

KING, PRINCESS I., Ph.D. *To Be First: Exploring Experiences of First-Generation College Students at Hamilton University.* (2021)
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First generation college students continue to grow in number on college campuses across the United States. As college becomes more accessible, students who would be first in their families to attend and graduate with a four-year degree are taking advantage of their opportunity at higher education. However, the experiences of those students are highly variable. The rationale for this study came from my desire to gain a deeper understanding of the academic and social experiences of first-generation students who are not participants in cohort programs that provide on-going support through college completion. Therefore, this basic qualitative study explored (a) how the experiences of first-generation college students differed across socioeconomic backgrounds and cohort status, (b) how barriers and or challenges impacted first-generation students at a private liberal arts institution, and (c) how non-cohorted first-generation college students leveraged campus resources.

The study was guided by both a constructivist and interpretivist framework to assess the lived experiences of non-cohorted first generation students. Using Social Identity theory, this study examined the challenges, life circumstances, and resilience of thirteen first-generation students navigating college. Findings from this study were derived from in-depth 1-1 interviews. The significance of the findings from this study have potential to contribute to on-going support initiatives developed for first generation students at private predominately white institutions, as well as adding to the wealth of scholarship in first-generation research.

TO BE FIRST: EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE
STUDENTS AT HAMILTON UNIVERSITY

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work to my parents, Annie and Oscar King, for their countless sacrifices, love, support, and unwavering belief in my potential. Thank you.

APPROVAL PAGE

This Dissertation written by Princess I. King 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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I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

Psalm 121:1-2

To all of the Elon Academy Scholars & First Generation College Students.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

What does it feel like to be a first-generation college student (FGCS) on a college campus? More specifically, what do first generation students experience at a private or relatively elite college campus? How might those experiences (both positive and negative) impact a student? College is one of many places where students can discover, embrace, or learn more about pieces of their identity. College is a tricky life maze where some students are able to figure out the best route to the finish line, in part because they are privy to the rules and/or have support in accessing a range of resources. For first generation students, navigating this maze might present a new set of unanticipated challenges to overcome. In this study I explore the experiences of first-generation college students at a predominantly white, private, liberal arts university. For research purposes I use a pseudonym for this college: Hamilton University; this should not be confused with the actual Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. The findings from this study will help inform higher education administrators of firsthand accounts of lived experiences of first-generation students at a private elite university. Additionally, findings from this inquiry may help to inform best practices to support and engage first generation college students at Hamilton University and other similarly positioned private colleges and universities. Lastly, this research will bring Hamilton University students and their experiences into the national conversation surrounding first generation college students at private elite universities within the United States.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education institutions within the United States mirror the dominant middle-class culture of the United States, especially predominantly white colleges and universities or PWI's. Predominantly white colleges and universities are institutions where the majority of student

enrollment is composed of white students. Private PWI's are likely to cater to and attract middle to upper class student populations. Fryberg et al. (2012) draw from well-known sociologists (Berstein, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992) to argue that institutions of higher education produce social class inequalities among students because they are built and organized according to middle and upper-class cultural norms; these are often unwritten codes, or "rules of the game." Classed norms and experiences play a significant role in how students experience private elite colleges and universities. The private, elite college environment often comes with a set of middle-class cultural norms, rules, tastes, and expectations that are set by the dominant population, often implicitly.

Students who are first in their families to attend college are more likely than their peers to experience high financial need and or come from a low-income background (Davenport & Siegel, 2016). When first generation college students attend a private institution, their cultural norms and expectations may clash with the established cultures, norms, and expectations of the college or university. First generation college students from low-income backgrounds might be accustomed to a different set of cultural norms than the culture that exists on their campuses. Hinz (2016) expresses that first-generation students face the prospect of upward social mobility and pressure to assimilate into the middle class, particularly at elite colleges; however, the transition from one social class to another can be difficult. This assimilation may include the acquisition of material belongings or style of dress and speech. FGCS may experience challenges with adjusting and fitting into the culture, as well as adjusting to academic expectations. According to Longwell-Grice et al. (2016), "higher education creates an important context for making sense of experiences because first generation students often confront new sets of values and norms in the college campus culture" (p. 37).

Posing an additional barrier for FGCSs, those who are first in their family may not be equipped with the prior college knowledge or social rules that are helpful to successfully navigating the college maze. These unspoken means of savvy might include such things as how to have a conversation with a professor (or other figure of authority), follow rules of etiquette at a dinner, or navigate the college registration process. In part due to ignorance of expected norms, these students may experience college differently than their middle and upper- class peers as they attempt to navigate this new territory without familial support or knowledge.

Colleges and universities have established specific initiatives aimed to address the on-going needs of first-generation students. These support programs often resemble a cohort model which recreates a familial network of students and staff to provide support and community for first generation students. Students who participate in school administered cohort initiatives are often closely connected to professional staff and develop a network with other peer participants. The cohorted experiences of FGCS are well documented, however, there is significantly less research on non-cohorted students. I was interested to learn more about non-cohorted FGCSs experiences at Hamilton University and whether their experiences influence the ways in which they connect to the university and perform academically in college. In this study I gather a better understanding of their needs, sense of connectedness, whether they are taking advantage of campus resources, and further, if and how they identify with their status as a first-generation college student at a private university. I also explore how their experiences compare to the experiences of cohorted first generation students.

