

LeeAnn aimed to enhance the student experience by creating more inclusive policies and practices and devoting institutional resources to support students from minoritized communities.

With little exception, participants acknowledged progress was occurring at their institutions but also expressed frustration that not all students experienced the university environment equitably because of institutional barriers. When talking about their offices/centers and roles, although most participants were in inaugural roles or their offices/centers were established less than 10 years prior to the study, all of them emphasized their presence on campus was a disruption from the norm and even a form of resistance. They explained how their work required them to acknowledge the influence of power and privilege in their institutional contexts, ask critical questions, and engage in disruptive acts to better support vulnerable students operating at the margins (i.e., first-generation college students). Critical to this work

was acknowledging the many strengths and assets these students bring to the college environment.

Asset-Based Approach

When asked to describe first-generation college students, participants used the following words and phrases: hard-working, persistent, trailblazer, community-oriented, independent, resourceful, courageous, self-aware, adaptable, figure it out mentality, driven, role-model, family-oriented, leader, smart, collectivist culture oriented, ambitious, resourceful, curious, generational cycle of poverty-breaker, self-motivated, multitasker, responsible, and resilient*. I intentionally put an asterisk next to resilient because although many named it, two participants offered it hesitantly. Chantel and Rochelle noted the term had been misused or reframed in a way that may have discouraged some students from asking for help or accepting help when they did not have the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. For example, students receive messages that they are expected to keep going, to push through and suck it up, and to keep grinding, despite dealing with severe stress and mental health concerns. Framed this way, minoritized students might not realize the institutional barriers and challenges they encounter, which chip away at their self-confidence or contribute to feelings of inadequacy or inferiority when they need help, should not be part of the college experience. Instead, the barriers they encounter may be a byproduct of institutions not created to meet the needs of students from diverse minoritized backgrounds. Although all the descriptors or phrases used to describe first-generation college students can positively or negatively affect students in some way, given the rise in mental health concerns, particularly among first-generation college students, I felt it necessary to elaborate on the tensions related to resilience and a student's psychological well-being.

Returning to the list of attributes used to describe first-generation college students, I chose to include the complete list shared among participants to highlight the many positive and affirming attributes participants recognized first-generation college students possessed. The mindset of those working with first-generation college students, or any students in general, is crucial because thoughts and beliefs influence behaviors, policies, procedures, and the university climate. As discussed in Chapter I, deficit-based models are problematic because they are used to pathologize minoritized students and frame disparities in student success outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, retention rates, academic performance), which is indicative of a student's aptitude, commitment, or some aspects of their cultural background (Yosso, 2005). More importantly, the emphasis on individual success propagates the meritocracy myth that hard work equals success, which does not account for the structural and systematic factors hindering the success of students from minoritized communities. Furthermore, deficit perspectives ignore the need to critique the hegemonic practices operating in higher education (Kezar, 2011).

None of the 20 participants described first-generation college students as inferior, deficient, or lacking in some regard. Instead, all demonstrated an asset-minded orientation to working with first-generation college students. For example, Chantel, Amber, and Daniela, who had experience working with students at the intersection of identity and career development, all described first-generation college students as driven. Chantel shared:

> First-generation college students take a huge risk when they decide to go to college, especially at a highly selective institution. . . . The experience can be filled with many unfamiliar situations and new experience. . . . To go to college when others in your family, or specifically, your parents, don't really have the path to model for you or really can guide you through that process is risky. It means that you've had to be driven to

> figure it out, and to find answers and to keep going when the path is unclear. The path is not linear . . . it's more of a zigzag path to where you want to get to. It takes courage and persistence to keep going. You have to be driven to continue on a path that doesn't seem straight or look straight but you are personally motivated to get a college degree.

Chantel emphasized first-generation college students were driven and had many assets formulated through their personal experiences. Amber felt similarly and stated:

> When I meet with students, and we start to talk about their career interests, the conversation naturally shifts to their upbringing and prior experiences. . . . Many students don't think they have relevant experiences to talk with employers about, and that's simply not true. I encourage students to think about all they have encountered and overcome to get to this elite institution. . . . They are driven and have so many great transferable skills. I work with students to articulate their skills, experiences, and talents in ways that are relatable to prospective employers.

Amber also used the word "driven" and emphasized students' assets through noting "transferable skills."

Like Amber, whose role was in career services, Daniela realized students had strengths and skills nurtured through their lived experiences. Daniela also recognized many students did not consider their experiences valuable or relevant because they compared themselves to their peers from more privileged backgrounds. She explained:

> I see lots of students coming to the table with all their natural talents and experiences from their life, and I'm here to empower and help students bring it out. Oftentimes, at an institution like [this], it will make you feel like you are not good enough . . . that you are behind. . . . Students always tell me that everyone has something better than [they] do.

> There are a lot of comparisons and many first-generation college students share the sentiment that [they] are not enough and question why [they] are here. My job is to help them recognize all they have accomplished that may align with their academic and career goals.

Daniela explained how difficult it could be for students to recognize the value of their lived experiences, particularly when they used their peers with more privilege as the barometer to measure their own success. Consequently, first-generation college students must have the opportunity to engage with administrators who value and understand their identities but can also help them draw connections between their personal strengths, assets, and experiences.

In addition to assisting students with identifying and leveraging their inherent assets and strengths, Maria and Hudson found it necessary to engage colleagues in conversations or create programs to challenge deficit-based viewpoints about students from minoritized communities. Maria used her position and influence to advocate and educate others about first-generation college students. She shared:

> Some folks will sometimes question if first-generation college students need so much support, why were they admitted? Do they deserve to be here? Do they have the capacity to be successful? Some of my work involves dispelling myths and clueing people into all the amazing things about first-generation college students. Yes, some of them went to under-resourced high schools and some did not have prior exposure to the content knowledge needed for college success without intentional resources and support. I'm not going to lie about that. That is true, but that doesn't mean they don't have the capacity to succeed academically. . . . I also kind of clue folks into all the things that first-generation college students from lower-income backgrounds have navigated and carried alongside

> their academics. That is quite impressive, and we should celebrate them for all they have accomplished to make it to this elite institution.

Maria's work to raise awareness about the experiences and personal attributes of first-generation college students was important to address assumptions and biases.

Similar to Maria, Hudson also worked to highlight the many strengths and assets first-generation college students possessed by creating space for students to tell their stories. Hudson described a programming initiative designed for first-generation college students to share the stage alongside faculty to talk about their lived experiences. She shared:

> We have these dinners once a semester. . . . I invite students and faculty to lead the discussions. This interaction helps students see faculty as human beings with interests and lives outside of teaching. It also helps students see that they have stories worthy of sharing. Another aim of this event is to debunk the whole idea of the professor as all-knowing and the student as an empty vessel. There is an exchange of knowledge and students have just as much to contribute to the discussion as professors.

Hudson's invitation offered a unique opportunity for first-generation college students to be more visible and feel empowered to own their narratives and view their stories as worthy of sharing.

Rather than focusing on what first-generation college students lack, participants worked to foster asset-based perspectives through intentional engagement and student empowerment strategies. Equally important, participants also worked to educate or challenge the campus community to depart from a deficit-based perspective. Departing from a deficit-based perspective is crucial to the work of institutional and empowerment agents and their ability to transform institutional cultures through adopting strategies intended to serve first-generation

college students. In the next section, I offer examples of ways some participants engaged in disruptive work by centering the experiences of first-generation college students.

Centering First-Generation College Students

As shared previously, many highly selective colleges and universities in the United States were built and continue to operate to uphold the status quo by centering the experiences of students from privileged backgrounds. Centering the experiences of students from privileged backgrounds often takes shape through creation of institutional policies and procedures and allocation of resources. To disrupt this practice, many participants emphasized their goals to redistribute resources, opportunities, and experiences to center the needs of first-generation college students. Tailored programs that incorporate their intersecting identities are most beneficial to help students understand how their social identities may impact their experiences and choices in college and beyond. Additionally, resources and support to address gaps in information and services are necessary to empower and help students maximize their college experience. To assist first-generation college students in their transition and navigation of their institutions, several participants mentioned efforts to help students decode the hidden curriculum operating in the academy. The hidden curriculum comprises unwritten rules, unspoken expectations, and presumed social norms that regulate academic behavior and social interactions (Gable, 2021). Students with college-educated parents benefit from implicit and explicit information about college life. Through informal discussions, college tours, and college stories from their parents, they are naturally oriented to the college environment, which contributes to their success. For first-generation college students with limited exposure to the college environment, exposing them to the hidden curriculum can benefit students by providing explicit

information about institutional resources and access to influential people who can support their academic and social integration.

As an example of exposing students to the hidden curriculum, Hudson, Kush, Maria, Daniela, and Amber highlighted initiatives they led to assist students in their integration into the university environment. Hudson's office supported students who identified as first-generation, lower-income, or undocumented, with or without DACA. In her role, she oversaw a summer preorientation program designed as an early intervention tool to support their transition and navigation of the academy. As Hudson described the program, she highlighted the intentional rationale that guided the program. Hudson shared:

> The program is not intended to be remedial. The students have the academic aptitude to be successful at this institution. . . . Before other students arrive, we want to give students access and opportunities to increase their social and cultural capital. . . . As part of the program, students participate in social events . . . take a mini academic course and learn about academic resources, policies, and expectations. . . . They get time to meet with administrators to learn about campus resources and get access to guides who can support their success. . . . The program is intentionally designed to give students dedicated time to learn, understand, and adapt to the academic and social rigors of college life. This early exposure to the college environment is critical to their success.

Through this preorientation, Hudson worked to unveil the hidden curriculum and embed students into a system of resources, opportunities, and administrators to support their success. This program was useful to help minoritized students integrate academically and socially. Additionally, the focus on knowledge acquisition and social and cultural capital development

were beneficial to help better orient first-generation college students to the college environment and student experience.

Another effective strategy to reveal the hidden curriculum of the academy is through first-year experience courses. First-year experience courses are institutionally structured experiences designed to increase student engagement and deepen learning (Kuh, 2008). As the instructor of a required first-year seminar course, Kush used this platform to introduce students to high-impact or transformative experiences such as study abroad, undergraduate research, and internships. Unfortunately, some students do not take advantage of these resources and often underestimate the value of the transformative experiences. Across campus, some faculty or staff may assume all students understand when, how, and why to access institutional resources, but this assumption does not accurately reflect the experiences of students with limited familiarity of the types of institutional resources or academic experience that can complement their college degree. Kush also noted critically minded colleagues and dialogues were not represented across campus, which impacted how students were introduced to high-impact experiences. At times, Kush found himself frustrated many colleagues did not proactively engage students or consider the needs of students from minoritized backgrounds. Kush found some colleagues operate from the *bootstrap mentality*, which asserts that any student, regardless of their background, can overcome obstacles and persist if they work hard enough. Disappointingly, the bootstrap mentality is pervasive in higher education but firmly rejected by participants in my study.

Kush explained, “The institution bears the responsibility to provide resources but also intentionally works to engage and connect students to these resources, especially where we see inequitable outcomes.” To this point, Kush regularly reviewed disaggregated student data to see if outcomes varied by population. When he noticed his students were significantly

underrepresented in undergraduate research opportunities, he worked to intervene. Drawing from his experiences as a first-generation college student, he did not assume students understood what undergraduate research was or even recognized the value of engaging in these experiences. Kush joked, "I did not know when I was in college, so why would I assume they would know." With this understanding, he sought to connect and demystify the process for students to explore and gain access to undergraduate research opportunities. When asked to explain why intentional outreach to first-generation college students was essential, he added:

> We assume everyone has been prepared the same way. . . . We need to be intentional and think about impact based on the experiences of students operating at the margins. . . . We can't assume that everyone understands what it means to attend a large prestigious Research 1 institution. We attach so much clout to certain academic experiences and resources, but we haven't stopped to ask the question, are all students aware or prepared to engage in intentional ways? I know the answer is no, well, at least for my students, so I'm working to do something about it by giving them access and knowledge to these types of experiences.

In this capacity, Kush operated as a liaison and resource agent to help expose students to high-impact experiences, which are known to positively contribute to student success outcomes, particularly for minoritized students (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008).

Maria acted in a similar capacity as Kush and noted centering the experiences of first-generation college students required the adoption of new strategies and approaches to account for their limited exposure and knowledge of the university environment. For example, first-generation college students may not understand why they should use the university library or

how to access the vast array of resources offered. Based on her own experiences navigating the university library, Maria offered this insight:

> The resources available on a college campus may be very different than the resources available through the library at a student's high school or community, particularly if they come from under-resourced communities. Students from more affluent backgrounds or who have spent time on a college campus may navigate the library space with ease or some degree of comfort. In contrast, students who never walked into a library on a college campus may not know that they can access artifacts from the library or work with the librarian to formulate research questions or get access to peer-reviewed articles. First-generation college students and other students from historically excluded groups often underutilize this resource because they do not have prior exposure to or understanding of the services available through the university library.

Rather than assume first-generation college students would find their way to the library, Maria collaborated with library staff to develop a program to help introduce and familiarize students with university resources. Davis (2010) found structured interventions, tailored programs, discussions, and support resources that address the various identities, needs, and experiences of first-generation college students are critical to helping level the playing field. Put another way, interventions designed specifically to fill gaps in knowledge, opportunities, or outcomes are necessary to ensure first-generation college students can have equitable experiences like their peers from college-educated families. Additionally, Hudson, Maria, and Kush also stressed centering the experiences of first-generation college students through tailored interventions moved them from the margins, where they often felt othered, to the center as the primary focus.

This intentional shift in practice can increase students' feelings of belongingness and self-efficacy, which is vital to their success in college and beyond (Strayhorn, 2012).

Each of these examples highlighted the roles of institutional agents manifested through a specific set of actions to connect students intentionally with direct support and assist in their academic and social integration into the college environment, which is critical to improving student success outcomes. Although most participants discussed their efforts to reveal or help students decode the hidden curriculum operating at their respective institutions, Amber and Daniela observed there was also a hidden curriculum operating in the world of work. Due to their understanding of the barriers first-generation college students encounter as they work to navigate the career search process, Daniela and Amber worked to develop programs to give students exposure to an environment they may not have been exposed to before and resources to help demystify the career planning process.

Many career centers on college campuses offer robust services to help students learn about their professional goals and interests, explore career paths, and prepare to navigate the job search process for career success (Rease Miles & Morales, 2018). Unfortunately, first-generation college students do not use career services as frequently as their peers with college-educated parents. When asked why this was the case, Amber speculated it had to do with a need for more awareness, exposure, and understanding of the various resources and strategies required to navigate the job search process. Amber believed first-generation college students must be introduced to the career services office early and often during their 1st year of college. While reflecting on her own college experience, Amber offered the following testimony:

> When I was in college, I did not know I was supposed to have an internship until my junior year. I didn't even know what an internship was. I was very behind and did not

> know it. How was I supposed to know?. . . . At the time, I did not utilize any university resources and I did not go to the career services office. . . . I often felt ill-equipped and behind. I don't want students to feel like I did, so I try to get to the first-year students early. I want them to know I am your person. Let me know what I can do for you.

Amber vividly remembered how unprepared and confused she felt. Drawing upon her experiences, she worked to connect with first-generation college students early so they could use her office and feel supported throughout the internship or job search process.

Similarly, Daniela worked intentionally to engage and connect first-generation college students to the career services office. Many students who went to her office often felt unprepared or discouraged because they did not have access to an extensive social network that could support their career goals. Additionally, some first-generation college students may not have known how to engage in the search process to identify and gain experiences to support their career goals. Daniela acknowledged looking for an internship or job could be overwhelming and intimidating for all students but was particularly stressful for first-generation college students without the social and cultural knowledge required to navigate search processes successfully. She worked with students to ease their concerns, helped them respond to interview questions, and guided them through the process. Daniela explained:

> I see my role as helping to empower students to find a fulfilling life postgraduation. . . . I encourage students to reflect on their experiences and career goals to help them prepare for the career search process. I ask them questions about their backgrounds and their families. . . . This awareness will prepare students to answer interview questions and talk confidently about themselves and their experiences. . . . I teach students how to navigate networks. . . . I give students tangible steps to learn how to engage in the process of

> finding mentors and how to be more competitive in this job market. I help them build their social network and increase their cultural and social capital.

Daniela worked to help familiarize and prepare first-generation college students to navigate the career search process. Amber and Daniela's stories highlighted the role of institutional agents to connect students with direct support to guide and integrate them into unfamiliar situations to prepare them for career success. Daniela and Amber provided insider knowledge equipping students with access to tacit knowledge and experiences to increase their social and cultural understanding related to their specific industry or career goals. Although Amber and Daniela worked directly with students in career services, many participants noted career-related support was an integral component of the resources offered because these interventions were vital to help prepare students for long-term career success. Equally important, participants recognized although they may not have been situated in career services or formally trained in career development, due to the frequent engagement and trusting relationships they formed with students, it was likely students would come to them for career advice or guidance.

For example, Kobe often conversed with students about their work experiences. Similar to Daniela and Amber, he found students often devalued their lived experiences and the cultural knowledge from their home communities. He believed it was important for students to develop a growth mindset and not let their past experiences dictate their experiences in college. Kobe shared:

> One of the things that we have been recently talking about is the fact that our students don't necessarily believe that their past lived experiences at home can contribute to the type of jobs they are seeking. Once they graduated college, they say, "Oh, when I was in high school, I worked as a cashier or I babysat.". . . . But the reality is, those

> developmental skills are so important in their overall understanding of life, that some of them are way beyond their years and their age in college. Why? Because they were able to experience those hardships or tough moments early on in life, they are now in a better position to navigate life's challenges after college a lot smoother than their peers. So, we try to really dissect their experiences, peel off the layers and look at the core . . . and how those layers have contributed to their overall well-being and experiences at [this institution].