Students who attend private and or elite colleges and universities tend to be predominately white (McCoy, 2014). Based on my research, scholars are more likely to highlight the experiences of first-generation students of color and low-income students, with little attention

placed on the experiences of white first-generation college students. Hamilton University, with a total enrollment of over 6,000 students, is approximately 81% white. This percentage also includes a number of first-generation white students with varying socio-economic backgrounds. Morris (2006) states that “according to an individual’s position in society, based on a combination of race, class, gender, and place” they may experience a range of advantages and disadvantages (p. 21). For example, it is possible that non-cohorted first generation college students may benefit from being white at a predominantly white college or university because others are less likely to classify them as a first-generation college student.

Further, research supports that the experiences of first-generation college students are highly variable. Scholars describe the general social and academic experiences of first generation students such as sometimes involving a lack of connectedness and significant academic challenges. In a study on black undergraduate student experiences at an elite predominantly white college, Jack (2014) contends that there is little known about the college experiences of disadvantaged undergraduates and this lack of information further “undervalues the cultural underpinnings of education process and inequality (Stevens, 2008), forgoing the examination of the experiential core of college life” (p. 454). The college experiences of first-generation college students who are also low income are often more challenging than those of their peers from higher income families at elite private institutions. Aries and Seider (2005) suggest that students who present with a lower income at prestigious liberal arts colleges face an additional set of challenges as they lack the financial resources and capital of their more affluent peers.

Class, gender, and race, as well as other identity markers, all play roles in how students experience college life. In over twenty years, according to an Administrative Executive at Hamilton University, no research study has been conducted about first-generation college

students at this university, hence the motivation for this study. Administrators observed a gap in support for non-cohorted first-generation students at Hamilton University. The experiences, stories, challenges, and successes of those students are unstudied and unknown. Understanding these experiences is vital to adequately and efficiently serving this population.

In this study I explore the academic and social experiences of first-generation students, specifically students who do not belong to a cohorted program. I address the lack of information on this specific population of students and ways in which the university can best meet their needs. To reiterate, little is known or documented about the ongoing academic and social experiences of first-generation college students at Hamilton. Through exploration of these experiences, I will glean information about life at a small, elite, private school through the lens of first-generation college students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to learn about the academic and social experiences of first-generation college students at Hamilton University who are not participants in a cohort program. I gather narrative data on the lived experiences of students who are first in their families to attend college. To date, the experiences of first-generation college students at this institution have yet to be studied, therefore, this study will inform the developing practices and services aimed at serving this population of students at Hamilton University. In 2016, Hamilton University piloted a mentoring program for first-generation college students who were non-cohorted. The program was developed specifically to target students who were not part of a university led cohort initiative or program. This new mentoring program struggled to gain traction, as student interest was slow to develop. Efforts concluded at the end of the school year, due to lack of interest and inconsistent student participation.

Insight into the lived experiences of first-generation college students at Hamilton remains under researched. There is much to be learned about this population to gain a better understanding of how first-generation college students experience college at Hamilton University. In this exploratory study, I aim to add to the literature that informs practices that support current and future FGCSs who attend selective, private, predominantly white institutions. I hope to learn more about student experiences as it relates to their participation in programs and resources geared toward FGCS, as well as understand the experiences of those who are not connected to a specific FGCS program.

Research Questions

This research is guided by one broad research question: How do students experience being a first-generation college student at a private, selective, predominantly white institution?

Additionally, I explore the following secondary questions:

1. How do the experiences of first-generation college students differ across socioeconomic backgrounds and cohort status?
2. What barriers and or challenges do first-generation students experience at a private, selective, predominantly white university?
3. How do non-cohorted first-generation college students leverage resources, including academic and social support on campus?

The secondary questions grow from themes found within the literature that speak to the varied experiences of FGCS and the elements that impact those experiences. By posing secondary questions, I gather a deeper understanding of the first-generation student experience at Hamilton University.

Background Context

Hamilton University is a mid-sized private liberal arts university in the southeastern part of the United States. Over the past several decades, Hamilton University has grown into a premier private university of the southeast, typically receiving over 10,000 applications for freshman admission (for an average class size of 1500). Enrollment for the 2018-2019 academic school year was slightly over 6,000 undergraduate students. The majority of students are from North Carolina (17%), New Jersey, Maryland, Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts (a combined 80%). For the 2019-2020 academic year, tuition and fees, along with room and board, amounts to a total of over \$47,000 per year. Of the 6,000 students enrolled at Hamilton University, about 80% of those students are white, 6% identify as African American, 6% LatinX, and 2% Asian (members.uca-network.org). The racial and ethnic breakdown of Hamilton mirrors Crozier's (2018) statement regarding the racial and ethnic makeup of private PWI's; Black American and Latino/a students in the United States are significantly under-represented at elite, selective universities.

The number of first-generation college students at Hamilton University continues to grow. Currently, there are over 482 (8%) first-generation college students enrolled full time at Hamilton University. Of those 482, 313 (64%) are non-cohorted; this means 313 students are not connected to the campus dedicated First Family cohort program; students could, however, be participants in other programs such as fellowships or living-learning communities. First Family is used as a pseudonym in lieu of the formal program name. In addition to being first-generation college students, the majority of the non-cohorted first-generation students at Hamilton are also white. Based on prior knowledge, students who are not part of the First Family program, which covers nearly 100% of costs to attend Hamilton, come from families with various income levels.

It is also possible for students to be recipients of other modes of funding such as fellowships or private scholarships.

Scholars suggest that white students who are also first-generation and possibly low to moderate income may experience complex experiences in college when they are confronted with class challenges at private, elite universities (Stuber, 2011). In her study of lower income white students at an elite college, Aries (2008) found that these students experienced “heightened concerns” regarding “difference in possessions or cultural capital and fitting in.” For some, college was their first encounter with other whites from a much higher socioeconomic status (p. 42). For students of color who may also be lower income, these complex experiences occur at the intersection of race and class, something I discuss in a later section.

One of the most prominent cohort programs at Hamilton University is the First Family program. This program was established to support students who are academically talented and demonstrate high financial need. In the past, accepted applicants met most if not all of the following qualifications: eligible for Federal Pell Grant, first in their family to attend college, will bring diversity to Hamilton, and have achieved academic success despite challenging circumstances. This merit-based scholarship program covers nearly the total cost of tuition, fees, room, and board at Hamilton University with an addition of providing funds for a study abroad opportunity during the students’ junior year. Out of nearly 300 applications, the First Family Program accepts about 120 applicants; these students then must decide to commit to Hamilton.

Applicants who enroll at Hamilton through the First Family program are entered into a cohort and participate in group activities, study abroad, retreats, and a week-long orientation prior to the start of the academic year. Students who participate in this program receive additional on-going academic support from full time program professional staff and student

mentors throughout their time at Hamilton. The program resides in a center-like office which offers students a place to connect with others, study, nap, and have a space that is dedicated to them. Students who are active in this program often describe it as a “family” environment. This program is a staple of the Hamilton campus community and is held in high regard for their work in supporting students who are the first in their family to pursue a college degree.

Non-Cohorted First-Generation College Students

In 2014, a staff member in Academic Advising, along with a School of Education faculty member, wanted to explore how many FGC students were non-cohorted at Hamilton University. Receiving data from the Office of Admissions and Financial Planning, they were able to identify students who were considered first in their family and enrolled full time at Hamilton University. At that time, there was no official support or financial backing from the university to engage in this research. Once students were identified, they were invited to connect at a dinner meeting organized by the Academic Advising staff. Students who attended were mostly participants in the First Family program cohort, along with a few additional students who were non-cohorted. This initiative was a one-off occurrence, as there were no official university funds to financially support programming.

In the fall of 2016, a mentoring program was developed as a result of the aforementioned initiative by the Academic Advising office to provide a layer of support for non-cohorted first-generation students after identifying that there was no established support for non-cohorted first-generation students. Students were invited to participate on a voluntary basis to be paired with a mentor for the academic year. Faculty and staff were invited to serve as volunteer mentors. The mentor-mentee responsibilities were loosely structured, allowing the mentorship to develop naturally as schedules permitted. This program continued for a full academic year, but there were

many challenges with student commitment and inconsistent participation. Efforts to continue the mentoring program ended after the 2016-2017 academic year.

University administrators recognized a gap in programmatic support for non-cohorted first-generation students again in the fall of 2019. They then looked at Admissions records that determined the number of FGCS enrolled at Hamilton but who were not part of the First Family Program. As a result of high numbers of students that they suspected needed support, Hamilton University created a position for a new Assistant Director of First-generation support. This individual is tasked with establishing programming and support for non-cohorted first-generation students at Hamilton University. Efforts to support non-cohorted first-generation students at Hamilton University are new and in the early development stages. Stanton-Salazar (2011) argues that first-generation students need an institutional agent or someone who occupies a hierarchical position of status or authority to support and negotiate on behalf of students. Consistently, the most prominent task of the individual in this position is developing relationships with this student population. Currently, the staff member is a first-generation college student and graduate of Hamilton University, which may help in connecting with students and building trust and rapport. Beginning from a blank slate, the goals for the person in this position are to:

1. Connect with non-cohorted first-generation students at Hamilton University
2. Get an understanding of their experiences and needs
3. Develop programming and support systems for this population

First-generation college students at Hamilton University have yet to be studied. As the university continues to grow, the population of first-generation college students may likely increase as well, in part due to new initiatives to provide more financial support. It is evident that the university is currently interested in investing resources to support this population of students.

However, there is no current research to support the notion that non-cohorted students are experiencing challenges that merit such programming. In this dissertation, I explore the experiences of these students, providing information that may help administrators to better assess the needs of this non-cohorted FGCS.