Kobe's ability to create intentional discernment moments for first-generation college students to reflect on their experiences was important to help them understand how their identities, skills, and experiences could contribute to their success in college and beyond. First-generation college students can benefit immensely from dedicated resources and support to engage in the career development process. Fortunately, when building their offices/centers from the ground up or expanding upon existing support, the participants, primarily driven by their own experiences as first-generation college students, intentionally incorporated career-related interventions. Most participants emphasized students could access opportunities to participate in job shadowing, mentoring, professional coaching, and career-oriented workshops. Eligible students could also receive financial support to travel for interviews, attend professional conferences, and purchase new professional attire. Through dedicated resources and support, the previous examples highlight the intentional ways participants worked to center first-generation college students to address gaps in knowledge and opportunities and impart agency to students.

Participants offered many examples of their work to center first-generation college students. Through tailored resources and interventions, they attempted to address knowledge and opportunity gaps to create more equitable student experiences. Participants also illuminated

several ways they engaged in disruptive acts for the betterment of first-generation college student success. For example, by revealing the hidden curriculum of the academy and the world of work, they intentionally connected students with institutional resources and supported networks to enhance their exposure and access to transformative academic experiences and career development interventions, all of which may contribute to their success during and after college. Additionally, students benefit from acquiring the types of social and cultural capital and experiences deemed valuable in higher education to be competitive for postgraduate success. Having established how participants centered first-generation college students, I next describe how and why participants engaged in actions to build institutional capacity to enhance the student experience.

Institutional Capacity Building

In addition to sharing how a critical orientation informed their work and the actions they had taken to advance an asset-based narrative and center first-generation college students, participants reflected on the positive influence of their work to build institutional capacity. Bensimon et al. (2019) described institutional capacity building as "an institution's willingness to grow capacity to provide equal academic experiences, recognitions, and outcomes for members of different racial and ethnic groups" (p. 1692). Working to expand the institutional capacity to supporting first-generation college students is relevant to advancing educational equity because many of these students also hold minoritized racial and ethnic identities (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006), and come from limited-income households (Cataldi et al., 2018). Additionally, equitable student success outcomes should be an institutional priority.

To effectively center and serve first-generation college students, participants discussed their work to lead initiatives and, in some instances, collaborate with colleagues and students to

expand their capacity to better support this population of students. Equally important, they also offered examples of their work to empower, affirm, and equip first-generation college students with the skills needed to exercise agency around their advocacy goals. In this next section, I share more about participants' motivation and efforts to support faculty and staff development before discussing strategies used to support student agency and success through advocacy.

Faculty and Staff Development

Collectively, study participants stressed an essential part of their role was to help develop and maintain a solid infrastructure to provide first-generation college students with the support necessary to meet their needs, both individually and systemically. Although each institutional context and resources vary, one of the ways most study participants emphasized their work to build institutional capacity was through training and workshops for faculty and staff. Much of this work aimed to develop an ally network of individuals who understood the varied experiences of first-generation college students and engaged in actions to support their success.

For example, Marissa regularly facilitated workshops and training for faculty and staff across campus. She used these opportunities to dispel myths, introduce asset-based framing, and raise awareness about the first-generation college student experience. Recently, in response to growing interest, Marissa worked with human resources to develop asynchronous training modules for faculty and staff to complete as part of their orientation process. Creating asynchronous training modules is a great example of an institution-wide strategy to integrate culturally relevant training through existing structures. Study participants also worked to expand reach and impact through training opportunities for key constituents based on their organizational roles.

Kobe and Maria consulted specifically with faculty members to develop more inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices to account for diverse student identities and perspectives. They worked to help create engaging learning experiences that were meaningful, relevant, and accessible for all students. Likewise, Jane regularly engaged academic advisors in conversations and training to address biases, microaggressions, and other forms of discrimination that may have negatively impacted their interactions with first-generation college students through the academic advising process. When asked to elaborate further, Jane shared:

> I know it happens. There is a bias that exists around specific majors and degree tracks. Some students are coached out of a particular major by their academic advisor. Not because they don't have the aptitude but because of their race, gender, or some other aspect of their identities and this perceived notion of who should pursue which majors. It's harmful and wrong. So, I intentionally engage my staff in conversations and training around bias and encourage them to reflect on their social identities and the privileges that come with them.

Due to the nature of their work, academic advisors frequently interacted with students regularly. Jane's efforts to address bias and build cultural competency among the advising staff were important to enhance the academic advising experience to be an affirming and empowering interaction for all students.

To help create more inclusive residential experiences for first-generation college students, Nicole offered training to resident assistants (Ras). RAs are student leaders who work and live in the residence hall. They play a vital role in fostering a strong sense of community and belonging, which can positively impact students' behavior and ultimately, their success in college.

Interestingly, a few study participants also engaged and offered training opportunities for the development staff and alumni boards to help raise awareness about the first-generation college student experience. Maria found sometimes her colleagues had assumptions about who students were, which was not always accurate. Through intentional discussions informed by student demographic data, she worked to help her colleagues have a better understanding of the diverse and intersecting identities of this student population.

Similar to Nicole, Max collaborated with colleagues in the development office to shift the narrative used to describe or frame the first-generation college student experience. For example, before joining his institution, Max noted much of the messaging used to engage potential donors to support specific initiatives for minoritized students was framed in two distinct ways. Messaging was either from a deficit-based perspective focused on the trauma students overcame or endured during their time at the institution or from an exceptionalism perspective that framed a student's success as unusual or an exception to the norm. Max explained:

> The messaging was not framed to highlight that these students are intrinsically brilliant on their own. It was from a place of these students needed more resources and support to survive this curriculum. It was not from a place that focused on how the institutional culture made it difficult for some students to actualize their strengths and assets. . . . In many instances, I was gently tapping to outright hitting with a hammer the folks inviting our FGLI [first-generation, lower-income] students who had especially difficult journeys to sit on alumni panels to share their pain and trauma. These practices are harmful and contribute to toxic exceptionalism that plagues lower-income communities of color. . . . I started to pivot and forced folks to pivot to stop talking about a student's trauma as a

mechanism for justifying why they need more institutional resources to support their success.

Max raised a compelling point that warranted critical attention and action. Specifically, he noted the need to disrupt efforts, intentionally or not, to exploit students and fetishize their trauma and oppression.

Rochelle and Chantel similarly spoke about their work to protect students from harmful situations by either moderating or attending events to manage the situation or outright rejecting invitations to identify students to serve on panels. Rochelle questioned, "Why would we ask students to sit in front of strangers who do not look like them or identify with their lived experiences and ask them to share personal aspects of their stories?" Chantel was also careful about the type of situations she put students in but also acknowledged the delicate work required to help donors understand student needs and where their philanthropic support could make a significant impact. Chantel offered the following example:

> I have the support of my boss . . . we never want to ask students to put themselves out there and tell a sob story in order to compel donors to give. Especially in person . . . it would be uncomfortable and awkward for students and cause them to bring up emotions or share parts of themselves with strangers. . . . As a compromise, we give students' stories without sharing their names or any demographic information. The goal is to help craft a compelling message that shows how our program has assisted a student or what the student experience is like. . . . We value and appreciate the support of our generous donors and continue to work to engage them to aid in our efforts to provide transformative and holistic student support services.

Chantel worked to protect students by providing anonymous student impact statements to help potential donors understand the potential to make a difference in the lives of first-generation college students through engagement with her office. Study participants spoke candidly of the critical need to disrupt practices and situations that may further marginalize or negatively impact students' sense of belonging and dignity. Simultaneously, they also highlighted the important work to build and sustain relationships with development colleagues and donors to build institutional capacity to expand support. The examples shared by Rochelle, Max, Maria, and Chantel highlighted their essential roles in shaping and shifting institutional practice to minimize harm, raise awareness, and affirm the experiences of first-generation college students.

The presence of administrators willing to ask questions, challenge harmful practices, and change institutional narratives about first-generation college students to include an asset-based framing was necessary for institutional capacity building. To further this aim, others focused their efforts on equipping faculty and staff with the cultural sensitivity and competencies to support first-generation college students rather than relegate it to one particular office or administrative role. Matt and Chantel believed it was essential to raise the competency of colleagues across campus to support first-generation college students because this critical work should not be systematically siloed among a few administrators. Work to build institutional capacity increases the potential of colleagues in other functional areas to develop the skills and motivation to support minoritized students and has the potential to transform the college experience to benefit all students positively. Matt offered:

> The way I think about my job is similar to how I thought about my work in nonprofit. If a nonprofit organization is doing its job well, you should be working yourself out of a job because you should not have to exist. . . . That is the vision that I probably won't see

> come to fruition, particularly at these types of institutions. My job is to plant the seeds so that it eventually happens. We shouldn't need an office to help support low-income students because their university should be doing it innately. You shouldn't need an office of one person or two people who are responsible for first-generation college students because everyone should be trained to work with students from this population.

From Matt's comment, it was evident he had a goal to integrate first-generation student support into all aspects of the university environment and a desire to eliminate the need for identity-based support because everyone should have the competency to support and serve all students.

Chantel also spoke from a personal place to share her belief that it was her responsibility to engage in advocacy to make critical changes on campus so that her program did not need to exist anymore. She boldly declared:

> It would be okay if my office did not exist anymore because it doesn't need to exist anymore. . . . I think we really need to build greater capacity and have faculty and staff who understand and are interested in supporting first-generation college students, in an equitable, thoughtful, evidence-based way, in every office across campus. It can't be localized in one office. As we admit more first-generation college students, everyone must be prepared to take up this work and support this growing population of diverse students.

Evident in this example, Chantel's desire to expand institutional capacity to eliminate the need for her office was predicated on cultural competencies shared among colleagues campus wide. Nicole shared a similar sentiment to describe her work to institutionalize support across her campus. One part of her portfolio was to oversee several programs that centered on the experiences of first-generation college students and students with other minoritized identities.

Due to her senior-level role, although much of her work was not directly with students, she used her platform "to try to shift the institution to obviate the need for the first half of [her] portfolio," which provided direct support for minoritized students.

Likewise, Kush, Rochelle, LeeAnn, Marisa, and Selma believed their work should not be confined to their offices; they all worked to engage other colleagues in supporting first-generation college students. They often asked others, "How can you change some things within your system or structure to help our students?" The work to eliminate institutional barriers through adopting inclusive policies, processes, and procedures was integral for all students to actualize their full potential.

In addition to training and workshops designed to build awareness and competency, most study participants led initiatives to amplify the visibility of faculty, staff, and students who identified as first-generation college students and celebrate their journey to and through higher education. Another area where they devoted their time was working to mitigate access barriers to increase student engagement in the full college experience. With a few exceptions, most offered funding for first-generation college students, particularly those who met established financial eligibility criteria, to cover the cost of tickets to sporting events, cultural excursions during study abroad experiences, student organization membership dues, and other aspects of the student experience that may have been inaccessible due to financial constraints. Additionally, many advised or supported a first-generation student organization or alumni group; oversaw a campus-wide task force or committees; and contributed to institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. To better support students' transition into the academy, a few study participants offered designated sessions at new student orientation, living–learning communities, and summer opportunities for new students to connect and find community.

To build and strengthen their social networks, several study participants were actively involved with initiatives or organizations to support first-generation college students outside their respective institutions. For example, a few study participants were members of the FGLI Consortium or the NASPA Center for First-Generation Student Success, three study participants had hosted student-led national conferences, and others were engaged in efforts to have their institutions recognized as a First-Gen Forward institution, which was a designation program for higher education institutions committed to first-generation student success.

Based on the many examples study participants shared, it was evident they took a multiprong approach to institutional capacity building. Through their work, some attempted to circumvent and subvert routine organizational practices that were not inclusive of the first-generation college student experience. Study participants worked to build institutional capacity through training and workshops for various stakeholders, dedicated resources to minimize barriers for first-generation college students to fully engage in the college experience, and other initiatives to galvanize efforts around first-generation student success outcomes. As the number of first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions continues to grow, administrators who approach their work from a critical orientation, as evidenced by study participants' experiences, have the potential to build institutional capacity to better support first-generation college students in meaningful and transformative ways.

Student Development

Another critical way study participants worked to support first-generation college students was through capacity building, specifically around student development. When I asked study participants to discuss the conditions that led to the creation of their offices or roles, a few were unsure of the origin story. Most pointed to a directive from the president or senior

leadership, an institutional priority to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, or in response to racial or oppressive incidents on campus. Surprisingly, many study participants acknowledged current first-generation college students and alumni played an instrumental role in advocating and pushing the institution to create a designated role, office, or center to unify, amplify, and integrate efforts to support first-generation college student success across campus. Consequently, several study participants reflected on their work to empower students to advance their advocacy goals and help unburden them from the emotional, physical, social, and mental labor they endured as they endeavored to change their campuses.

Student engagement in leadership roles and experiences positively contributes to retention, persistence, and overall college experience (Davis, 2010; Padgett et al., 2012). Several study participants noted many first-generation college students were actively involved on campus in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, minoritized students do not always have the luxury of taking on leadership roles for fun or to add something to their resume because many are actively involved with working to change their institution by enacting meaningful social change. To help students advance their advocacy goals, study participants spoke about the intentional way they collaborated and empowered students. Matt shared his belief and strategy to help students gain access to positional power through student leadership opportunities. He explained:

> When I talk with students, particularly those who are motivated to get involved, I try to explain to them how the institution works. I even break it down for students in concrete steps. If you need this, go talk to this person, and this is what you say to get them to pay attention to you. . . . I know students have more power than they realize, but they need to use their power effectively. Students from privileged backgrounds use their power to their advantage all the time, but students from minoritized backgrounds may not

> recognize the powerful influence of their voices. I've encouraged my students to take leadership roles and represent their peers on key campus-wide committees. . . . My students are visible across campus and know how to work strategically to make their needs known.

Matt discussed his efforts to support student development in two distinct ways. First, he used his knowledge of the institution to empower students through student leadership to sit in situations where they could influence power. Second, Matt also worked to help students amplify their voices and concerns in meaningful ways.

Chantel and Dexter also worked to empower first-generation college students through leadership roles and job opportunities connected to their offices. When discussing the structure of her office, Chantel talked about the important work of a student advisory board. She shared:

> It is important to use the student voice as much [possible] when building out the program. One of the most impactful things that we have done is to develop a board of students. The board is composed of students who represent the three populations that use our office. . . . Whenever we are thinking of doing something new or changing something or just want to get a pulse on what's happening on campus . . . we go to them, we turn to them, and we hear what they're thinking and feeling. This has been really integral in making sure that we are actually doing what we're setting out to do. . . . These students can help us make sure that as an office, we are fulfilling the need that we're enacted that we were developed to do right. [They] can also show us whether or not the mission and vision for our office are still relevant. . . . They allow us to learn from them and we give them the space to share their concerns and give us feedback.

From this example, it was evident Chantel valued student input and had intentionally worked to institutionalize a way to consistently empower them to ensure resources and initiatives were meaningful and relevant to students based on their interests and needs.

Dexter also worked to connect students to his office through the creation of job opportunities for students who were often ignored or excluded from work opportunities on campus. When asked to elaborate further, Dexter offered a specific example:

> I intentionally hire first-generation college students without access to federal work-study. Unfortunately, due to external factors and institutional barriers, some students are excluded from jobs on campus that are funded by federal dollars. For instance, students who are undocumented, with or without DACA, international students, or students who don't meet the low-income threshold are excluded from federal work-study jobs, which are the majority of the on-campus positions. So, I use my office budget to hire these students. Yes, it takes more money out of my budget, but it is important to me to help these students access employment opportunities that I know give them community, opportunities to learn job skills, and make money to support themselves.

In this instance, Dexter used his institutional power as the person who oversaw the office budget to address a need and fill a gap in student support.

Nicole also found it necessary to leverage her positional power to challenge the system in her sphere of influence while also working to support students engaged in efforts to act politically or contest oppressive institutional policies or practices. She shared:

> It is my job to push and ask challenging questions. I want students to be free to be students . . . but this generation of students. . . . feels real ownership over changing the institution and making a difference in the world. . . . Students are willing to do sit-ins,

> draft petitions, and collect signatures with their demands. They are willing to organize protests and really amplify social justice in the form of student advocacy. Students do not expect that administrators will save them or fix these issues because clearly, it has not been fixed . . . I've learned to be a sounding board, to check in on students, and help them strategize based on their needs, capacity, and abilities.

Nicole recognized the importance of her role to help empower students by giving them tools and strategies to accomplish their advocacy goals. Similarly, Kush also spoke about his work to care for students by helping them strategize effectively to advance their aims. Kush offered the following example:

> I work to empower students and try to get them strategies to put in their tool kit. . . . I [don't] try to get students to do it my way, but I want to give [them] some historical foundation, give some examples of what it looks like to challenge a system and the risk and rewards involved. . . . So, I love using the Civil Rights Movement as a basis . . . by showing students that there are multiple strategies to reach the same goal. Sometimes students get fixated on one way, but I want to expand their perspective and add to their toolkit about multiple perspectives, multiple realities, and multiple strategies.

Kush's efforts to help students develop a toolkit that included multiple strategies to advance their advocacy goals may also have benefited their personal development and capacity to make a difference in their communities. Nicole and Marie also approached student advocacy with a focus on helping students exercise agency based on their goals and capacity. Marie shared:

> It is important to recognize that all students do not have the capacity to fight the system. . . . To best support students, I take it as what is the capacity for the student and how to help guide them towards resources for whatever decision they decide? I'll share two examples.

> . . . I had a conversation with a [first-gen] staff member working on their doctorate . . . They're experiencing a ton of micro and macro aggressions. . . . The way [their advisor] is talking to them is very undermining. . . . And the student decides they are going to fight. So, my job is to coach and advise the student through whatever it means to fight the system. What skills do you need to know how to navigate . . . a system in academia that we know [is] riddled with all types of oppressive nature? On the other hand, I have another first-gen student who just lost two parents within a year. . . . They failed two classes and want to appeal their grade . . . but don't have the mental capacity . . . so I ask, what's the best that you can do?. . . . I give them resources and . . . the language I would suggest to push the needle a little bit so [they] can get what they need to get this done.