Methods Overview

Research suggests an intersectional approach to explore the ways in which class, race, and identity impact the experiences and outcomes of first-generation college students at private colleges and universities (Stuber, 2011). I used a basic qualitative approach to explore the experiences of first-generation students. With the assistance of the Assistant Director of First-Generation Support, I solicited student participation via email. Students had the opportunity to voluntarily participate in a pre-survey that helped screen students for appropriate fit.

This study focuses on the experiences of first-generation students. I interviewed thirteen students who were first generation and not participants in the First Family program or other university cohorted programs. Once student participants were identified, I conducted interviews that lasted 45 to 70 minutes. Each interview was loosely structured and guided by a set of prepared questions. Interview questions were organized in such a way that aimed to gather the most pertinent rich data useful for this study. Data analysis and open coding will take place in an on-going process to assure the most accurate analysis possible. Following interviews, participants were asked to participate in a focus group to view transcripts of their interviews to assure an accurate interpretation of their accounts. To conclude, participants were asked to share their input on ways to improve and or establish programming and institutional support for first-generation students.

Theoretical Framework

Guided by elements of both interpretivist and constructivist frameworks, I asked students to share personal accounts of their experiences. A constructivist researcher believes that “individuals construct reality in interaction with their own social worlds” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). In connection, an interpretivist believes that human interaction is fundamental to interpretation (Glesne, 2016). Researchers who draw on an interpretivist framework are specifically concerned with the assessment of other’s interpretations of themselves, their actions, and interactions with their surroundings. These frameworks helped me in assessing and processing how participants made meaning of themselves and their experiences as college students.

While social identity is not the focal point of this study, identity is one of the many important elements that might impact participants of this study and the way they experience college. I also ground this study in Social Identity Theory as a foundational framework. The university environment can be a crucial time for identity development, grouping, and identifying oneself through those group connections, be it friend groups, first-generation groups, Greek organizations, religious or cultural affiliations. According to Aries and Seider (2007), Social Identity Theory states that “social groups can become a part of the self and that knowledge of group memberships and the emotional significance that are attached to them make up an important component of the self-concept (Smith, 1999; Tajfel 1981; Turner, 1982)” (p. 137). Moreover, Social Identity Theory or SIT affirms that individuals often negotiate their identities with communities to which they belong (Abrams & Hogg, 1990).

Social Identity Theory is grounded in Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory; both argue that individuals have an upward directional drive which motivates comparisons to others who are

similar or slightly better than us in relevant dimensions (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). These comparisons range from possessions, appearances, friends, social media, and abilities, or can be motivated by one's sense of connection or membership to the community. Further, Social Identity Theory assumes that individuals are consistently categorizing others and simultaneously categorizing themselves, due to a desire to maintain a positive self-image (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). To further assess student experiences, I focused on elements such as reputation, social identity, motivation, stereotypes, and social acceptance.

I draw from this theory by assessing and interpreting the various ways students connected or disconnected to the university in a broader sense: how they viewed themselves as members of the larger campus community. Moreover, this framework helped to process the nuances of social and academic experiences in college. An important aspect of understanding connectedness and identity is grasping the ways in which students find peers and choose to connect, how they identify, and whom they choose to identify with. Elements of one's identity and sense of connection impact one's choices and "while identity achievement involves choice, power and privilege are what dictates the choices one has" (Aries & Seider, 2007, p. 138; Cote, 1996). Analyzing the experiences of first-generation college students through a Social Identity Theory framework allowed for a more wholistic assessment and understanding of student narratives, specifically ways that privilege, identity, race, and socioeconomic status intersect and impact their college experience. In addition, through their narratives, I also gathered pertinent data that speaks to student academic performance, challenges, and ways the university can support their social and academic experiences.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality was significant as I conducted research on this topic. It is important to position myself within my research to understand what biases, preconceived notions, and or assumptions I hold based on my own identity and experiences, particularly as a first-generation college student and as an employee of Hamilton University. Reflecting on my positionality was important in creating a space for my participants to feel safe, authentic, and genuine.

While conducting this study, I served as an Assistant Director of College Success at Hamilton University for the Hamilton Scholars Program. In this role, I work primarily with high school students in the community who are participants of our program. I have been in this role for five years. Students in this program are low income and or will be the first in their family to attend a four-year college or university. Due to the physical location of our office, I am often in contact with Hamilton University students who are participants in the First Family program, but I do not work directly with these students or other Hamilton University students. Several students who were part of the Hamilton Scholars Program in high school have enrolled at Hamilton University as recipients of the First Family scholarship, However, I do not work directly with that program.

In my experience working with first-generation college students, I have observed a difference in experiences based upon attendance at a public or private institution. I am aware that students I work with are a small subset of a larger body of first-generation college students and their experiences must not be generalized to represent those of the total population. I also recognize that my experiences working at Hamilton University have an impact on my perspective as I consider what the experiences of first-generation students may be like on this campus and the assumptions I have developed about those experiences. I also have a working

relationship with the new Assistant Director for First-generation Student Support due to their previous work as a student at Hamilton University and with the Hamilton Scholars program as a mentor. This relationship was beneficial in helping to gain access to first-generation student data and connecting to this student population. I think it is important to note here, that while I have a positive working relationship with the individual in this position, they were not required to help, support, or rally student participation for my research in any way.

Lastly, I also recognize that my own experiences have the potential to both help and cloud my perspective. Because I was a first-generation college student, I hold an immediate close connection to the topic. I am passionate about the work that I do for first-generation college students and understand how this affinity has the possibility to impact my research. I questioned why I was so drawn to this topic and realized it is because I am deeply interested in how other students who are also first-generation might relate to their own status as a first-generation college student. I also believe that the experiences of first-generation students are just as uniquely varied as the individual students; this presents a challenge when attempting to conduct research about them as a population. This is because such research is largely idiosyncratic to individuals and their experiences as a first-generation college student. However, my choice to dig deeper into this topic grew stronger as I began to learn more about Hamilton University and its student population. Hamilton is new territory for me, in terms of working at a private institution. All of my college experiences, both as an enrolled student and employee, have been at large public institutions and I am not familiar with the experiences of students who attend private universities. Since my role at Hamilton is primarily catered to working with high school students from the surrounding community and college students from our program who do not attend Hamilton, I rarely interact with Hamilton Students. As a result, I have always been curious as to

what the first-generation college student experience is like here, which further motivated this study.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to the growing work of Hamilton University and the work surrounding the experiences of first-generation students at private and elite universities on a national level. In the same way that the experiences of FGCSs are varied, it is also problematic to assume their experiences, both academic and social, will be identical to those of students at other elite institutions. For the first time in its history, the university has invested in providing support for non-cohorted first-generation students. According to admissions and enrollment data, there are a significant number of first-generation college students enrolled at Hamilton who are non-cohorted. The university deemed it necessary to provide support by creating a position for a full-time staff member to serve this population. These efforts speak largely to the interests and vision the university has in providing support for this population of students as they anticipate growth in enrollment overall and an increase in first-generation students at Hamilton in the coming years. Upon further questioning, I learned that the decision to provide support for non-cohorted first-generation students at Hamilton was not backed by any existing data showing that this population was indeed struggling academically or socially; hence, one goal I have for this study is to determine whether these students need or desire support.

Furthermore, the data I collect will help provide insights into ways universities approach support and programming for first-generation college students. More specifically, this work can help to inform how private universities position themselves, their staff, and programming as it relates to current and incoming first-generation college students. There is a wealth of untapped knowledge at Hamilton University that is pertinent to how students experience college. Through

this study, I add to the existing literature by sharing information about the lived experiences of students. As the research shows, first-generation college students have been a focal point of research for over twenty years. Universities have implemented initiatives that support FGCS, conducted research to evaluate those initiatives, and yet, Hamilton University has not conducted nor participated in any research focused specifically on the experiences of first-generation college students at their institution. Not only will this research highlight student voices, but it will support the universities' initiatives as they move forward in developing programming, literature, and support for this population; bringing their student voices into the conversation.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. In this first chapter, I introduce the research topic, provide a brief background of context, and offer a short description of the theoretical framework guiding this study. I also cite key scholarship to support the foundation of this research. Further, I briefly discuss the research methodology and describe the purpose of the study, along with articulating the research questions. I conclude chapter one by addressing the significance of the study.

In chapter two, I analyze research literature that provides the foundation for this study. I divide the literature review into four main sections which are organized by topic. In the first section, I examine the construct of first-generation college students and common characteristics of their experiences. In the second section, I introduce class and race, and how these two elements influence first-generation student experiences. In the third section, I address college readiness with a focus on academic preparedness, college preparation, and related programming initiatives. Finally, in the fourth section, I explore the college experiences of first-generation students, specifically examining their academic performance and social immersion. I offer a

summary at the end of each section to gather connecting ideas and conclude with an overall summary for the literature review.

In chapter three, I describe the study's research design, method, and methodology. I use 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 provide a detailed account and explanation of how I selected participants. I used a web-based pre-survey and in person interviews, all of which I describe in detail within this chapter. Further, I outline additional methodological details related to data analysis and trustworthiness within this chapter.

In chapter four, I present the findings from this study and in chapter five, I analyze these findings, bringing the data back into conversation with the literature. Chapter five also includes a conclusion to this dissertation study. Additionally, I present ways in which this study may be used to inform, connect, or inspire initiatives supporting first-generation students at surrounding universities with a similar profile to Hamilton University.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived academic and social experiences of first-generation college students at a private, elite liberal arts university. Through this study I uncover the experiences of first-generation college students at Hamilton University, including how those experiences impact students academically and socially. In this review of the literature, I present an overview of key characteristics of first-generation students followed by a review of what is being discussed and studied among scholars on first-generation college students. I review literature that informs the fields of college access, higher education, class, and first-generation college students creating a foundation for this study. I organize this literature review into four sections: defining first-generation college students, class and race, college readiness and preparation, and college experiences.