From Marie's comments, it was clear she took an individualistic approach as a vehicle to impart agency to students. Rather than take a standard approach, she provided students with resources and support based on their unique situations and capacity.

Nicole also engaged in conversations and partnerships with students to build their capacity to drive institutional change by helping them understand how to navigate an oppressive system. Nicole elaborated:

> I feel like students can understand the hidden curriculum better, not just by here's some rules about how you navigate the space . . . but you have the power to change it by challenging it, but you need to know why it is the way it is so that you can challenge it in the right sort of way. . . . When the approach does not align with their goals, I tell them, [this approach] might not get you what you want, and here's why . . . I offer different approaches . . . to frame [their] message and really help people understand what [they're]

> trying to say. . . . I do a lot of that kind of informal translating for students . . . to help coach them . . . to help them see different ways to push for productive change.

Through this quote, Nicole shared how she intentionally worked to empower students through informal coaching and translating. She worked to help students better understand the system they were trying to navigate and leverage their power effectively to take action. Nicole and Marie demonstrated how they supported and empowered students to advance their advocacy goals. They also helped minimize the complexities students experienced when trying to change oppressive systems. They both acknowledged the need to partner with and highlight agency in students to help them build their navigational skills and develop effective strategies based on their goals and capacity.

From the stories and examples shared by several study participants, it was evident they worked to build institutional capacity, specifically around the development of faculty, staff, and students. Through training, workshops, and discussions, study participants served as institutional brokers by connecting colleagues and student leaders with the focused priority of serving first-generation college students. Furthermore, study participants worked to extend their reach and influence to build institutional capacity to equitable and systematically support the success of minoritized students. Important to their efforts to support student success included the partnerships they formed with first-generation college students to help students develop an awareness of oppressive systems and strategies to successfully navigate and participate in power. Study participants worked to develop programs and experiences to foster critical consciousness, which is critical to help students exercise self-agency and leverage their power to drive institutional change.

Unique Perspectives and Words of Support

At the end of each individual interview, I asked study participants to offer advice or recommendations to another first-generation administrator aspiring to engage in this work. Study participants shared critical insight, which may help to better understand their unique beliefs and strategies to sustain themselves and their work. Suggestions that related most to the theme discussed in this chapter are listed in the following section. I took the liberty to combine some of them that overlapped; thus, the names of study participants are not attached to each statement. However, all following suggestions are study participants' words:

- Take the time to learn as much as you can about the institution. You need to understand the DNA of this place. Know what each office does, where are the tensions points, and who has the positional power to hinder or contribute to your work. You must also understand how the institution prioritizes this population and the staff infrastructure to support this work.
- This work should not and cannot be done in isolation or with minimal support. It takes many hammers to chip away at institutional barriers.
- The work you are doing is essential. Do not forget that. If you encounter resistance, it is probably a good thing because you are working to change a system that is slow to change. Reframe your thinking about resistance - see it as a growth opportunity for you and the institution. Go in knowing that this work will be difficult, and you may spend some time justifying your existence. Some people do not want you to change the system that benefits them or people like them.
- This work is deceptively complex and slow - brace yourself. These issues were created over decades, you will not resolve them overnight. You are not a savior - you

are a piece of the puzzle and a part of a team. You are not the solution - the presence of your office/center does not address the systemic issues that shape the experiences of those operating at the margins. Be realistic about the capacity and scope of work.

- This work is hard but comes with many rewards. Remember who you are here to support. Draw inspiration, support, and motivation from students every day.

What Participants' Stories Tell Administrators

The collective reflections shared by study participants made visible the various ways they drew from a critical orientation to approach their work. As illustrated by their stories, study participants were concerned with issues of power, privilege, and oppressive systems that contributed to inequitable experiences and student success outcomes. Put another way, all participants were ideologically motivated to challenge and interrogate the systems that reproduced stratification in higher education. The critical ideological mindset is consistent with traits of institutional and empowerment agents. To various degrees, study participants leveraged their roles and worked in their sphere of influence to ask critical questions, disrupt oppressive practices, and challenge institutional structures. Several study participants shared examples of their work to affect a paradigm shift in language and actions. They intentionally challenged the deficit-based mindset in favor of an asset-based approach to acknowledge and value the many strengths and talents first-generation students brought to the college environment. Study participants worked diligently to change the institutional culture and shift the narrative about first-generation college students from a deficit-based narrative to an asset-based narrative.

Additionally, to better support first-generation college students, study participants worked to center their experiences through creation of tailored programs, resources, and information to address gaps in support, knowledge, and experiences to confront inequitable

practices in higher education. The study participants' work to redistribute institutional resources to benefit first-generation college students is critical to ensure they can access information and experiences to support their success. Intentional acts to redistribute resources to better support minoritized students were disruptions to the status quo and necessary to help mitigate institutional barriers that hindered student success. Study participants also worked to reveal the hidden curriculum and equipped students with access to the social and cultural capital deemed valuable to support their success at their institution and beyond. The hidden curriculum includes the tacit rules, expectations, and often not spoken norms that work to influence interactions with others in the academe and beyond. It is necessary to reveal the hidden curriculum to best position minoritized students to successfully integrate and navigate unfamiliar spaces.

As part of efforts to drive institutional change and support student success, many study participants offered examples of their work to build institutional capacity through faculty, staff, and student development. Their efforts focused on prioritizing first-generation college students through curriculum enhancements, critical consciousness-raising, and equipping others to accept responsibility to create more equitable college experiences for all minoritized students. Their efforts were significant because all students deserved the opportunity to learn and grow in an environment that fostered their success, regardless of their backgrounds. Study participants worked in many ways to give students access to the tacit knowledge often taken for granted and helped students navigate systems and leverage their power to benefit themselves or in solidarity with other minoritized students. The presence of critically minded first-generation administrators at highly selective institutions presented opportunities to get into good trouble to disrupt the status quo. Many study participants embraced opportunities to form partnerships with others to resist, disrupt, and challenge the very system that rendered minoritized students vulnerable. As

illustrated by stories and interactions across their respective institutions, study participants engaged in transformative work to advance equity in student success outcomes and experiences for first-generation college students. Their actions and ability to serve as institutional and empowerment agents were vital to first-generation student success and efforts to advance inclusion and more equitable educational student success outcomes.

In the next findings chapters, I share more about participants' backgrounds, skills, and experiences that informed their work and barriers they encountered in supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. I close this chapter with advice and recommendations generated by study participants related to how critically minded administrators who were first-generation college students approached their work at highly selective institutions.

CHAPTER V: I FEEL CALLED TO DO THIS WORK

> Heavy is the head that wears the crown. It is challenging to be the first to go down an uncharted path. I did this through my educational pursuits and now as the inaugural director.
>
> —Kush, Study Participant

In the previous findings chapter, I discussed the first theme, My Presence is a Disruption for Good, and in response to Research Question 1 offered insight from study participants about the influence of critical orientation, system-aware perspectives, and their approach to work. In this chapter, I share more about study participants' personal and professional motivations, knowledge, and experiences that informed their work. Having found success as first-generation college students, administrator participants were uniquely positioned to draw from their lived experiences and used lessons learned from influential people in their network to support their navigation and success to and through higher education.

I begin this chapter by discussing the second theme shared by Amber, I Feel Called to Do This Work, in response to Research Question 2: How do critically minded, first-generation administrators use their unique backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to support first-generation college students? Throughout this chapter, I draw connections between Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) framework to highlight the actions of those engaged in work to support minoritized students. To review, the institutional and empowerment agent framework draws distinctions between the work of individuals who focus on supporting minoritized students (i.e., institutional agents) and individuals who expand their efforts to include supporting minoritized students and driving institutional change (i.e., empowerment

agents). The CCW model helps name the various forms of capital that people from minoritized communities may already possess. Both frameworks are useful to reject antideficit discourse and provide an alternative in research and practice to understand the educational experience of minoritized communities and educational inequality.

The second theme, I Feel Called to Do This Work, highlights the motivation and personal connection study participants had toward their work as administrators supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. While in college, study participants benefited from interactions with people and gained access to new experiences, which influenced their motivations and interest in higher education as a career path. Before I share more about the study participant's careers in higher education, it is first necessary to highlight the factors and circumstances that motivated their desire to pursue a college degree, which was required for their respective roles.

Transformative Potential of Higher Education

All study participants shared a belief in the value of education as a liberating force for personal and professional transformation. Although their parents or guardians did not obtain a college degree, most, from an early age, received aspirational messages about the meaning or value of education and its potential to change the trajectory of their lives.

Dexter, one of the three study participants who attended a college preparatory high school, looked back at his upbringing, and stated:

> I always liked books and school. I was good at it. I was the teacher's pet, and people in my family called me "little professor." When I got tracked in the seventh grade and received a scholarship to attend a private school, everyone told me, "Oh, you're the one;

> you have to make it." A lot of my identity was wrapped up in being a good student. It was how I internalized it and saw myself.

Dexter received affirming messages about his academic potential, which influenced his view of himself. His family nurtured his dream to attend college, demonstrating aspirational capital.

Kush also talked about the value of education from a personal place. His parents, like Dexter's, often told him that college was in his future. He recalled:

> There was never a conversation about what college was or what to expect, but I knew college was the only path. If we were at school or the grocery store and anyone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I [could] barely utter a response before my momma chimed in and replied, "he's going to college." . . . Going to college was a family goal . . . which was evident when we all showed up with grandma in tow to move me into the residence hall.

Even though his parents could not offer insight into what to expect in college, Kush knew his family expected him to attend college and supported his aspirational educational goals. Several study participants were also motivated to go to college because it was their way to honor their parents, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds.

Both Devon and Kobe identified as first-generation Americans and explained they were motivated to attend college because they recognized the personal, physical, and financial sacrifices their parents made to leave their home countries and come to the United States. They understood their parents wanted them to receive a better education and live the American dream. When asked what motivated her desire to attend college, Devon explained:

> My mother emigrated to this country . . . and her motivation to come here was education. . . . She did not get a college degree, but she wanted to [ensure] her three children

> attended and finished college. There was never a time when I was in school or up to the point when I was applying for college did I ever think that I wasn't going to college. . . . It was a family goal, and I never resented it because I thrived in school . . . and my mother put me and my [siblings] in spaces where we would get the support needed to go to college.

Devon always knew she was going to college and was motivated to attend because of her mother's sacrifices.

Kobe also felt compelled to get a college degree to reward his parents for their sacrifices and to be a role model for his younger cousins. He shared:

> Although I experienced culture shock and faced a language barrier . . . I always knew that college was an option for me. . . . The concept of going to college was talked about often in our household . . . I felt like I needed to go to college for many reasons. . . . One because my parents had sacrificed their entire life to come to the US, for us, my siblings, and saw it as a way for us to obtain a better education. . . . I wanted to be a role model for my cousins and family back home. . . . I also wanted social mobility and to make something positive out of my life.

Despite the challenges he experienced adjusting to schooling in the United States, Kobe was intrinsically motivated to succeed in college for himself and his family. Although Kobe and Devon shared their parents left their home countries for better education, some study participants also expressed a desire to leave their home communities in search of something new and different.

Marisa identified as an Asian, transracial adoptee raised by immigrant parents. She grew up in a small, rural farm community, and her parents did not value education. She considered

college a viable path, saying, "[I] go away for my own experience and discover more of the world on my own." Marisa was motivated to leave her rural community and explore something new.

Daniela was also raised in a rural community and wanted to leave her small, close-knit rural community. She explained:

> My community was not normal or reflective of the real world. Everyone was the same. Everyone knew each other, and I had the same classmates from kindergarten all the way through eighth grade. I knew going to college would give me access to different people, places, and new academic experiences.

Daniela was ready for a change and saw college as the path to leave the homogeneous community in which she was raised. Alternatively, Hudson grew up in a strong religious community and wanted to leave home because she "identifies as queer and could not be out and proud at home." She also worried without a college degree, she would have to work a "meaningless job with no real prospect for financial security or the opportunity to live the type of life [she] wanted."

Participants' stories showed their high educational aspirations and encouragement they received from their families to pursue higher education. Also reflected in the previous quotes were diverse examples of their intrinsic motivation, desires, and hopes for something different or better. Many study participants, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, valued education and equated attending college with the opportunity to change social positions and the possibility of transforming their life circumstances.

Upward Mobility and Self-Actualization

Although I did not explicitly explore socioeconomic status through this research study, it was a topic that came up repeatedly among study participants. Most understood and discussed the systemic and structural barriers they faced due to their socioeconomic status. In a capitalist hierarchical society that privileges some groups over others, higher education may be less accessible for students from lower-income backgrounds. As discussed in Chapter II, it was important to recognize that not all first-generation college students come from lower-income backgrounds. Likewise, not all students from lower-income backgrounds are first-generation college students. In this instance, most study participants identified as first-generation college students from lower-income households.

Rae came from a lower-income background, and when asked why she wanted to attend college, she paused and recounted:

> I did not want or need to be rich; I just wanted to take care of my family and not worry about food, shelter, or money. I wanted to support myself, and I knew getting a college degree could help me secure the life I wanted to create for myself.

Rae's desire to attend college was to improve her future earrings and life circumstances. Nicole held similar beliefs about the potential for college to be a vehicle to help obtain financial stability and new experiences. When prodded further, Nicole explained:

> I saw college as a gateway to the life I envisioned for myself. . . . Money was always a concern in my household. I grew up using food stamps, and my family received [supplemental financial support] to cover our household expenses . . . I did not want that . . . I just wanted to be able to pay my bills and not worry about paying bills. . . . I was looking to change social classes. . . . Another reason I wanted to . . . go to college is that

> many of the people in my community did not value education. . . . I wanted to be around different people. I wanted to discover different options and have a life shaped differently [from] the life I had.

Nicole was partially motivated to attend college because she wanted the comfort and security of upward mobility. She also wanted exposure to more people who were intellectually curious and valued learning like her. Dexter also believed in the potential of higher education to help him achieve his financial and personal goals. He shared:

> Coming from a Black, lower-income neighborhood, I [believed] that I had to go to college to be somebody . . . I knew if I [was] going to have anything to offer myself or to provide for my family, I had to go to college. I was motivated to attend college to gain a sense of financial security and self-actualization.

Dexter was raised by his grandmother and wanted to be able to take care of her bills and to be in an environment that nurtured his intellectual curiosity and growth toward self-actualization.

Framed differently, Devon's immigrant mother also instilled a belief in the value of education as a tool for personal and generational transformation. Devon shared her mother often stated, "every generation is supposed to get better. [College] is a way for you to build generational wealth. You will be better because of attending college." The desire to "be better," gain greater financial stability, and accomplish personal or family goals were common sentiments shared among many study participants. Evident in their stories was a strong sense of aspirational and familial capital. Despite persistent education inequities, limited resources, and institutional barriers, study participants' discussed hopes and dreams about their ability to achieve educational success and financial stability through access to higher education.

Many study participants received affirming and empowering messages about their potential to succeed in college from their families and home communities. Familial capital and social support were a source of motivation and strength for minoritized students. However, all study participants shared a strong love of learning and placed a high value on education for their personal and professional success, and they received various levels of informed support and guidance as they navigated the college search process. As a result, they developed and leveraged navigational capital to maneuver the college admissions process.

Navigational Capital in College Admissions

For many high school juniors or seniors, applying to college is an exciting yet anxiety-provoking time filled with writing college essays, taking standardized tests, and visiting college campuses. Many students navigate this process with the support of family or friends with experience who can offer insight and advice (Engle et al., 2006). As discussed in Chapter II, the college search process for first-generation college students can invoke much anxiety, stress, and uncertainty as they attempt to navigate a complicated admissions process without the benefit of generational knowledge from those who have attended college. When asked to reflect on their experiences applying to college, most study participants felt their guidance counselors or high school staff did not offer much help. Nicole stressed where you went to high school mattered. She emphasized:

> When applying to college, where you go to high school matters. . . . The guidance counselors were not very helpful . . . few college representatives from highly selective colleges visited my school. . . . I knew I had the grades and aptitude to attend a highly selective private college but needed access to them . . . I remember taking the bus to another high school's college fair to meet with representatives. . . . If I had not made a

> choice and done the work on my own to get to that college fair, I might not have attended a highly selective college.

Nicole's initiative was to navigate and get access to people and resources to support her goal to attend a highly selective institution. Nicole's story differed from many first-generation college students overrepresented in community colleges and public institutions. Since the early 2000s, there has been an increase in the number of first-generation college students enrolling at highly selective colleges and universities (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle et al., 2006).

Similarly, Elena also felt her options were limited based on the support her high school provided and had to figure it out on her own. In hindsight, she acknowledged:

> I attended a religious private all-girls high school, so only those colleges and universities attended the career fair at my high school. . . . Since I was not interested in those types of schools, I did not get much support from my guidance counselor. I had to navigate the process on my own and figure it out. . . . I wish I had known that I would have had so many options with my high test scores and grades, but I was completely unaware and did not know what I was doing when I applied to college.

Elena only applied to three colleges that she knew about, but she was tenacious and worked to navigate the process with minimal guidance. After her 1st year, she was miserable and randomly decided to transfer to a college closer to home.

Like Elena, Matt tried to figure college options out independently and recalled how uninformed he was about applying to college. His guidance counselor changed three times during his 4 years in high school. Matt remembered being frustrated about the lack of support. He shared:

> I was a strong student, but I did not know what to do with the shoe box full of brochures and pamphlets sent to me from all these small private colleges. I did not consider them because the tuition was so high. I had no idea I could go to college for free because I was poor . . . I only applied to one college because it had no application fee or essay. . . . I was so misguided throughout the entire process. . . . I wish I knew then what I know now.