Defining First-Generation College Students

Scholars have conducted numerous studies on first-generation college students. In this section, I detail common characteristics, behaviors, and outcomes of first-generation college students according to scholars who study this population. Specifically, I address common challenges, academic behaviors, academic preparedness, and college preparation and readiness of first-generation college students.

A first-generation student, as defined by the Higher Education Research Institute, is any student from a family in which both parents have no education beyond high school (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich & Powell, 2017). In their most recent report on the access, persistence and outcomes of first-generation students, the National Center for Education Statistics defines first-generation college students as “undergraduate students whose parents have not participated in

postsecondary education” (Bennet, Cataldi & Chen, 2018, p. 2). Initially, this term was used to identify students for federal “TRIO” programs (see next sentence), which define FGCS “as all students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree” (Davenport & Siegel, 2016, p. 4). Federal TRIO programs are “a set of federally-funded opportunity programs that motivate and support disadvantaged students in their pursuit of a college degree;” I discuss these programs in detail in a later section (www.coenet.org/trio). Lastly, Ward et. al (2012) have adapted the Suder Foundation’s definition of first-generation college students as “those whose parents have no education beyond high school” (p. 4).

While scholars typically use variations of the definition shared above when identifying FGCS, others have included cultural capital as a key component when forming a definition for first-generation students. Cultural capital is information, skills, and wherewithal gained from lived experiences and interactions; the lack of this capital impacts social mobility and negatively affects those who may be otherwise academically well prepared for college (Bennet et al., 2018). Cultural capital, a term originally introduced by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990), can be defined as the cultural assets transmitted by one’s family, or can also be described as “knowledge of highbrow aesthetic culture (e.g., opera, classical music); educational attainment and credentials; personal style, tastes, preferences, and linguistic aptitude” (Aries, 2008, p. 30). Aries (2008) explains that different social class groups with a “high social status send signals that distinguish them from those of lower class” (p. 30). Since cultural capital is a vital element to understanding the experiences of FGCSs, I choose to use the following constructed definition for first-generation college students: undergraduate students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree and are likely to lack cultural capital related to college and college knowledge. I discuss cultural capital in further detail in a later section.

Across the literature, scholars present several characteristics and behaviors of first-generation college students. Students in this population are often students of color and are most likely to be “female, older, have dependent children, and come from lower-income families than students whose families have college degrees” (Engle et al., 2006, p. 14). College enrollment for first-generation college students continues to remain steady each academic year. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reports from the 2015-2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study that 56% of student participants (19.5 million) in this assessment were first-generation college students (firstgen.naspa.org). As more students gain access to higher education, earning a college education has become accessible, but students often experience challenges during the process of obtaining a college degree. Students in this population face barriers that limit their access to information about post-secondary education. FGCSs differ from their non-first-generation peers in a number of ways, including racial/ethnic demographics, socioeconomic status, and preparation for the academic rigor of higher education (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Students in this population are typically less prepared academically, have lower aspirations, and lack parental support. Reid and Moore (2008) discuss further differences in their qualitative study of college readiness and preparation. They identify five areas in which FGCSs differ from their peers whose parents attended college; these differences often create disadvantages for FGCS:

- (1) FGCS face the task of applying to colleges without assistance from their parents because most of their parents have no knowledge of the process. (Choy, 2001; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004)
- (2) College preparation during high school is more useful for FGCSs.
- (3) FGCS often lack the rigorous academic preparation of their peers with college-educated parents because their parents do not understand the importance of taking challenging

courses. (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Warburton, Burgarin, & Nunez, 2001) (4) FGCS often perceive college education as a means to a good job and often choose a college close to home that is not necessarily a good fit, which then leads to leaving college before completing the degree. (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nevill, 2006) (5) FGCS often have different personality traits (i.e., differences in self-esteem and social acceptance) and more often live at home and work part time while attending college. (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Warburton, Burgarin, & Nunez, 2001) (p. 242)

FGCSs have a range of these differences; however, each FGCS is unique. Their dispositions, attitudes, and self-esteem are personal traits that are unique to each student; however, many commonalities have emerged in research in regard to their experiences. In addition to the barriers above, according to Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien (2006), students whose parents did not complete any education beyond high school are more likely to have less knowledge about the college application process and fewer resources to pay for college. As a result, parents and families are more likely to be intimidated by the cost of college, particularly if they're not privy to information on how to afford college. These barriers often limit and deter first-generation students from moving forward to pursue a college degree or, if they do move forward, they're more likely to make uninformed financial decisions when paying for college.

Preparation for college is enhanced when family members have a set of skills and familiarity with college knowledge that is related to student success. FGCSs often enter college lacking the necessary skills, or social capital, to navigate college successfully. In a NCES report on the college access and persistence of FGCS, Bennett et al. (2018) found that "three years after enrolling, comparatively more first-generation students (33%) who began postsecondary education in 2003-04 had left postsecondary education without earning a credential" than their

non-FGCS peers (p. 4). College knowledge can range from knowing common college jargon (e.g., FAFSA - a common application), being familiar with college culture or expectations (interacting with professors), understanding the importance of rigorous courses, to understanding the application process from beginning to end. To better serve this student population, colleges and universities have implemented programs and offer resources specifically for FGCSs to ensure a successful transition into the college environment. Colleges and universities recognize the specific challenges faced by FGCSs and many institutions have provided an array of resources and personnel for support. Even despite these efforts, these students are more likely to not persist and ultimately not graduate from a four-year college or university (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). However, students must first identify as a first-generation college student, enroll in such programming, and actively participate to benefit from the resources many colleges provide. Understanding why some FGCSs fail to take advantage of resources and other FGCSs do is vital to shaping how resources are provided for future FGCSs. On campus, first-generation college students easily blend in with the larger campus community because they do not look any differently than any other group, thus, they can be easily overlooked in terms of accessing resources.

When FGCSs apply and enroll in a four-year college or university, many enroll in an institution that is predominantly white. In the United States, the majority of four-year colleges and universities can be classified as predominantly white institutions (PWI) or “extreme predominantly white (EPWI)” (McCoy, 2014, p. 156). EPWIs have a very low enrollment of students of color, ranging from 8-20% of the total student population (McCoy, 2014). Additionally, FGCS are more likely than their peers to be students of color and or from low-income households. According to the Pell Institute Study on Opportunities in Higher Education,

first-generation students are more likely to be African American or Hispanic, have dependent children, and come from lower-income families than students whose parents have college degrees (Engle et al., 2006). Ward, Davenport and Siegel (2012) reference the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics report on the status of college bound high school seniors from 1992-2000 and found that first-generation college students are:

1. More likely to select a two-year college as their first institution of choice
2. More likely to delay postsecondary enrollment
3. More likely to have interrupted enrollment in a postsecondary institution
4. More likely to have part time enrollment status (p.10).

As a comparison, using a similar more recent report of high school graduates from 2003-2004, first-generation college students are more likely to enroll in a 2-year institution (46%) than students with parents with a college degree (26%) (Cataldi, Bennett & Chen, 2018).

Additionally, FGCSs are still more likely to also enroll in postsecondary education at a lower rate (26%) than their peers with parents who have a college degree (45%) (Cataldi, Bennett & Chen, 2018). Because students from this population are first in their families to experience the college application process and attend college, FGCSs often lack the familial support (with college knowledge) than their peers whose parents have college degrees.

In terms of family and parental support, parents with no college degree or experience are less likely to be able to offer their children knowledgeable support during the college going process. Dennis et al. (2005) share that the parents of first-generation college students lack the first-hand knowledge of the college experience and typically cannot help students directly with college goals. Lastly, FGCSs are more likely to be underprepared for the academic rigor of college due to their high school academic experience. Connecting college aspiration to academic

rigor is one of the many missing links FGCSs are likely to struggle with when preparing to go to college. Not understanding the importance of upper-level courses such as honors and AP or, more importantly, lacking access to such courses often places FGCSs at a disadvantage when applying to 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). FGCSs are likely to have attended lower-resourced high schools and lacked access to college preparation courses such as Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment. Moreover, schools often have misleading course categories, for example, by labeling their lower-level courses as college preparatory, when those courses alone will not adequately prepare students for college academic rigor. However, many first-generation college students are from low-income families, and as the research confirms, attend under-resourced schools, thus participating in less than rigorous academic experiences for students seeking to pursue college. In addition to under-resourced schools and course selection, class and race have been shown to be factors that play a significant role in how students prepare for, gain access to, and experience higher education. In the next section, I discuss how class and race are vital elements in understanding the experiences of first-generation college students.

Class, Capital, and Race

Class and race are important identity markers in understanding the experiences of first-generation students in college. They also influence the kinds of social and cultural capital that students are able to access. In this section, I first discuss issues of class: both how class is defined and how it influences students’ experiences in college. I then discuss how research on social and cultural capital is important to understanding class differences and the first-generation college

student experience. Finally, I also discuss issues of race as they relate to how first-generation college students are impacted by race and racially imbedded issues.

Class

Social class and its definition are very complex. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) describes class in three sections based on occupational status: lower, intermediate, and higher position. These class positions are more commonly understood today as working class, middle class, and upper class. Bourdieu (1977) differentiated these class positions by occupational types and job role.