Even at the time of the interview, Matt regretted not knowing more about the college search process. Similarly, Amber recalled she was clueless about her college options but knew that money was the biggest barrier. Initially, she did not consider attending a 4-year institution because of the cost. She planned to attend the local community college and live at home. At her best friend's insistence, she went on a college tour and was exposed to different colleges. When it was time to decide which college to attend, the cost was the determining factor. Amber explained:

> My parents were really supportive, but I knew [they] were not going to help me with funding my undergraduate degree. . . . I literally picked the cheapest school to attend in the state. It was in the middle of nowhere and lacked any sort of diversity or cultural food, but I made it work . . . I feel like I made [many] sacrifices to be able to attend college because the cost was the biggest concern, but I think for me, it was worth it. . . . At the end of the day, I was able to get my degree . . . which is what my parents wanted.

Elena, Matt, and Amber's stories are important because they are not unique. They represented the struggle many first-generation college students experience due to a lack of knowledge and access to people and resources that can help them better navigate the college search process (Reid & Moore, 2008). Although they enrolled and graduated from college, Elena, Matt, and Amber admitted they would have benefited from more assistance and possibly made different

decisions if they had known all their academic options. Although none of them were involved with work in college admissions at the time of the study, their experiences motivated their desire to help demystify the college experience for first-generation college students enrolled at their institutions. I speak more about this topic in greater detail later in this chapter.

Next, I compared their stories to those of Hudson and Dexter, who had an easier time navigating the college search process because they had access to resources provided through their high schools. Hudson explained:

> I went to a small high school in NYC, and my guidance counselor helped me a lot. . . . My high school organized free college tours, hosted alumni panels, and I had regularly scheduled appointments with my guidance counselor. . . . She helped me generate a list of potential schools and explained the process to apply. . . . I also attended an alumni panel and heard directly from college students about the schools they were attending and why they decided to apply. That was so helpful for me.

Hudson benefited immensely from the support and guidance offered by her high school. Dexter received similar support but emphasized due to his academic goals and early socialization in elite, white academic spaces, he only applied to highly selective colleges and was savvy in managing the financial aid process. Dexter bashfully explained:

> I was a scholarship kid and understood the dynamic of rich people paying for me to attend high school. . . . I went to a predominantly white suburban high school, and everyone went to elite colleges. . . . College recruiters from these schools came to my high school to conduct interviews and talk with me. . . . I knew I had good grades to be admitted and was not discouraged by the price tag. . . . As I applied to schools, I looked

for ways to maximize my financial aid package to cover books, tuition, and all other expenses. I learned early what I had to do to set myself up for success.

Hudson's and Dexter's experiences were vastly different from the stories offered by Elena, Nicole, and Matt due to the high schools they attended. Dexter and Hudson had access to social and cultural capital that assisted them when applying to college. They did not have to figure it out alone. Their high schools provided intentional support and coordinated resources to help simplify and familiarize them with the college selection process. Although Dexter and Hudson had support from their high schools, like Elena, Nicole, and Matt, they took the initiative and intentionally used resources to support their success. Although most participants acknowledged they had to figure it out independently and stumbled through the college admissions process, their navigational, social, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005) helped pave the way for college success.

Navigating College Life

Once enrolled in college, many first-generation college students often struggle to adjust to college life because of limited knowledge, exposure, and academic preparedness, among other factors (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). Navigating college can be filled with new situations and opportunities that require access to institutional support to ensure students can effectively transition and succeed.

Missed Opportunities

When asked to discuss their experiences navigating college, several participants discussed the impact of their disengagement with campus resources. Amber, who regularly contemplated leaving college, regretted not accepting the invitation to attend the Education Opportunity Program (EOP) summer bridge program. She explained:

> When I asked other people from my high school who were admitted to my college, no one else was invited or heard about the summer bridge program was. . . . So, I thought it was a scam . . . and decided not to attend. Later, when I was in graduate school, I [discovered] that I was invited to the EOP program because I was a first-generation, low-income student . . . I wish I had known.

Amber struggled academically and socially during her first 2 years of college. She admitted she would have benefited from more structured support and guidance offered by EOP. Fortunately, during her junior year in college, Amber connected with the multicultural student office and a faculty member who helped her find community, use campus resources, and secure a required internship.

Similarly, Daniela was invited to a summer bridge program but declined because she was not ready to go to college early, even though she was desperate to leave her rural community. Once in college, she struggled to navigate college alone. She shared:

> I did not realize that attending the summer bridge program would be helpful. My first quarter in college was awful. I had a financial aid issue, so I was unenrolled from all my classes and received an eviction notice. I did not want to ask for help, and I tried to navigate college alone, but I was so lost. . . . It was challenging because I did not know that offices were intended to help students. . . . I thought colleges only helped with academics.

After this ordeal, Daniela connected with an academic advisor who supported her throughout college. Daniela was especially grateful the academic advisor reached out to her when she was in trouble because she admitted she would not have sought them out alone. Similar to other first-generation college students, Daniela was not aware of the type of institutional support available.

In addition to helping her solve her financial aid problem, her advisor was instrumental in encouraging Daniela to get involved in a student organization, which was the start of her leadership development and engagement on campus.

Amber and Daniela shared because they regretted not attending the summer bridge program and due to their involvement on campus as student leaders, they now worked hard to ensure students are informed about institutional resources. As shared in the previous chapter, they both worked in career services. Amber and Daniela were motivated to help students identify and leverage their navigational capital and develop the cultural capital needed to achieve their personal and professional goals. Several other study participants talked about how their involvement with student organizations and employment on campus helped them learn more about college life and connected them with influential people to support their success.

Student Involvement

Involvement on campus positively correlates with student satisfaction, retention, and academic success (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). Unfortunately, it is well-documented first-generation college students are not involved on campus at rates comparable to their continuing-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Several study participants attributed their involvement on campus to their ability to academically and socially integrate into the campus community, find their people, and increase their cultural and social capital. Elena, Kobe, Kush, and Devon spoke fondly about their experiences in a fraternity or sorority during their time in college. Elena recalled being around her sorority sisters helped her develop goals she had never considered for herself. Initially, she was not considering joining a Panhellenic sorority (i.e., predominantly white) but decided to reconsider because her best friend, who like her is Latina, joined the same sorority at another institution. Elena explained:

> My sorority had the promise of being more diverse, but it did not happen. It was good for what I needed at the time. Being around my sorority sisters, [a lot of them] were from wealthy families, and they were the president of . . . clubs, doing internships, and undergraduate research and talking about grad school. It was the first time I had ever been around people who had those aspirations. It made me rethink my goals because I didn't have many goals before then.

Through involvement with her sorority, Elena gained exposure to peers who helped her reconsider and expand her goals. As a result, she sought opportunities to get more involved with undergraduate research and leadership experiences, which positively contributed to her academic and personal success. Likewise, Kobe shared being in his fraternity surrounded him with "peers who were academic scholars and leaders on campus." Kush also mentioned his fraternity gave him "opportunities to give back to people who looked like me and be involved in the local community." Devon attributed her racial identity exploration to her involvement in a multicultural sorority and elaborated:

> During my 1st year of college, I was really trying to explore what it meant to be a person of color in that [predominantly white] space. I was pretty color-blind . . . and my consciousness was expanding as well. . . . I decided to join a multicultural sorority. . . . It helped with my identity exploration.

Devon's exposure to racial identity development literature and leadership training helped her realize she was passionate about helping students of color make sense of their college experiences. The formative experiences were the introduction to her career in student affairs. Many study participants also spoke fondly of their leadership roles and jobs on campus because it helped them learn about campus resources and develop professional goals.

Personal and Professional Development

Through work on campus and in leadership roles, several study participants gained new skills and experiences and found a career path in higher education. Several worked on campus as resident assistants (RA), orientation leaders (OLs), and tour guides, which connected them to campus resources, supervisors, and mentors who supported their success. Max attributed his jobs and leadership roles on campus as instrumental in helping him get connected and grow. He explained:

> When I became a RA and OL, these two roles helped me get plugged in. Through training, I learned about campus resources that helped me as a first-generation college student as I worked to become a resource for other students. . . . My OL supervisor also mentored me and took me to a professional conference. . . . These experiences nurtured me and my interest in student affairs.

Max's involvement in RA and OL roles allowed him to fill gaps in knowledge that oriented him toward college life. Through the relationship he forged with his supervisor, who acted as an institutional agent, Max also developed social capital and gained access to professional development opportunities to prepare for a career in student affairs. Like Max, Selma also found mentorship and support in her role as an OL. Selma explained:

> When I attended orientation, I immediately connected with one of the ladies who oversaw orientation. She became my unofficial mentor and point person for all things. . . . She encouraged me to apply to be an OL. . . . I was connected to so many offices and administrators. They . . . saw my leadership potential and entrusted me with various positions. . . . Honestly, I'm in higher education because of those people who poured into me and ensured I could navigate and succeed in college.

Selma benefited greatly from her involvement and relationships with adult institutional agents who displayed care and acted as recruiters to connect her with meaningful leadership experiences. Selma's story demonstrated access to institutional agents may be critical to help minoritized students gain access to transformative experiences.

Rae also learned valuable skills from her work–study job in the security office and later as a graduate student and professional staff member in the dean's office. She found the roles complimented her skill set and explained:

> I worked in [many] service jobs growing up. I was good at customer service and dealing with angry people in crisis situations. Working in the dean's office helped me strengthen these skills and also taught me to deal with complex situations and new projects, which prepared me for the inaugural role I have now.

Rae could identify and cultivate what can be framed as social, cultural, navigational, and familial capital through her previous work experiences before and during college. Often, first-generation college students do not recognize the value of the capital derived from their home communities because it is often undervalued by higher education institutions, particularly highly selective institutions (Yosso, 2005). The undervaluing of the skills and assets that minoritized students have is problematic and could be rectified if more administrators, faculty, and staff approached their work from a critical orientation and asset-based approach.

Influential People and Advocates

Many study participants expressed values, experiences, and knowledge derived from their families were important to their success in college and even today. I begin by sharing examples of how families continued to be a source of support and strength for study participants in college.

Then, I conclude this section by highlighting the significant role faculty and staff can play in supporting and advocating for students.

Family Support

Contrary to common perception, first-generation college students receive support and guidance from their parents and people in their network to pursue their college dreams (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Although participants' parents did not attend college and had limited knowledge about college life, they provided guidance and support in many ways. Elena recalled her parents continually offering support and encouragement throughout college. She emphasized:

> When I decided to transfer schools, my parents were supportive. They sat me down and said, "we are very proud of you, but we cannot afford this. You will have to take out loans to cover the cost, but we will support you however we can." I lived at home, so my parents provided me with cooked meals, shelter, laundry, and unconditional support. Even when I decided to quit my job and live off loans, they trusted my judgment and knew I would make good decisions. Their unconditional love and support were affirming and empowering.

Elena shared she tried to be a source of support for first-generation college students with whom she interacted because she knew how beneficial it was to have supportive parents.

Both LeeAnn and Jane recalled their mothers playing significant roles in helping with the college search process. LeeAnn's mother was a secretary at a medical school and encouraged her to apply to the college where she worked to receive a tuition waiver. Her mother's advice allowed LeeAnn to graduate from college with minimal student debt. Jane's mother brought home college viewbooks from her boss to help her learn more about different colleges. When sharing this experience, Jane smiled and said, "my mother did not know much about college, but

she knew enough to ask her boss to borrow his son's college books. That was her way of helping me get to college." LeeAnn and Jane's examples highlighted how their parents continued to play influential roles by offering information and resources to help their children achieve their educational goals. In addition to family support, first-generation college students can benefit from expanding their social network to include influential people who can advocate on their behalf.

Extended Network Support

In addition to familial support, several study participants formed relationships with people in their extended network who helped them and intervened during critical moments in college. Rae offered two stories of relevance. She explained:

> In my 1st year of college, I did not do well academically, and I was in jeopardy of losing my spot in the accelerated medical program . . . so I had to meet with the program coordinator to discuss the next steps. I told her about all the stuff that impacted my academics, and she said, "you need to appeal this, do not walk away from this. This is what you need to do to appeal this decision." Because of her, I submitted the appeal and had a second chance.

Rae shared initially, she was not going to write the appeal because she did not think her excuse was valid or unique. She explained, "everyone has problems. I just figured I did poorly because I did not do the work. That's not an excuse." Rae continued to be grateful to the program coordinator because she provided positional resources and helped Rae learn to advocate for herself. During her senior year of college, Rae had a chance encounter with a professor who restored her faith in the world. She explained:

> I was accepted to a [graduate] program at my alma mater, and I was eight credits shy of graduating. A former professor helped finagle credits and approved a waiver so I could finish and graduate in May. I thought, wow, why did he do that? I never expected it. . . . I did not realize that college offices could help people like me.

Rae shared she still worked at her alma mater, and she was "extremely loyal to this institution because of those people who went out of their way to help me." In this instance, her professor served as an advocate and knowledge agent to leverage his position and influence for Rae's benefit. She continued to take the same approach to her work. In her role at the time of the study, she helped students advocate for themselves, and she worked to identify when to recommend or make exceptions to institutional policies to mitigate barriers and best support students in distress. Rae's examples showed how faculty and staff worked to serve as institutional agents to support minoritized students.

Another example of this theme was when study participants mentioned getting connected to unique academic opportunities with the encouragement of an influential faculty member. When looking back at her college experience, LeeAnn explained:

> My faculty had a sense, rightfully so, that I [would] be academically disadvantaged. . . . One of the things that helped me was receiving the Mellon Mays award. Initially, I was not going to apply, but my faculty advisor insisted. That was a huge intervention. I did not know how much it would benefit me. I'm grateful to this day.

Due to her selection for the Mellon Mays award, LeeAnn received academic and financial support and mentoring to prepare her to obtain her PhD and become a faculty member. She served as a faculty member for several years before assuming the inaugural administrative role she had at the time of the study.

Matt shared a similar story about an administrator who was a positive influence on his academic studies, saying:

> I struggled in college and was kicked out of the university due to my grades. I used my own resilience to get back into school. I knew I could not go home a failure, so I talked with anyone who would listen. One day, I met with the engineering dean. After a lengthy conversation, she decided to give me a second chance under the condition that I meet regularly with an academic advisor and attend study sessions. I was a former student-athlete, so the structure was helpful for me. I also was connected with an academic advisor who knew how to work with me. It was essential to get a support system of people who actually see me for my gifts and talents and take the time to show me how to succeed in college.

Matt valued his interactions with his academic advisor because he felt supported and empowered to try again because someone had a vested interest in him and his success.

Rochelle also shared a powerful story about a person she called "my angel," a little old Black lady at her church who encouraged her to apply to college. When Rochelle was in jeopardy of not returning to school, she stated:

> My angel [intervened]. . . . I did not understand financial aid. So, I received a large refund check and used the money to buy books, a laptop, and a car. I did not know I was supposed to use that money to pay for my room and board. At the end of my 1st semester, I had a substantial bill, and there was no way I could pay it. My mother and I tried to call the financial aid office, but no one wanted to help me. It was so frustrating. I explained the situation to my angel, and she said, "don't you worry; give me a few days to make some calls." I don't know what she did, but when I saw her again, she gave me a check to

> buy my textbooks and told me, "you go back to school." If it wasn't for her, I think I would have given up on college.

Rochelle benefited from the influence of someone from her social network who used their power and social capital to advocate and resolve the situation on her behalf. Rochelle elaborated, "if it were not for my angel and other Black administrators who helped Black students like me, I would not be here before you today as the [title] with a doctorate degree." This experience shaped her approach to supporting minoritized students on her campus as she strived to lobby for greater institutional capacity to meet their needs.

Although stories and experiences varied, one common thread throughout the examples shared among study participants was their ability to navigate and persevere with the support of a caring adult who advocated on their behalf and made them feel as if they mattered to them. Study participants benefited from a growing social network of family and individuals from their home communities and other influential people with whom they formed relationships while in college. A robust support system can be a powerful tool to equip first-generation college students with the cultural and social capital most beneficial to succeed and thrive in college.

Paying It Forward

When asked to explain why they did this work, many study participants drew connections to an intrinsic desire to help others who shared similar identities. Participants spoke about a desire to help students like others helped them or to be the support they needed. As shared previously in Chapter III, many study participants identified as first-generation college students raised in lower-income communities. Due to their lived experiences navigating higher education on the margins, the development of resistant capital may have motivated them to engage in "oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80), bring a personal

commitment and desire to give back to their communities, and pay it forward for others to successfully navigate higher education, particularly at highly selective institutions.

Representation Matters

Many study participants shared minoritized racial and ethnic identities. Students from minoritized racial groups are underrepresented at highly selective institutions, particularly students who identify as Black or Latinx. Underrepresentation of minoritized racial groups was one of the reasons several participants attributed to why they decided to work at a highly selective institution.

Kush was in an inaugural role and understood the unique opportunity he had as a Black man to serve as a role model and source of inspiration for other students who looked like him. When talking about why this work mattered, he sternly shared:

> I strongly believe you can't be what you can't see. . . . I believe that people need role models. . . . I believe that we can tell everybody that you are the future . . . but it's really hard to actualize that if you don't have a role model that you can reach out to and touch and ask questions. You need to see someone who looks like you to be successful and model the way.

Kush prided himself on being a role model and finding ways to help students understand how to navigate life. On more than one occasion, he edited cover letters, helped students negotiate job opportunities, and continued to build and sustain strong relationships with his students long past graduation.

Elena and Daniela discussed their initial hesitation when considering applying to work at a highly selective institution because of the large number of affluent white students. When asked about her career path, Elena shared:

> I started in the nonprofit sector and worked primarily with Black and Brown students from underserved communities. Initially, I was turned off by the idea of working at a highly selective college because I did not want to work with entitled students. I figured I would do this job for a little bit and then go back to fight the good old fight. Then, I quickly realized that all of the students in my office come from lower-income backgrounds and are first-generation college students. . . . They were dealing with some trauma, most inflicted by the institution, and I realized with my background in case management, I could be better served at this institution. . . . If I could help these bright, gifted students navigate this place, it could transform their lives.

Elena was passionate about her work because she got to serve and advocate for students who shared some of her same identities.

Like Elena, Daniela had to adjust her mindset about working at a highly selective institution. She explained:

> When my advisor from graduate school suggested I apply for a job at a highly selective institution, I thought, "there is no way I wanted to work there." I feel like the students are entitled . . . and I don't want to work for a place that doesn't feel like they need me or where I can make an impact. . . . I did some more research and realized that the first-gen, low-income student population is less than 15%. That must mean these students must have it harder, feel more invisible, isolated, and misunderstood. I did some reframing and decided to apply. In hindsight, it was a good decision.

Although they initially dismissed the prospect of working at a highly selective institution, Elena and Daniela valued their opportunity to serve students, particularly in their institutional setting,

because they recognized their potential to make the college experience better for minoritized students.

Supporting Others From Their Communities

Several participants mentioned a desire to provide students with personal and institutional resources based on their experiences. While in college, Minerva became passionate about helping students from lower-income backgrounds gain access to highly selective institutions. She shared:

> As a [title] scholar, I saw a door open for me, and I wanted other students, like me, to have that. . . . Through my various roles, I've been motivated to give others access to information, resources, and experiences to support their success. . . . The world needs so many things, and I feel like this position is the first experience that connects to me and that I can bring my full self.

Minerva valued how her position allowed her to draw from her passion for access and education and her lived experiences to impact student success. She also appreciated opportunities to connect students with resources and support. Key to her work was building a web of support to engage and connect students to transformative experiences like she benefited from while in college.

Matt also felt a strong connection to his work due to his identity. He worked intentionally to build a strong network across campus. He shared:

> Before working in higher education, I worked in K–12 education for 5 years. I was not looking for a new job, but when I saw this opportunity, it spoke to me. I get to [work] with students from backgrounds like mine and help them navigate one of the most selective institutions in the world. . . . To best support my students, I need to be a conduit

> of services and intimately familiar with every office on campus because what happens in one office can derail a student's academic journey. I have a wide network that I leverage when needed.

Matt was speaking about his ability to leverage his network across campus to best support students. Max shared a similar example. He explained:

> I don't have the luxury of being specialized like my colleagues in other offices on campus. Since my students interact with every office on campus, I've made it my mission to learn as much as I can about every function on campus and know people all over campus. It was one of the ways I made it through college, and I take pride in my ability to understand complex systems and hold so much information.

Matt and Max both demonstrated a strong desire and capacity to serve as bridging agents, connecting students to appropriate resources and people to support their success.

Selma and Kobe shared a similar experience navigating an institutional barrier to being admitted to their respective institutions. Both talked about the importance of helping Black students find community and support to achieve their academic goals. Selma shared:

> I know the struggle of what it takes to get to college. . . . I was admitted conditionally and had to prove myself, but I had the support of a strong family and community at the HBCU [historically Black college and university] I attended. . . . So, for Black students to make it to this elite institution, I understand the grind that it requires . . . I want students to feel comfortable and know that they belong. . . . This is their opportunity to change the trajectory of their life and maybe for years to come.

Evident in participants' stories was a sense of connection to their racial identities and a strong desire to give back to their community. Through their work, they demonstrated a collective

obligation to think critically about the needs of minoritized students and the institutional barriers they encountered. A critically oriented mindset and approach, informed by their lived experiences, was instrumental to their work to drive institutional change in support of minoritized students.

Unique Perspectives and Words of Support

Study participants offered candid and insightful tips and encouragement for other administrators engaged in work to supporting first-generation college students:

- Listen to students and create space for them to share their stories. Although you may identify with the first-generation college student experience, your experience will differ from the needs, challenges, and situations these students encounter today.
- Build a strong network of allies committed to supporting minoritized students. This network should extend across and outside your institution. Having a solid group of committed colleagues to strategize with, learn from, and contribute to your work will be helpful. Find a mentor outside your institution who understands the culture of highly selective institutions.
- Take care of yourself and create a sound support system. Students need you to be checked in. What you need to do requires you to be 90%–100% present and accountable. This work can be draining and hard to carry. Use your vacation time, talk with a counselor, and take care of your body and spirit. At a point, you may decide to step away from the role to protect your mental health, and that is okay!
- You may continue to navigate what it means to be a person from a low-income background in a classist society. All aspects of your identity are part of your

personhood. Your low-income upbringing is an asset, not a liability. Do not lose yourself in the process.

- See yourself as worthy and legitimate. You are what makes the institution valuable. Your voice, your perspective, the work you will do for students, and the impact you will make is memorable and will touch many minoritized students for generations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I shared details about study participants' backgrounds and experiences that informed their work. Through study participants' experiences, I drew specifically from Yosso's (2005) CCW model to highlight how study participants leveraged and benefited from various forms of cultural capital. Although first-generation college students enter college with limited awareness of the college environment, most study participants were motivated from a young age to attend college. They received empowering and affirming messages from their families about the value of education. The powerful messages contributed to the growth of study participants' aspirations to attend college for various reasons. Some study participants were motivated to honor their families' sacrifices to give them access to a good education. Others were motivated to attend college because they wanted to be a role model for their family, gain credentials needed for financial security, or explore new environments with opportunities to meet different people and have new experiences.

Although most study participants experienced some difficulties navigating the college search process due to limited support from their high school or families, through their stories, they shared how they drew from their navigational capital to persist and succeed. While in college, they benefited from access to people and experiences to increase their knowledge and cultural capital. Specifically, a few participants talked about the significant impact of their

involvement in Greek organizations, roles as student leaders, or through jobs on campus. Some study participants appreciated people who intervened when they needed support and guidance. Through intentional actions, study participants benefited from the support and guidance provided by their families and other influential people inside and outside their formal networks. For this reason, study participants were conscious of the role they could play in the lives of first-generation college students. Due to their desire to give back, be a source of strength, and act as a role model for students who shared similar identities, their work was deeply personal, and some believed they were fulfilling their purpose through their work. They each brought unique lived experiences and knowledge. They were also highly motivated to succeed in their work to provide strength, support, and guidance for first-generation college students, particularly students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities.

In the previous findings chapter, I offered examples of how students' critical orientations and system-aware perspectives supported their approach to work. In this chapter, I offered many examples to highlight how study participants drew from their lived experiences and knowledge to inform their work. In the final findings chapter, I share about institutional barriers participants worked to mitigate to enhance their work and efforts to support first-generation student success.

CHAPTER VI: MANY BARRIERS TO NAVIGATE

> The biggest barrier is that this place is designed to be exclusive and caters to a certain student population. It can be difficult to disrupt that because exclusion and privilege permeate the ecosystem of this institution.
>
> —Matt, Study Participant

In the previous two findings chapters, I shared how study participants described their critical orientation and the influence of a systems-aware perspective on their work. I also highlighted their lived experiences and noted several meaningful interactions that informed their work to support minoritized students. In this section, I explore institutional barriers that impeded their efforts to support first-generation college students at highly selective institutions. Context matters and is critical to this work. In this chapter, I discuss the third theme, Many Barriers to Navigate, in response to Research Question 3: What do critically minded, first-generation administrators working with first-generation college students perceive as barriers to their work?

The theme Many Barriers to Navigate is important to explore because work to disrupt oppressive systems does not happen in isolation and is highly contingent upon several factors internal and external to those engaged in efforts to support minoritized students. In the following sections, I share examples of the barriers study participants named that impacted their work. In the spirit of reciprocity and community learning, I conclude this chapter with advice from study participants to other first-generation administrators who work or may choose to work at highly selective institutions to advance first-generation college student success.

When asked to describe barriers they encountered, many study participants started by acknowledging that anyone would face barriers regardless of the work environment. Some obstacles were budgetary constraints, staffing, bureaucracy, or sociopolitical factors. Based on

study participants' prior experiences working at HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities), community colleges, and institutions with higher selectivity rates, many study participants believed some institutional challenges they worked to navigate were unique to the culture and climate of highly selective institutions. Study participants shared over 30 institutional barriers, which I grouped into the following categories: (a) infrastructure and capacity, (b) decentralized resources, (c) unhealthy culture, and (d) restricted financial support.

Infrastructure and Capacity

Many study participants questioned whether available institutional support was adequate to meet the complex and diverse needs of first-generation college students at their respective institutions. In Dexter's case, he expressed frustration with limited institutional support and attention to the needs of diverse students once admitted. He explained:

> We want your diversity, but we don't want your diverse problems. We don't want your personal struggles or the things that we may have to change in the environment or policies or practices to fully accommodate you. . . . I would prefer if we admitted [fewer] low-income students than to force them to struggle once admitted.

When Dexter was in college, he transferred schools and mentioned the first institution he attended provided him with a diversity scholarship but did not have the infrastructure (i.e., staffing, resources, space, or organizational routines) to support him or the other students of color admitted. Years later, he questioned why institutions continued to boldly espouse a commitment to diversity and students from historically excluded or minoritized backgrounds but would not provide institutional resources necessary to build a strong foundation of support.

Similarly, Kush, Hudson, Amber, and Jane noted a need to build the capacity of faculty and staff to help create a more inclusive community sensitive to the needs and experiences of students from minoritized identity groups. Kush explained:

> There is a need to build the capacity of staff and faculty to better understand how to work in student-facing [roles]. Students spend most of their time in the classroom, and they encounter environments that challenge their mere presence based on some aspect of their minoritized identities. . . . There is a challenge and opportunity to build more strategic relationships with faculty to influence the curricular and cocurricular experiences to support the holistic development of all students.

Kush highlighted the challenge of being a minoritized student, moving in and out of spaces not designed for them. Sometimes, this experience could be isolating and harmful. Negative encounters may chip away at a student's confidence and sense of belonging, which in turn may impact their academic performance and mental health. Kush also acknowledged the opportunity to collaborate with faculty to build their awareness and cultural competence to better support minoritized students.

Like Kush, Amber emphasized a desire to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion work. She shared:

> Although diversity, equity, and inclusion [are] espoused institutional priorities, this work needs to be valued and prioritized with adequate resources and support staff. Getting colleagues to focus on equitable access has been challenging because senior leadership does not hold themselves or directors accountable for prioritizing this work. . . . For example, why don't we say no to employers who offer unpaid internships . . . or will we

> turn away employers with a documented track record of harmful actions towards our students of color.

Amber shared her frustration that institutional practices and decisions often did not align with espoused diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. The reality of the misalignment caused her concern because she believed the institution was complicit in knowingly allowing employers access to recruit on campus at the expense of their students, particularly those from minoritized communities.

Quotes offered by Kush and Amber highlighted the need for administrators to make decisions and implement policies and practices that aligned with espoused diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Moreover, to best support students from historically excluded or underrepresented backgrounds, the campus ecosystem must be disrupted to move to a new way of being and doing to support academic achievement and personal success of minoritized students. Another area worthy of attention that tied to this subtheme was the lack of diversity among faculty.

Jane believed faculty leadership could do more work to increase faculty diversity, "The faculty, particularly at these institutions, are not diverse. In most classes, students do not see themselves at the front of the room." Faculty diversity is important to student success and retention. As discussed in the previous chapter, increasing cultural representation and awareness is an important part to build institutional capacity to better support minoritized students. In addition to previously described barriers, staff shortages presented challenges for staff and students.

Several study participants discussed the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic and staff shortages, particularly in their efforts to enhance support for first-generation, lower-income students. Devon explained:

> The pandemic has taken so many members of my community. Watching death and violence inflicted on these communities has been difficult. The pandemic also halted our efforts to build relationships and sustain awareness about the FGLI [first-generation, lower-income] student experience. . . . We had been doing training, but that was put on hold. We are also short staffed, and there's no breathing room to expand our efforts. Now, everyone is doing multiple jobs to best support our most minoritized students with limited staffing.

Devon mentioned as social distance restrictions relaxed, she looked forward to the opportunity to scale their work and build relationships with more staff across campus to provide seamless, proactive support systems for first-generation college students. Jane and Amber also echoed issues related to reduced capacity and acknowledged staff shortages persisted and raised concerns about the ability to meet the needs of students given multiple critical staff vacancies.

Selma highlighted infrastructure needed to be in place to align with institutional priorities to admit more first-generation and students of color. She shared:

> At my institution, senior leadership has articulated aspirational goals and expectations to support minoritized students. I took this job because I believe in the mission and vision for trying to grow and sustain our efforts around student diversity. Now, I need to see if the messaging aligns with the infrastructure to translate aspirations into equitable practices.

Selma was in an inaugural role and worked to build a team and scale efforts through collaborations across campus to identify and mitigate the institutional barriers that hinder first-generation college student success. Selma's example highlighted the need to examine if and how the institutional infrastructure was designed to support minoritized students. Often, minoritized students benefit most from high-touch wrap-around support, which includes frequent outreach, building trusting relationships, and sustained engagement. Because of the type of critical support study participants provided, there was an urgent need for adequate staff to best support first-generation college students. As student enrollment increases, limited staffing constraints may interfere with efforts to create equitable access, opportunities, and experiences for minoritized students. Issues related to institutional infrastructure can raise concerns and create barriers for those charged with nurturing the success of first-generation college students.

Decentralized Resources

Overwhelmingly, most study participants discussed the decentralized nature of highly selective institutions. McShane and Von Glinow (2007) described decentralization as "an organizational model where decision authority, power, and resources are dispersed among units rather than held by a single small group of administrators" (p. 237). There are unique strengths and challenges to the decentralized model that impact how students experience the college environment. In the case of first-generation college students, study participants often discussed challenges inherent in this structure. Lack of controlled uniformity across departments and divisions can create bureaucracy, stifle collaboration, and perpetuate inequitable conditions, making it more difficult for everyone to navigate and work effectively. Kobe shared:

> At my institution, resources are decentralized, and it can be difficult for students and even staff to figure out how and where to access resources. . . . Students receive different

> messages from different people. It's confusing and frustrating. We tell people to send students to our office, and we will assess their situation and get them connected to the right resources.

Kobe mentioned students struggled to navigate bureaucratic and highly complex systems independently unless they were adept at such navigation. Rae also noted "decentralization contributes to multiple hidden curriculums within the same institution." Students would need to decode policies, practices, and resources that are not uniform or consistent across the institution. For example, students in the school of business may receive free professional headshots in their career services office, but students in the art school may not have access to this resource. Matt raised another relevant point about the impact of decentralization on the academic experience. He stated:

> When students are admitted to my institution, many don't venture outside of their college or school. They take most of their classes in one building and eat lunch on one side of campus. Many students often only interact with friends in the same college or school. They don't venture outside their box and meet different people or get exposed to different content, ways of thinking, or new experiences. It's actually really sad.

Matt suggested the decentralized nature of the curriculum impeded efforts to foster greater interactions across differences. He encouraged curricular and cocurricular experiences to allow for more fluidity and exposure to broaden students' understanding of their intended discipline and help them acquire interdisciplinary skills needed for the workforce.

In addition to the previously discussed points, Elena emphasized how decentralization hindered collaboration and sharing of institutional resources across the institution. She explained:

> Decentralization is entrenched in all aspects of the university culture and functioning. People are really territorial about their students, their programs, and their resources. Everyone works in silos and is often reluctant to work collaboratively because of the decentralized nature of the institution. This contributes to duplication of effort, inequitable access to resources, and confusion for staff and students.

Like Elena, Amber noted the decentralized nature of her institutions also contributed to "competition among colleagues who often focus exclusively on their students and often forces us to compete to get students to attend our events or use our resources." Decentralization caused staff to work in silos. A decentralized, siloed work environment can foster competition and isolation, which can make it challenging to provide equitable resources.

Study participants' frustrations were palpable as they discussed the unnecessary wastefulness, discouragement, and competition that stemmed from a highly decentralized institutional structure. They also expressed annoyance with the lack of effort by leadership to systematically coordinate communication and collaboration. Many study participants found themselves attempting to coordinate efforts or expand resources to help provide a more seamless support system and integrative experiences to ensure students could access critical support services.

Unhealthy Culture

When asked to describe the culture of their institutions, study participants more frequently used words such as competitive, toxic, exclusive, oppressive, harmful, disingenuous, excessive, resource-rich, arrogant, and privileged. This list was not to imply that study participants did not think fondly of their institutions or had positive experiences, but oftentimes negative aspects of the culture may have canceled out positive attributes. Matt expressed concern

the student experience was not prioritized, so students were left to create their own experiences. He shared an interesting story highlighting the extent to which the unhealthy culture showed up in the student experience. He explained:

> Every year, my institution hosts a [project] competition, and the students work on the project over the course of one weekend. This project experience is not open to everyone; students must undergo a rigorous interview process to be selected for the project. Students selected endure sleepless nights over a 48-hour period to devote all their time and energy to working on the project. To ensure no distractions, the administration coordinates the delivery of food and water. We even set up portable toilets within close proximity to the project site. This is students' idea of fun, and we are complicit in supporting this unhealthy annual activity.

Matt questioned if and why the administration continued to support the project. Although they were often student-led, he wondered how endorsement of the project competition activity or others like it could hinder the mental health and well-being of students, particularly students who were not used to navigating competitive and high-pressure situations. Like Matt, several other study participants mentioned harmful, and in some instances high-risk, school-sanctioned events, activities, and practices that contributed to unhealthy student behaviors and expectations.

Student culture is riddled with stress and competition, which can show up in many ways. Elena offered an astute point, saying:

> My students are not having a good experience . . . while retention and graduation rates are not a concern, we see higher incidents of anxiety, suicidal ideation, and dissatisfaction. Help-seeking behaviors are stigmatized, and students are struggling

> quietly on their own. My office is now focusing our efforts on the psychosocial metrics to improve the student experience and institutional culture.

Elena had a background in social work and was recently promoted to a director role. In her previous role, she handled case management and was concerned about the trauma and harm students were experiencing due to the toxic student culture. Her team worked collaboratively with colleagues across campus to shift the student culture to one that was more affirming, collaborative, and inclusive. Marie and Amber also raised similar concerns about the student culture. Marie shared:

> At my previous institution, I saw students kicking it [laughing, socializing, and having fun]. Now, I see students studying religiously and sleeping in public spaces [to] get a nap before a test. They stay up all night studying. [They] are working their sophomore year on preparing for law or med school, taking precourses so that they can start to apply early and get early admissions for grad school. There's no sleep, and they treat student leadership as a job. They are committed to leaving a legacy. . . . It's a lot of pressure.

In this quote, Marie was concerned about how the competitive student culture may have pressured students to sacrifice their sleep to do more, get ahead, and leave their mark at the institution.

> Amber also acknowledged the impact of toxic culture on relationship building, saying: The study culture is not healthy. The competitive mindset harms students' mental health and does not allow for failure, personal growth, or exploration. Students are fearful of taking risks because they don't want to fail. . . . Students are also constantly competing with one another and feel the need to prove themselves. . . . The competitive culture also

> makes genuine collaboration, vulnerability, and authentic relationship-building challenging.

Elena, Marie, and Amber shared concerns about the influence of the competitive student culture, which contributed to stress, exhaustion, mental health concerns, and other challenges. Through their work, they tried to make the university environment easier for students to navigate so they did not have so much to contend with while also attempting to succeed and thrive in a highly competitive and toxic student environment.

Max, Kobe, and Minerva expressed frustration at the culture of entitlement, particularly regarding students' expectations about what type of support should be provided by the institution. Max explained:

> The culture of entitlement or even excess is pervasive across campus. Our students, those from lower-income backgrounds, expect that our offices will provide resources and support in ways that are indigenous to the culture [from] which they come. If I believed or had data to confirm that giving students access to a particular resource would create greater equity to support their academic studies, I would work to get them access. But that is often now the case. Students expect that we will use institutional resources to give them access to the same brand of resources as their peers.

Kobe built upon this sentiment and added, "Our students want designer coats and technology because their peers have those items." Minerva similarly felt strongly regarding students' unreasonable expectations about the type of support the institution should provide. She shared:

> This work is thankless. Sometimes, it feels . . . impossible to meet student expectations. So, on my bad days, I feel like, why try? We've done things like give students computers and then get pushback on why we didn't give them better ones, or I've put together a

small lending library of textbooks in the office, and most of the feedback is about, "why don't you have ALL the books I want."

Minerva often felt conflicted and frustrated because she and her staff were working to provide students with access to resources and opportunities but were often met with critiques and demands for more support. Often, student demands focused on their materialistic wants versus their needs. Student demands can be difficult to navigate in a space heavily influenced by privilege and wealth.

Max, Kobe, and Minerva shared a targeted concern about the unhealthy culture of excess and entitlement permeating their respective institutions. Administrators must contend with students' demands and critiques because institutional resources (i.e., winter coats, boots, professional attire, transportation) provided did not compare to the quality and type of items and experiences accessible to their affluent peers. Students may try to assimilate into the dominant culture and figure out how to coexist in a space where materialism is valued and shown visibly.

Restricted Financial Support

As shared in Chapter II, many highly selective institutions adopted new financial aid policies to attract and make it more affordable for lower-income students to attend their institutions. Although the efforts are helpful, most study participants expressed concern about the growing and highly complex issues that students bring with them to higher education. Although this section focuses on financial support, other issues were closely related to students' financial needs. Dexter expressed concern that the institution did not adequately meet students' various needs. He explained:

There is a perception that financial aid addresses all student needs, [which] is inaccurate. Students have other needs that are not included in the cost of attendance. They [have to]

> send money home to support their families. Some students have to pay for health insurance, professional attire, winter clothing, and cell phone bills. We tout that we met full need, but we don't explain to students what this means in language that is relevant and accessible.

Dexter wondered if institutions were overselling and if more should be done to better support students financially or become more transparent in messaging about financial aid. Although financial aid packages vary across institutions, most highly selective institutions offer financial aid packages designed to cover the cost of on-campus housing and a set meal plan, academic textbooks and supplies, and tuition. In some instances, financial aid packages may cover additional costs, such as health insurance or an on-campus gym membership, but it varies. Not included in most financial aid packages are costs not considered part of the academic experience but may be a necessity to students, such as a cell phone, transportation, and winter attire. Gaps in financial support creates challenges for students who do not have the financial means to cover these expenses or any other unexpected expenses.

LeeAnn mentioned the hidden costs associated with participating in student activities and events. She shared:

> There are many costs that are not covered by financial aid (i.e., a $200 tennis racket strongly recommended by the faculty member). Annual events and experiences that are part of the social and academic fabric of the institution have price tags associated with them. My office tries to cover some of these expenses, but sometimes it is not enough.

LeeAnn was referencing the hidden costs to engage in extracurricular activities that were such an important part of college life not covered by financial aid. Hidden costs can create barriers for students to access or participate in certain events and experiences.

Elena mentioned helping students navigate financial aid was one of the biggest challenges she encountered daily in her work. The institution had conducted a compliance audit and found the office was using institutional resources for students not in compliance with financial aid guidelines. As a result, she had to stop providing students with access to valuable resources. This situation frustrated Elena and she explained:

> Unfortunately, we do not have a great relationship with the financial aid office. We were providing students with laptops, gift cards to furnish their residence hall rooms, and emergency funding to deal with unexpected expenses. Now, we can't do that anymore. We were giving students tangible resources to support their success, but it was found to be out of compliance. So now, some of the problems we had addressed previously are emerging again. It's frustrating not to be able to use our resources to help students in meaningful ways.

Elena explained many students felt unsupported, and it was frustrating to watch students not get supported. She was challenged by the new restrictive financial aid policies because they felt arbitrary and interfered with her efforts to support students and provide them with tangible resources. When talking with colleagues at other highly selective institutions, it was apparent the beliefs and motivation held by the person crafting or upholding financial aid policies could often be detrimental or beneficial to ensure all students, regardless of financial background, could get adequate financial support to fully participate in all aspects of the student experience.

Participants' examples illuminate challenges experienced by students from lower-income backgrounds and barriers administrators encounter in their efforts to provide students with tangible resources. Several study participants shared they had funding in their budgets to provide students with laptops, textbooks, test prep materials, and other academic resources, but restrictive

financial aid policies prohibited them from using the funding in ways that could make the most impact to benefit students in meaningful ways. Restrictive financial aid policies can be challenging for students and administrators. Study participants worked to understand and mitigate barriers to ensure all students could receive tangible support to meet their needs.

Unique Perspectives and Words of Support

In spite of the barriers and challenges study participants experienced through their work, they offered several recommendations to assist other administrators in their efforts to take care of themselves while doing this important work:

- Reframe your thinking about resistance - see it as a growth opportunity for you and the institution. Go in knowing that this work will be difficult, and you may spend some time justifying your existence. Some people do not want you to change the system that benefits them or people like them.
- This work is deceptively complex and slow - brace yourself. These issues were created over decades, you will not resolve them overnight.
- You are not a savior - you are a piece of the puzzle and a part of a team. You are not the solution - the presence of your office/center does not address the systemic issues that shape the experiences of those operating at the margins. Be realistic about your capacity and scope of work.
- This work is hard but comes with many rewards. Remember who you are here to support. Draw inspiration, support, and motivation from students every day.

Conclusion

Listening to study participants talk about barriers and challenges they encountered in their work to support first-generation college students at highly selective institutions was a

sobering point in the individual interviews. I could feel the frustration. I know their frustration. I experienced it myself on many occasions. The issue of infrastructure and capacity was an example many study participants raised. Participants were challenged by limited staffing and institutional support to execute their work and expand their reach. The discussed challenges may have been because many study participants were in inaugural roles, and although they had the rewarding and challenging, depending on how one feels about ambiguity and venturing down uncharted paths, task of building a program from the ground up, that often meant doing it alone or with limited staff for a period of time. Building a program from the ground up can be a taxing and lonely experience, especially when and if one is working to mitigate other barriers that interfere with their work to support first-generation college students.

As I considered comments about decentralized resources and restrictive financial aid policies, I wondered what responsibility the university bears to ensure all students can have the full college student experience in the same way. When students from lower-income backgrounds are admitted to highly selective institutions, they often have to make difficult choices about when and how to engage because hidden costs permeate all aspects of the student experience. In many instances, joining a student organization comes with the cost of buying professional attire or equipment, and living in the residence hall may come with fees to attend a hall dance or buy a hall sweatshirt. Enrolling in a ceramics class may come with extra costs to buy clay and tools to carve and fire the pieces in the kiln. The reality of hidden costs makes it very difficult for first-generation college students, specifically those from lower-income backgrounds, to feel like they belong and are full members of the university community. As an administrator charged with leading programs and resources to support first-generation college students, the task is especially challenging due to institutional barriers that take time, energy, and oftentimes social capital to

work collaboratively with others to identify creative solutions or make strong enough arguments to convince the right person to move forward. Many study participants did not share much about how they overcame obstacles; however, further exploration is needed. Unfortunately, I learned three study participants had recently changed jobs, two no longer worked at a highly selective institution, and the other left the field entirely. Staff departure and retention may be indicative of a larger systemic problem that must be addressed to ensure administrators are best positioned to scale and sustain their efforts, support students, and continue the good work to drive institutional change while maintaining their passion and commitment to this work. To conclude this chapter, I offer a few words of advice and support from study participants.

CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Through this study, I learned about the experiences of 20 study participants who identified as critically minded, first-generation higher education administrators. Although their backgrounds, social identities, and experiences varied, they all shared a personal and professional commitment to driving institutional change to better support minoritized students, particularly first-generation college students. In Chapters III–VI, I offered a group and institutional summary, allowing a brief view of the lived experiences of study participants and the characteristics of the institutions where they worked. I then explored how their critical orientation and system-aware perspectives influenced their approach to work. Next, I shared how their backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences informed their work, focusing on their first-generation college student identities. Then, I highlighted examples of several barriers that impeded their work to support first-generation college student success. Throughout the three findings chapters, I also offered advice and candid recommendations from study participants.

To frame this chapter, I begin with my analysis of the data collected through basic qualitative methods to address the three research questions that guided this research study:

- How do critically minded administrators who were first-generation college students approach their work to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions?
- How do critically minded, first-generation administrators use their unique backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to create and lead programs to support first-generation college students at highly selective institutions?

- What do critically minded, first-generation administrators working with first-generation college students perceive as barriers to their work at highly selective colleges and universities?

I used Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001, 2011) institutional and empowerment agent framework and components of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) framework to analyze study participants' responses about their experiences as first-generation college students and administrators. Through this chapter, I contextualize their experiences and highlight how their critical orientation and system-aware perspective informed their work approach to supporting first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. To review, Stanton-Salazar (1997) explained institutional agents "occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system and are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (p. 1075). Empowerment agents engage in the same actions but also direct their time and attention to institutional transformation. Yosso's (2005) CCW framework, developed through the tenets of critical race theory, includes six types of capital: (a) aspirational, (b) linguistic, (c) familial, (d) social, (e) navigational, and (f) resistance. Through my review of the literature and this study, I found both frameworks were complementary and offered a helpful lens to operationalize how administrators support minoritized students. To honor and complement study participants' voices, I structured the discussion of findings based on the three themes reflected in participants' words: (a) My Presence is a Disruption for Good, (b) I am Called to Do This Work, and (c) Many Barriers to Navigate.

Discussion Theme 1: My Presence is a Disruption for Good

This theme resonated with me because it hit at the heart of what it takes to best support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. First-generation college

students are often underrepresented at highly selective institutions. The college culture is designed to cater to the interests, needs, and expectations of students from privileged backgrounds (Kezar, 2011). As a result, many first-generation college students may encounter barriers on their educational journey because they enter college with limited social and cultural capital deemed valuable. To meet the needs of first-generation college students and support their success, administrators must be disruptive in their efforts to decenter privileged students. Decentering privileged students does not imply that administrations must be hasty, confrontational, or hostile in their efforts. Instead, administrators must be calculated, collaborative, and steadfast in their efforts to disrupt, cause trouble, and inspire change in thought and action. This point was encapsulated in Rochelle's words when she said, "My presence is a disruption for good." She and other study participants recognized they had a responsibility to disrupt the dominant ways of being to create an educational experience conducive to first-generation college student success.

To this aim, the first set of findings concerns the 20 study participants' mindsets and fundamental beliefs. Study participants espoused a critical orientation and system-aware perspective. They were critical of policies, practices, and conditions contributing to inequitable student success outcomes. They rejected deficit-based narratives often used to describe marginalized students and worked to advance asset-centered narratives to create more affirming and welcoming educational spaces. As discussed previously, given the various intersecting minoritized identities many first-generation college students hold (i.e., race, socioeconomic status, citizenship status, and sexual orientation), it is essential individuals in charge of nurturing their success recognize the many strengths and assets first-generation college students bring to higher education. To support student success and drive institutional change, study participants also worked strategically and collaboratively to engage the greater campus community and build

institutional capacity to better support first-generation college student success. Next, I elaborate on each subtheme in relation to the extant literature and conclude with a summary.

Critical Orientation and Systems-Aware Perspectives

Study participants were unwaveringly committed to supporting first-generation college students and others operating at the margins. When asked to describe their approach to work, study participants mentioned a drive to disrupt a pervasive culture of exclusivity, power, and privilege that reinforced the status quo at highly selective institutions. Several participants acknowledged the historical and sociopolitical factors that worked in concert to privilege students from dominant groups at the expense of students from minoritized communities. To this point, Dexter encouraged administrators to consider the population highly selective institutions were designed to educate and how the origins of these institutions may explain why inequities exist today. It is necessary for student service professionals to reflect on the legacies of highly selective institutions and approach their work from a critical orientation and system-aware perspective because it may inform the types of questions to ask and ways to redistribute institutional resources. Additionally, awareness of historical and current sociopolitical factors such as discrimination, racial injustice, and housing instability, may also enhance administrators' understanding of how to approach the work in response to institutional barriers and resistance.

As study participants explained how they spent their time at work, they recognized their roles as twofold. All drew distinctions between supporting individual student success (i.e., institutional agents) and holding the institution accountable for creating greater access and equitable experiences (i.e., institutional/empowerment agents). To manifest participants' roles and goals, I identified three subthemes as crucial attributes of the administrator's critical orientation and system-aware perspective, including: (a) Possessing an Asset-Based Approach,

(b) Centering First-Generation College Students, and (c) Engaging in Actions to Build Institutional Capacity.

All study participants regarded first-generation college students from an asset-based lens. They rejected the belief that first-generation students were deficient or inferior because they lacked the cultural capital deemed valuable in higher education. Due to their own experiences navigating college as first-generation college students, participants recognized the assets and cultural capital they inherited from their communities that contributed to their success and social mobility. In their campus roles, they were in positions to empower and help cultivate capital in their students.

Asset-Based Approach

When describing first-generation college students, study participants used words such as ambitious, courageous, trailblazer, and role model. Study participants believed it was essential to help first-generation college students identify and draw connections between their assets and strengths derived from their home communities and lived experiences. Administrators should approach their work from an asset perspective to empower and increase feelings of self-efficacy and belonging among first-generation college students, particularly in predominantly white spaces (Strayhorn, 2012). Equally important, administrators, faculty, and staff who use asset-based approaches may also intentionally challenge deficit-based discourse and framing often used to characterize students from minoritized communities and explain educational inequities. All study participants led initiatives and worked collaboratively with colleagues to shift the narrative about first-generation college students from one that framed students as deficient or academically challenged to one that was empowering, affirming, and inclusive of their diverse and intersecting lived experiences. Shifting narratives is critical to support the engagement and retention of students trying to coexist and reach their full potential in an educational environment

not designed to meet their needs. Rae explained, “minoritized students encounter an educational system operating as it was designed, to keep them out, and allow students from privileged backgrounds to succeed and thrive.” Administrators who approach their work from an asset-based lens or use strength-based strategies are instrumental in disrupting the status quo to benefit minoritized student populations.

Centering First-Generation College Students

Study participants also worked in their sphere of influence to disrupt policies and practices that silenced, ignored, and pushed first-generation college students to the margins in their sphere of influence. Study participants disrupted policies and practices by centering the needs and experiences of first-generation college students. Many study participants worked to redistribute institutional resources by designing tailored programs and support. In most cases, administrators had objectives to help students develop various forms of capital (Yosso, 2005). For instance, when Kush noticed his students were underrepresented in high-impact practices, he intervened and worked in his sphere of influence to provide his students with access to highly regarded academic experiences. Similarly, Nicole’s work with the library staff to encourage and introduce first-generation college students to the library as an institutional resource may have better positioned first-generation college students to use campus resources. Both were examples of their work to help students develop navigational and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Early exposure and engagement are critical to students’ academic integration and success (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Kush and Nicole’s examples, among others offered by study participants, exemplified the intentional and disruptive work required to create targeted interventions to address gaps in student support and advance equity for the benefit of first-generation college students.

To help students better navigate an educational environment filled with unfamiliar terminology, unspoken expectations, and tacit knowledge that shape social and academic interactions, most study participants offered workshops and events designed to help reveal the hidden curriculum operating at their respective institutions and in the world of work. Revealing the hidden curriculum aligned with Gable (2021) who concluded helping students decode and navigate the academe is necessary to support their success. In addition to helping students learn and adjust to the cultural norms, mores, and expectations of their college, it is important to expose first-generation students to the hidden work curriculum so they are familiar with and adequately prepared to succeed. Amber and Daniela spoke passionately about their work to teach first-generation college students the unspoken rules and expectations so they were not further marginalized or othered in the workplace. This finding is also consistent with Rease Miles and Morales's (2018) research, which emphasized that administrators have an essential role in critical career development to support vocational exploration, discernment, and navigation for first-generation college students.

Additionally, work to center first-generation college students can be enhanced when students are encouraged to become self-aware and critical of the systems they are working to navigate. Administrators can also ask critical questions, such as why this barrier exists, who it is designed to support, and how we can mitigate it, for the betterment of other minoritized students. This practice of asking critical questions and mitigating institutional barriers was reflected in the examples shared by Amber and Daniela to help first-generation college students develop the tools and confidence necessary to fully integrate and successfully navigate networking, internships, and other postgraduate opportunities. Although outside the scope of career services, in my findings, Nicole, Kush, Marie, and Kobe also shared examples of their work to help students develop their critical consciousness about the world around them, with a particular focus

on how students might navigate and engage with power. When administrators create exposure and opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue through promoting student involvement in leadership roles or student advocacy, it has the potential to transform spaces and practices operating inside and outside the institution, which is a goal of empowerment agents.

Institutional Capacity Building

Lastly, to do vital work, study participants acknowledged their responsibility to ask critical questions, challenge misconceptions and assumptions, and push to hold their institutions accountable to enhance the first-generation college student experience. Many study participants stressed their work could not be done in isolation. Their work required many study participants to work strategically and collaboratively with campus partners to build institutional capacity around equity and student success for all. This finding aligns with Bensimon et al.'s (2019) advocacy and challenge to all administrators and faculty to engage in institutional capacity building to enhance equity across all racial and ethnic groups. Nicole, Kobe, and Marisa's work engaging faculty and staff in training about the unique characteristics of first-generation college students to raise awareness about their experiences at their respective institutions may help shape narratives used to frame the first-generation college student experience (Jehangir & Do, 2022). Study participants worked to shape the narrative about first-generation college students through training opportunities to raise awareness about the needs and experiences of first-generation college students.

Although I did not find much literature about donor engagement or development initiatives, many study participants emphasized they must delicately leverage their navigational capital to manage relationships and expectations of colleagues engaged in development work. At most institutions represented in this study, the work of colleagues in development offices focused on developing relationships with prospective donors who may have an interest or the potential to

make significant contributions to support first-generation college student initiatives. Several study participants were in endowed positions, or their offices/centers were fully donor funded. When asked to reflect and explain why they believed their offices/centers may have attracted more donor interest compared to other identity or affinity spaces, a few study participants noted the first-generation college student identity was more palatable and appealed to generous donors in ways that talking about Black and Brown students did not. The reality of a first-generation college student identity being more palatable than a Black or Brown identity for donors contributed to some of the tension many study participants experienced because of their ethnic or racial identities and commitment to supporting all minoritized students.

Due to growing popularity and interest in supporting first-generation college students, study participants regularly received requests to identify students to feature on a webpage as part of the giving day campaign or to serve on a panel to talk about their experiences during trustee weekend. Rochelle, Chantel, and Max spoke about their work to protect students from situations that may traumatize or tokenize them, but they also spoke about their efforts to reeducate others. To minimize and protect students from encounters that may cause them harm, participants often tried to advance a message that spotlighted the great work and support through their offices and resources without putting students in situations to disclose personal aspects of their lives to garner donor funds. Rochelle, Chantel, and Max's examples highlight the work of institutional and empowerment agents and their efforts to support students while simultaneously working to transform the institution from the inside.

In this study, the manifestation of the institutional and empowerment agent was embodied at various levels. In discussing the next theme, I delve deeper into this embodiment by offering more information about the experiences, circumstances, and interactions that motivated

study participants to engage in work to disrupt oppressive policies, practices, and procedures that hinder the success of first-generation college students.

Discussion Theme 2: I Am Called to Do This Work

Although the first theme focused on how study participants approached their work, in this theme, I journeyed back to their earlier experiences navigating to and through college. Exploring study participants' backstories was important to better understand the knowledge, skills, and experiences that informed their work.

Drawing From Experience and Knowledge

All study participants shared a belief in the transformative potential of higher education. Many saw education as the path to upward and social mobility for themselves and their families. Four participants talked about their desire to get a good job and make money to support their parents and help their siblings attend college, which aligned with their collectivist culture and was different from the individualistic culture pervasive in higher education. I was pleased to see my findings differed from much of the literature, which assumes families are not involved or engaged in supporting first-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018). All but three study participants shared their families supported their educational aspirations and helped them, in their own way, accomplish their goals. Family support is an example of navigational and familial capital, two forms of capital from Yosso's (2005) CCW framework. Dexter's family referred to him as the "little professor," and Kush's mother told everyone in listening distance that her son was going to college when he grew up. Several study participants' families made family sacrifices to move neighborhoods, and a few noted their parents emigrated to the United States so they could have access to a better education. Study participants proudly shared examples of ways their families sacrificed and nurtured their aspirational goals. This finding is important

because it aligns with my experience and may highlight an opportunity for more administrators to design programs and resources to help engage families in the college student experience.

When applying to college, most study participants thought they did not have adequate support or information to make an informed choice. They had limited cultural and navigational capital to move through the admission process effectively alone. This finding is consistent with the extant literature that reports first-generation college students often have less knowledge about the college application process and fewer resources to pay for college (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Engle et al., 2006). Matt and Elena wished they were more informed about their academic options. Although I did not explore this topic further, Matt and Elena's experiences may align with the undermatching phenomena, where students from under-resourced communities often do not apply to colleges that meet their academic potential because they are unaware of their options or may be deterred by the cost of attending a highly selective institution (Muskens et al., 2019). Consistent with Padgett et al. (2012), Dexter, Hudson, and Chantel attended well-resourced high schools and had access to cultural capital and resources to help them make informed decisions. Dexter's experience at a predominantly white preparatory school was especially poignant because he was the only study participant who talked about his early socialization and comfort in navigating affluent white spaces. Dexter's experience is consistent with Jack's (2019) description of first-generation college students from lower-income backgrounds who have access to higher social and cultural capital and are comfortable conversing with adults in power and navigating elite academic and cultural spaces. Jack (2019) referred to this group of students as the "privileged poor" (p. 11) compared to the "doubly disadvantaged group" (p. 11), students who attend under-resourced high schools and often struggle to navigate elite academic spaces. Dexter stressed early exposure to the dominant culture through his middle and high school experiences

aided in his transition and navigation of highly selective institutions when he was in college and even in his role at an elite college.

Although most study participants had limited knowledge and exposure to the college environment when they applied, all were determined to attend college and graduate. When confronted with an obstacle or barrier, many took an "I'll figure it out" approach. They were resourceful and took the initiative to gain access to information needed to navigate the admission and financial aid processes. All relied on the help and knowledge of their families, friends, teachers, coaches, and others in their network to persist. Study participants exhibited a high degree of social, navigational, and resistance capital, three forms of capital reflected in Yosso's (2005) CCW model. Many also regarded their personal attributes, strong work ethic, resourcefulness, and ability to manage and work through ambiguity as instrumental to their success in college and as an administrator. For example, many shared due to their experiences navigating unfamiliar situations in college, they were comfortable stepping into their inaugural roles and building a program from the ideation stage to implementation.

As a collective, study participants shared similar characteristics and attributes consistent with the literature. Many participants were from minoritized racial and ethnic communities and lower-income backgrounds (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). Most study participants also identified as women. Their experiences on campus were consistent and different from the extant literature in some regards. Horn and Nevill (2006) found many first-generation college students are not engaged on campus because they are commuter students and live at home. Of the 20 study participants, Elena was the only participant who lived at home. Still, she was actively engaged with her sorority and undergraduate research and proudly shared she formed a Latinx student organization in her senior year. Many study participants regarded their experiences living on campus in the residence halls as instrumental to helping them find community, mentors, and

leadership development. This finding is consistent with Pascarella et al. (2003) who found that living on campus helped first-generation college students feel connected to the community and community resources.

Influential Mentors and Advocates

Consistent with the literature (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010), most study participants shared that their work on campus was necessary to support themselves financially; however, my study findings differed in that many study participants did not believe their jobs on campus detracted from their studies or engagement on campus. Instead, many participants reported their on-campus jobs connected them to institutional agents who validated their aspirational goals, supported their personal and professional development, and affirmed their scholar identities. In my study, three participants also named a faculty member as instrumental in supporting their success. This finding reaches a similar conclusion as A. C. Dowd et al. (2013) on the role of institutional agents in promoting transfer student success, who found institutional agents are instrumental in helping low-status students navigate the bureaucratic process of transferring from a community college to a highly selective institution. A. C. Dowd et al. (2013) concluded that students attributed their successful transition to the efforts of institutional agents who validated their experiences and provided supportive environments.

During their time in college, most study participants explained they benefited from formal and informal mentoring from influential people, including their peers, faculty, staff, and administrators at the university. Through engagement and the relationships formed with influential people, study participants gained access to social and cultural capital that prepared them for leadership roles. Selma and Max were orientation leaders (OL) and credited their OL experience for helping them develop leadership skills and gain exposure to careers in higher education. Minerva felt her experience as a resident assistant (RA) helped with her identity

exploration and motivated her to consider a career working with college students. Marie and Daniela felt their resident director, a professional staff member who oversaw the residence hall staff, was instrumental in helping them reevaluate their career goals. Both Marie and Daniela wanted to study immigrant law because of their lived experiences, but neither was aware of the time and money required to attend law school. Overall, most study participants felt their engagement on campus helped them grow and find community, develop career readiness skills, and provide role models for them to emulate. Participants' experiences were formative in their personal and professional development.

When asked to discuss their career in higher education, all study participants shared they had not considered a career in higher education before college. They were not aware of this potential career path. Participants' lack of awareness might have been due to limited exposure to the college environment or the newness of the administrative role. It is important to note the first-generation college student identity did not gain greater visibility until the early 2000s. To combat the first-generation college student identity invisibility, most study participants shared they regularly disclosed their first-gen identity when introducing themselves and worked to increase and build a loud and proud first-generation community of faculty, students, and staff across the institution. Many participants considered their first-generation college student identity a source of pride and inspiration.

When I asked study participants to talk about their salient identities, all but one participant considered their first-generation college student identity as part of their salient identities. When I asked Selma to share more about her salient identities, she explained she identified as a Black, Christian woman. She explained the first-generation college student identity was not salient because she attended a historically Black college and university (HBCU), and most of the students were first-generation college students. As a result, she believed the

university was designed to support and meet her needs. She felt her navigation might have been more seamless than others who attended a predominantly white university or obstacles were not as pronounced because everyone around her was experiencing the same issues. Selma's experience made me wonder more about the influence of institutional contexts and the intersection of race on the experiences of first-generation college administrators who attended different types of institutions.

While reflecting on why they pursued their respective roles, all study participants shared they were motivated to help other first-generation college students like someone did for them. They wanted to make the college transition easier and more fulfilling for students. Matt, Amber, and Nicole explained when they were in college, they were reluctant to ask for help because they wanted to appear self-sufficient and capable. My study reached a similar conclusion as Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011), who concluded first-generation college students experience tension when asking for help. Lowery-Hart and Pacheco found many students felt conflicted when asking for help, because at home, they learned asking for help was a sign of weakness and they wanted to appear independent and knowledgeable. Nicole and Rae mentioned they recognized some students may have felt prideful or embarrassed, just like they did when they experienced academic challenges in college. To connect with students, study participants worked to normalize help-seeking behaviors and regularly engage students. Rochelle and Matt explained they would not have graduated college if someone did not "advocate and pour into them." Because of their experiences, Rochelle and Matt were motivated to support and guide students like them. Matt showed students his transcript, Rochelle shared she was academically dismissed, and Kobe explained he put a lot of pressure on himself in college because he was afraid to fail and shame his family. Study participants believed it was essential administrators and faculty tell

their stories as a way to connect and build rapport with students and to show their humanity and vulnerability.

Hudson, Dexter, and Marisa described one of their primary functions was to help students find a community or a safe space to be themselves in their respective institutions. Hudson referred to her office as a home base. She encouraged students to engage and find community across campus, but when things got tough or they wanted to be around people who got it, students knew they could always come back to home base. Many study participants advocated for and designed spaces, similar to other identity or affinity groups, for first-generation college students to come together to process their experiences, learn from one another, and develop the confidence, agency, and self-efficacy to persist and graduate. Many study participants believed they were successful in college because they had access to influential people, advocates, and spaces where they could find support and community. Participants' various examples illuminate institutional agents' important work and actions to support individual student success. Study participants regularly drew from their lived experience and knowledge of the first-generation college student experience to inform and enhance their work. In addition to supporting students, many participants shared a desire to work in the system to mitigate barriers for the betterment of first-generation college students, which may benefit all students.

Discussion Theme 3: Many Barriers to Navigate

The first theme focused on how study participants approached their work. In the second theme, I journeyed back to study participants' experiences navigating college as undergraduate students to explore the interactions and experiences that informed their work. In this theme, Many Barriers to Navigate, I highlight the perceived barriers study participants identified that impacted their work. To review, study participants self-identified as critically minded, first-generation administrators and led programs to support first-generation college students at highly

selective institutions. Although they all acknowledged institutional barriers were embedded in every organization, many participants believed the barriers encountered were distinctive to highly selective institutions, which are steeped in privilege, wealth, and exclusive practices.

As shared previously, many highly selective institutions began adopting financial aid policies in 2008, and implemented admissions strategies to recruit more first-generation college students. Highly selective institutions may offer minoritized students more access to institutional resources and faculty and higher retention and graduation rates than other institutional types (Cataldi et al., 2018). Although increasing student enrollment is promising, if the institutional infrastructure and capacity are not designed to meet the increasingly diverse and complex needs today's college students bring to higher education, first-generation college students may not equitably reap the rewards of these benefits. First-generation college students often hold other minoritized identities and encounter institutional barriers due to how the institution is structured to favor students from privileged backgrounds (Kezar, 2011). Institutional policies and practices that favor students from privileged backgrounds simultaneously create barriers for first-generation college students and the administrators charged with nurturing their success. For example, Dexter expressed frustration that his institution had not allocated appropriate resources to build a strong foundation of support for students from first-generation and lower-income backgrounds. He said recently his office received a gift from a donor to enhance support for first-generation lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, but he still needed more support for Black and Latinx students.

As an undergraduate student, Dexter felt unsupported and struggled to find community among other students who shared his identities. After his 1st year in college, he transferred institutions. To best support students, Dexter recommended senior leadership evaluate if current institutional resources (i.e., financial resources, staff, and space) were suitable to meet the

complex and diverse needs of all admitted students. Several study participants served as the primary support for multicultural affairs and or work in collaboration with other colleagues to support minoritized students. Dexter's example highlights the importance of acknowledging ways to support the intersecting needs of the first-generation student population.

Similarly, several participants also emphasized the need to build faculty and staff capacity and cultural competency to work with an increasingly diverse student population. Kobe and Nicole regularly worked with faculty to diversify the curriculum, and Marisa offered training and workshops to raise awareness of the unique needs and strengths of first-generation college students. Although diversifying the curriculum and training are helpful, the success of these efforts is highly contingent upon everyone at the institution taking advantage of opportunities to enhance their skill sets and knowledge to better support minoritized students. All study participants shared they unfortunately continued to encounter or learn from students that the college environment was hostile and unsupportive. Study participants shared the culture may make it difficult for them to foster a strong community and feelings of belongingness among minoritized students (Strayhorn, 2021).

Another barrier study participants mentioned was the highly complex and decentralized nature of their respective institutions. Highly decentralized institutions often operate independently regarding decision-making and distribution of institutional resources (McShane & Von Glinow, 2007). A decentralized organizational structure creates barriers for students because it can be difficult to find information and understand how processes operate among various units. First-generation college students enter higher education with limited awareness and knowledge of key offices, terminology, and university operations (Davis, 2010). Their limited knowledge of the university environment is further exacerbated by the hidden curriculum operating with various units that make up the university. The hidden curriculum comprises the

norms, mores, and unspoken expectations that regulate behaviors and interactions (Gable, 2021). Several study participants noted colleagues across the institution were often unaware or confused about the types of institutional resources to support students based on their individual circumstances. Bureaucratic processes and procedures may make it difficult for students to persist and graduate, negatively impacting students with limited social and cultural capital. To best support first-generation college students, several study participants encouraged their colleagues to send first-generation college students directly to their offices. Participants worked to assess and triage the student's needs to appropriately refer students to the right offices or persons to meet their needs. Study participants tried to serve as a one-stop shop for students to minimize their confusion and efficiently get their needs met. They also tried to publicly promote resources and encourage normalizing access to campus resources so students were more aware and comfortable using resources provided by their offices and across campus. Additionally, some study participants considered themselves generalists and intentionally worked to overcompensate for other areas by trying to learn as much as possible about other offices so they could best support students. Overcompensating for other areas could lead to overuse of their staff and offices, which could be counteracted if institutional information and processes were streamlined to make the college experiences simpler and more efficient to benefit all students.

Concerns about the unhealthy student culture generated the most discussion among study participants. Many shared examples of the highly competitive and individualistic nature of the environment. Matt offered an example of a project activity that required students to give up significant amounts of time, sleep, and energy to devote to the project. Marie was surprised to learn that students regularly slept in public spaces between classes and experienced high levels of anxiety and stress due to their demanding course load and desire to gain as much experience as possible through extracurricular engagement to prepare for postgraduate success. Max and Kobe

also expressed concern that lower-income students were adopting materialistic values and expectations not germane to their home communities or culture. A primary worry was some first-generation and lower-income students were attempting to assimilate into the dominant culture. Moreover, lower-income students expected the institution to provide them with financial resources to experience college at the same level as their continuing-generation and affluent peers. Minerva and Max noted a strong emphasis on materialism created a sense of entitlement and lack of gratitude among the first-generation college student population. It is important to note study participants did not believe students should be silenced and grateful just to be at the institution; rather, there was a growing sentiment among students that the institution should be doing more to provide them with more resources that often equated to high fashion and materialistic items. To address this concern, several study participants noted they continued to help students identify and validate their cultural capital and assets derived from home communities.

The last topic area raised regarded institutional barriers related to restrictive financial support. Please note this was different from students' expectations for materialistic items. Restrictive financial support related to how financial aid policies and guidelines were interpreted to evaluate the cost of attendance and how institutional resources should be allocated. As shared previously, most students with high demonstrated financial need often receive a financial aid package to cover the cost of a meal plan, on-campus housing, and academic supplies. The financial aid package is often made up of institutional funds and, in some instances, loans, federal work-study, and a family contribution. Unfortunately, most financial aid packages do not account for the various financial and personal needs students have that are not calculated into the cost of attendance. Participants often shared they struggled to explain why students needed more support. Dexter shared many students often explained they needed money to cover bills related

to health insurance, a cell phone bill, or even to send money home to support their families. Additionally, Chanel and Rochelle mentioned other hidden costs associated with engaging in the full college student experience, such as tickets to sporting events, professional attire, and membership fees to join a professional organization. Students who cannot participate in all aspects of college life due to limited resources may struggle to find community and feel a sense of belonging. Engagement on campus in activities also gives students access to highly valued social and cultural capital, which is important for first-generation college students.

Due to their desire to give first-generation college students and other minoritized students greater access and exposure, many study participants structured their financial resources to allocate funds for students to engage in various ways. Elena shared she continued to navigate a complicated relationship with the office of financial aid at her institution. She explained this was largely driven by her desire to create greater student equity based on her college experiences. Once transferring to another institution, Elena worked full-time and felt her college experience was completely transactional. She wanted more cocurricular experiences and access to opportunities like her sorority sisters, so she decided to quit her job and take out loans to live off to have the type of college experience she wanted. In her role at the time of the study, she was motivated to provide institutional resources so students could have more equitable experiences without taking out extensive loans to have the same experiences she did. Study participants continued to grapple with how and when to allocate institutional resources to best support student needs and engagement on campus and often drew inspiration from other peer institutions to address gaps in student support.

Study participants concluded barriers greatly impacted the student experience in various ways and also made it challenging for them to best support students. Although study participants identified how they worked creatively and strategically to disrupt barriers, they also

acknowledged mitigating institutional barriers could be time consuming and divert their attention from other priorities and initiatives to scale and enhance first-generation student support.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

In this study, I described the experiences of 20 critically minded first-generation administrators and their work to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective institutions. Study participants' stories provided unique insight into their efforts to help students build community, access institutional resources, and engage in transformative experiences. Although their stories are unique and may be applicable to other administrators, it is my hope that information shared may inform future practice and research to build upon this body of work.

Implication for Practice

Although the focus of this study was on the experiences of critically minded, first-generation administrators at highly selective institutions, the findings can benefit every faculty, staff, and administrator who interacts with minoritized students. Findings from this study implied a need to examine and adapt policies and practices in higher education to better serve minoritized students. Study participants identified it was important to approach their work from a critical lens and systems-aware perspective. All study participants engaged in actions in alignment with the roles of institutional agents, and several displayed characteristics of empowerment agents. They recognized the transformative potential of higher education and viewed minoritized students from an asset-based lens. Unfortunately, they also recognized faculty, staff, and other administrators might hold deficit-based perspectives about students from minoritized backgrounds that influences institutional policies and actions. To address deficit-based perspectives, all members of the institution should adopt an asset-based perspective and advance

institutional narratives to celebrate and honor the unique talents, assets, and strengths minoritized students bring and contribute to the university environment.

Additionally, institutional leaders should invest in institutional capacity building to intentionally create a network of faculty, staff, and students galvanized around addressing gaps in equitable student outcomes and supporting first-generation college student success. Having a strong and visible network of support may make institutional resources more widespread and may normalize helping-seeking behaviors, which may be beneficial for all students. Study participants also worked to mitigate and eradicate institutional barriers that negatively impacted the student experience and their approach to work, including infrastructure and capacity, decentralized resources, unhealthy student culture, and financial support. Universities leaders need to assess if their current infrastructure and institutional capacity are sufficient to meet the increasingly complex and diverse needs of all students.

Implication for Future Research

Through this study, I identified several opportunities for future research to continue to incorporate practitioner knowledge into research and literature, to amplify the voices of first-generation administrators, and enhance support for first-generation college students. Social and cultural capital theory is used frequently in literature to explore educational inequities between students from minoritized communities. The institutional and empowerment agent framework, which draws from social capital theory, has not often been applied to the work of higher education administrators across various institutional settings. Therefore, additional research is needed on the institutional and empowerment agent framework in higher education settings.

In addition to expanding research to include the institutional and empowerment agent framework to administrators in various higher education settings, future research should explore the influence of career service professionals to serve in this capacity. This study highlighted that

Amber and Daniela used their roles in career services to serve as institutional agents to empower students and increase their social and cultural capital and knowledge of the hidden curriculum operating at their respective institutions and the world of work. Amber specifically mentioned a need to reevaluate relationships with employers who recruit on campus and have a poor track record of supporting minoritized students. Additionally, unpaid internships continue to be inaccessible for students from lower-income backgrounds but are still promoted on college campuses. It would be worthwhile to explore if other career services professionals engage in acts to center the experiences of first-generation college students and work to transform institutional policies and practices to enhance support for students from minoritized backgrounds.

In addition to understanding how career services professionals may work to support first-generation college students through their engagement with campus recruiters and employers, another area worthy of further exploration is the relationships between advancement/development professionals and administrators leading efforts to support first-generation college students or other minoritized student populations. Most study participants discussed their work with colleagues in advancement/development offices to increase visibility and awareness of the first-generation college student experience. Several study participants also described their work to shift institutional practices and the mindset of their colleagues and potential donors to honor and affirm the diverse strengths and assets first-generation college students have and ways they contribute to the college environment. Lastly, study participants engaged in work to mitigate the systemic and institutional barriers minoritized students often navigate with the support of dedicated resources and support staff. More research to illuminate best practices and explore the experiences of administrator who engage in disruptive acts across institutional settings, would be worthwhile. It is also important to engage those who are in positions of power and influence to help shift narratives about minoritized students and address

gaps in student support. Further studies should seek to explore if and how institutions incorporate asset-based narratives, practices, and strategies into the curriculum and co-curricular experiences.

Given the intersection between social class and first-generation identity, it would be beneficial to further explore the experiences of first-generation administrators with intentional attention to those raised in lower-income households. Although social class was not a primary focus of this research study, it came up repeatedly from many study participants. When discussing their upbringing, their experiences navigating the college application process, and their experiences in college, several study participants talked about their attentiveness and influence of their lower-income status and access to the cultural and social capital deemed valuable in higher education. Additionally, a few study participants even mentioned how their internalized beliefs about poverty influenced how they approached their work because they were conscientious and sensitive to how low-income students may experience their institutions. Moreover, three study participants also mentioned the tension they experienced when considering working at a highly selective institution because of their upbringing and perceptions about the type of students attending these institutions. Lastly, two participants mentioned due to their upbringing in a lower social class, they continued to experience and worked to manage feelings of inferiority, which influenced how they moved through professional spaces, and another study participant discussed the ethical costs of upward mobility. Based on study participants' comments, it would be interesting to explore the intersection of social class and first-generation administrators employed at highly selective institutions focusing on the tension of upward mobility. Further research in these areas may enhance understanding of the experiences of first-generation administrators and also expand the literature about first-generation college students.

Final Thoughts

This study confirmed the significant roles first-generation administrators can play as institutional and empowerment agents. The findings align with extant literature, which captures the influential roles of institutional and empowerment agents who work to support individual student success and engage in actions to transform the institutional culture to better support minoritized students. All study participants indicated a critical mindset and systems-aware perspective. This study built on the influence of institutional and empowerment agents and expanded understanding by illuminating various ways study participants approached their work and drew from their lived experiences to support student success. Study participants used their platforms to ask critical questions, center the experiences of first-generation college students, and tried to disrupt institutional policies and practices that create barriers and tension points for students, particularly minoritized students. They asked critical questions to identify gaps in support and encouraged others to think critically about ways to better enhance the student experience to meet the needs of students operating at the margins. Through the examples provided in this study, it was evident study participants worked intentionally to advance an asset-based narrative about minoritized students and worked to help minoritized students identify and leverage their unique strengths and cultural capital inherent in their home communities. Participants also worked to build collaborations across campus to expand institutional capacity and engage faculty, staff, and other administrators to center the first-generation student experience. To this aim, participants devoted their time to building programs, allocating institutional resources, and drawing insight directly from student feedback to inform future programming, policies, and procedures. Their work was commendable and could be expanded with more attention to institutional barriers that impeded their work. Many study participants

noted the vast array of institutional barriers that they must navigate to create more seamless and equitable student experiences. As highly selective institutions continue to admit more first-generation college students, university leaders must consider if institutional capacity is adequate to meet the needs of first-generation college students and other students from minoritized backgrounds. If capacity is not sufficient, the responsibility to ensure all students can succeed and thrive in college will not be met.

I call on university leaders to continue to adopt institutional policies, practices, and procedures to better meet the needs of first-generation college students. The population of first-generation college students is growing and has the potential to benefit the most from access and success through higher education. I also call on administrators, faculty, and staff to approach their work from a critical lens and adopt asset-based practices. Additionally, work must be done to collectively identify and disrupt the exclusive and harmful practices that contribute to inequitable student success outcomes, which includes revealing the hidden curriculum operating in higher education and the workforce. If supporting first-generation college students and other minoritized student populations is truly important, decentering the most privileged students and working to address systemic gaps in support and resources must occur. I am inspired by the vast potential to transform higher education.

I set out on this research project to capture the voices and experiences of first-generation administrators who espoused a commitment to social justice and equity through their work. It was affirming to find a diverse group of colleagues who approached their work from a critical lens and also drew strength and inspiration from their lived experiences. On more than one occasion, I found connection with study participants and silently celebrated their bold, tenacious, and courageous work to try to create more inclusive and affirming spaces across highly selective

institutions. A few years prior to the study, when I decided to work at a highly selective institution, I did so because I believed I could make a difference and impact daily operations. I know I was successful in my work because I was able to expand student support and contribute to the change of institutional policies hindering student success. Now, after completing this research study, although I answered some questions, I am left with additional questions and have yet to reconcile the tension that comes with trying to coexist and work in an oppressive system. For example, I found it challenging to reconcile my own complicacy in an oppressive system. I wrote about this in my journal after my interviews with Dexter and Kush. I acknowledged that my administrative position allowed me to make a good salary and positioned me as a leader and thought partner in the first-generation college student conversation. I might not have had the exposure and access to thought leaders and scholars in this space if it was not for my position and the clout that comes with working at a highly selective institution.

Additionally, the knowledge and educational pedagogy I gained from my doctoral program provided me with the language and strategies to know how to effectively engage in this work without evoking defensive feelings in potential allies was beneficial as I learned to navigate a predominately white institutional exclusive space as a first-generation administrator working to lead programs in support of minoritized students. While engaging in this work, on more than one occasion, an alumni or student called my Blackness into question because they wanted more of my work to focus on Blackness exclusively, not those who happened to be first-generation Black students. This tension was the most challenging for me to resolve as I learned to navigate my own identities with my administrative responsibilities, particularly around student activism and advocacy.

Although these topics did not come up often during my conversations with study participants, these tensions are worthy of further exploration to best support the administrators engaged in this work for their own self-preservation and for the benefit of the students they work to support. I often wondered if I would encourage and pay for my daughter to attend a highly selective institution. I cannot say that I would discourage her from attending because I recognize my daughter's positionality as someone raised in an upper-middle-income household and her prior exposure to the college environment and ability to navigate elite white academic spaces may position her differently that other first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students. I know my daughter can find academic success and cultural pride at a minority serving institution, but also recognize our social network and cultural experiences nurtured through our home community would supplement her experiences at a highly selective institution if she decided to attend. Ultimately, it is her choice, but I would not shy away from exposing the realities that come with attending highly selective institutions for her or any other prospective students.

Similarly, I would not discourage other administrators from choosing to work at a highly selective institution. Because the number of first-generation college students enrolled at these institutions tends to be lower than any other institutional type but are growing, I urge other critically minded administrators to consider bringing their talents and expertise to help change and improve these institutions to better support minoritized students. Administrators who have a commitment and ability to engage in disruptive work can benefit the minoritized students who choose to attend highly selective institutions. Based on this research study, I am confident there are first-generation administrators working courageously and boldly to drive institutional change in support of minoritized students and equitable student success outcomes. I am proud to be part

of this important work and encourage others to use their voices and platforms to get into good trouble.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT ELECTRONIC LETTER

Date

Dear (First and Last Name of Administrator)

My name is Shakima M. Clency, and I am a PhD student in the Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am conducting a qualitative research study as part of my dissertation focusing on the experiences of critically minded, administrators who were first-generation college students themselves and currently work with this student population at a highly selective college or university. The participant criteria for this study will include people who:

1. Identify as a first-generation college student (meaning neither your parents or guardians obtained a 4-year bachelor's degree prior to you obtaining your undergraduate degree).
2. Currently employed full-time at a 4-year highly selective college or university
3. Oversee a program or office that supports undergraduate, first-generation college students
4. Approach your work from a critically oriented or social justice perspective – are concerned with issues of power, inequity and social change

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please complete a short preinterview questionnaire using the [add link] below. The preinterview questionnaire will allow participants to learn more about the research study and clarifying questions, agree to participate in the research study and schedule a time to participate in an individual virtual interview with me. As a small token of appreciation for your time and participation, you have the option to receive either a $25 Amazon gift card or will be mailed a copy of the book, *First-generation Professionals in Higher Education: Strategies for the World of Work.*

Participation in this research study would require one individual virtual interview for a maximum of 75 minutes. Interviews will take place over Zoom or another video-conferencing platform at your convenience. Participation in this study is voluntary and if you choose to participate you can withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. Your relationships with your university will not be affected whether or not you choose to participate in the study. Your identity as a participant will always remain confidential during and after the study. All interviews will be audio and video recorded, notes will be taken during all interviews and all documents will be stored in a secure location.

If you would like to participate or have any questions, I can be reached at XXXXX@XXXXX.edu

Thank you for your consideration.

Shakima M. Clency
Doctoral Student, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

APPENDIX B: PREINTERVIEW PARTICIPANT SCREENING AND DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

The front landing page of the screening questionnaire will include text from the adult informed consent form template found at https://integrity.uncg.edu/institutional-review-board/

Participants eligible for this study must identify as first-generation college students and currently work at a highly selective college or university and lead programs to support first-generation college students.

1. What is your first and last name?
2. What pseudonym do you want to use during the interview in place of your name?
    - If you do not have a preference, I will assign a pseudonym for you.
3. When you were pursuing your undergraduate degree, were you a first-generation college student? (Neither parent or guardian had earned a 4-year bachelor's degree)
    - Yes
    - No
    - Unsure
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    - Undergraduate degree
    - Master's degree
    - Terminal degree (PhD, JD, MBA, etc.)
5. At any point throughout your educational journey, did you attend a highly selective college or university?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Unsure (if unsure, list the name of the institution(s) for confirmation?)

*Your response to this question will not impact your eligibility to participate in the research study, it is used to capture demographic diversity

6. How long have you worked in higher education as a full-time administrator?
    - 0–5 years
    - 6–10 years
    - 11–15 years
    - 16+ years
7. Do you currently work at a highly selective college or university?
    - Yes
    - No
8. What is the name of the institution that you currently work at?
9. What is your title?
10. What is the name of your office/department?
11. What is the best e-mail address to contact you?
    - This email will be used for all communication regarding this research study
12. What is the best number to contact you?
    - This number will only be used in the event I need to contact you in the case of dropped services during the individual interview.

13. Briefly describe your understanding of social justice, equity, or critical theory and how this understanding may or may not influence your work with first-generation college students enrolled at a highly selective institution. (Limit to 150 words).
14. With respect to your work to support first-generation college students at your institution, indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:
    (Likert Scale options: strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)
    - I am driven by a social justice mindset.
    - I am motivated to challenge the status quo.
    - I approach my work with a critical lens.
    - I engage in actions to disrupt oppressive institutional policies or procedures.
15. Do you have access to a Zoom video conferencing platform?
    - Yes
    - No
16. If you are selected and complete the individual interview, you may receive either a $25.00 amazon gift card or a copy of the book. Please indicate your preference below.
    - I prefer not to receive either a book or Amazon gift card.
    - $25 Amazon gift card – this will be sent via e-mail to the address provided
    - First-Generation Professionals book – please provide your full mailing address (include city, state, zip code and apartment # if applicable)

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Questions

1. How do critically minded, administrators who were first-generation college students approach their work at highly selective institutions?
2. How do critically minded, first-generation administrators use their unique backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to support first-generation college students?
3. What do critically minded, first-generation administrators working with first-generation college students perceive as barriers to their work?

Interview Primer

- Introductions
- Discuss purpose of research study, interview format and respond to any question(s) from participants
- Review consent form and get permission
- Request permission to record interview and take hand-written notes
- Share researcher's contact information
- Confirm pseudonym
- Transition to begin interview

Interview Questions (75 minutes)

1. Talk about the college search and application process - how was that for you?
    a. What type of help or support did you have during the process?
2. During your time in college, were you part of any college access or cohort-based programs?
3. Talk about your understanding of what it means to be a first-generation college student.
    a. To what extent is this a salient identity for you?
4. Talk with me about your career in higher education? How is it that you became involved in the work that you do?
    a. What is important to you in your work? Why do you do this work?
5. Tell me about your work with first-generation students.
    a. Tell me about your office and your primary responsibilities.
    b. What type of resources does your office provide?
    c. How do you spend your time? What aspects of your job take up the most of your time?
6. What challenges have you encountered through your work to support first-generation college students?
    a. What do you struggle with?
    b. What does it take for you to do your job?
7. What sustains your ability to do this work?
    a. What relationships do you rely on or invoke to do your job?
8. You have been selected for this study because you have self-identified as having a critical orientation. What about your approach makes it critical? (Get specific examples)
    a. Is there a particular world-view, scholar, theory?

    b. How does this approach show up in their work with students? (decode system, resource allocation, challenge system, make changes to benefit first-generation college students)
    c. How does this approach inform the types of programs or resources provided?
9. If you could change one aspect of your role to better support first-generation college students, what would it be and why?
10. How does your identity as a first-generation college student inform your work?
11. What advice do you have for others who aspire to have a similar administrative role at a highly selective college or university?
12. Given that I am specifically interested in the work of critically minded, first-generation administrators, who currently lead programs to support first-generation college students enrolled at highly selective colleges and universities, is there anything you would like to add that I might not have thought to ask?