These different classes or sections of a class are organized around three major positions: the lower position, occupied by the agricultural professions, workers, and small trades people, which are in fact categories excluded from participation in “high” culture; the intermediate position, occupied on the one hand by the heads and employees of industry and business and, on the other hand, by the intermediate office staff (who are just as removed from the two other categories); and, lastly, the higher position, which is occupied by higher office staff and professionals. (p.488)

In addition to occupational type and position, identifiers or markers of class can also include job title, education, or income. Ardoin (2018) defines socioeconomic status (SES) “as someone’s income level, including wage or salary they earn from their employments, and any other forms of wealth (e.g., land or business ownership, or other forms of wealth)” (p.75). In a qualitative study on first-generation student experiences at a private college, Aries (2008) describes traditional indicators of class such as “educational attainment, occupational status, and supervisory capacity (how many people a person takes orders from or gives orders to), income and wealth” (p. 18). Aries (2008) found that indicators such as those previously mentioned, are sometimes not

consistent; for example, a person can have a higher college degree with a lower prestigious career. These indicators are often used by society to determine one's class level or status. Individuals are categorized based on job status, financial standing, and also tastes or behaviors. Bourdieu (1977) also identifies the ways in which each class category has its own culture or ways of being: "working class culture or middle class culture are references to the tastes, behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with each class" (Hinz, 2016, p. 286). Classed cultures or tastes might be connected to one's interest in the arts, types of foods, or social connections (i.e. clubs, private organizations, etc.). For first-generation college students who come from low-income families, this might mean a lack of prior knowledge or experiences that are common for middle- or upper-class students and vice versa.

One's surroundings and environment of cultural values, beliefs, and tastes contribute to their habitus, which influences how one perceives the world around them. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) define habitus as "a system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action" (p. 40). College campuses are known for bringing together diverse students. Differences among students may include race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Highly selective colleges and universities often have an established cultural history and habitus that drives student behavior and sense of connectedness with the university (Coleman, 2015). To take Bourdieu's definition into context, many private and elite college campuses have an established overarching perception or "scheme of thought" which is mostly established by the majority student population. Hinz (2016) describes habitus as the "individual manifestation of cultural differences between classes" (p. 286). College campuses are prime grounds for differences, particularly class difference, to manifest. When students enter a college campus, it is common for them to feel uneasy when adjusting to a new setting. However, when

some first-generation college students enter the college campus environment of an elite private institution, it is likely they will encounter feelings of discomfort. They may also question their sense of belonging and connectedness to campus as they navigate their new unfamiliar environment and peers. In a study to gain a better understanding of first-generation student experiences at private schools, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) interviewed 14 FGCS participants and learned that of those participants, many students reported a sense of “culture shock” when discussing the ways students “negotiated college to participate with the dominant majority on campus” (p. 37).

Most institutions of higher education have adopted middle class social norms. While many universities are becoming more accessible to lower income students, Ardoin (2018) states that universities can treat poor and working-class students as “outsiders who need to learn the manners, norms, and rules that middle and upper class students acquired at home” (p. 77). Hinz (2016) laments that the higher education sector is stratified by social class and thus characterized by middle class “cultural rules, values, language, and community mores” (p. 286). Class difference in the United States is significant. Historically, class and class categories are determined by overall household income and or level/type of work (i.e., working class, middle class, upper class). These categories are also defined by the level of power and privilege that are associated with them, along with norms, rules, tastes, and cultures of members of that class. Class differences can be visibly seen in “distribution of income as well as education, family structure, health and longevity, even in civic and community engagement” (Reeves, 2017, p. 3). These historically assigned characteristics of class groups might also involve cultural stereotypes that are alienating or demeaning of a particular group. Further, class is displayed with certain markers, such as tastes, material possessions such as clothing (name brands or labels),

electronics, vehicles, and homes. For students, class is largely displayed in possessions they bring with them or acquire in college or tangible finances that enable them to participate socially. In a qualitative study exploring issues of race and class of first-generation students at an elite college, Aries (2008) found that a student's first encounter with class difference was through observing their difference in material possessions on move in day. She writes that, "Possessions are indicators, sometimes incorrect, of socioeconomic class; as much, for students they came with layers of feelings attached, and for others, especially those for whom a budget was never an issue, with little thought at all" (p. 26).

For lower income students, observing their peers with laptops, flat screens televisions, large amounts of clothing, and expensive vehicles, they notice the differences in class, especially income, that are palpable and comparison is inevitable. Stuber (2011) writes that within the education setting, social capital "functions as an invisible resource - in the form of knowledge about school culture - that selects and conditions some students for success while marking others as poorly suited to academic or social distinction" (p. 119). For FGCSs from working class families, attending an elite private school may be their first experience with wealth and privilege. The ability to navigate their feelings is vital when FGCSs from lower income families embark on a private college experience. So too is learning to cultivate the cultural and social capital needed to be successful.

Culture/Social Capital

Drawing on Bourdieu's work, Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) outline cultural capital as the parental ability to pass along information acquired over time that is critical to success in college. This "training" or passing on of cultural capital takes place through relationships and interactions with others within one's immediate circle of engagement. Social

capital, as defined by Stanton-Salazar (2011) entails the resources and key forms of social support embedded in one's network or associations and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents. For FGCSs, information and experiences such as navigating the admissions process or initiating conversations with professors can be examples of cultural capital skills that would be useful in the college process. Padgett and Pascarella (2012) define social capital as the information, values, norms, standards, and expectations for education as communicated to individuals through the interpersonal relationships they share with others. Others define social capital as residing in relationships among individuals; this capital helps to facilitate transactions and the transmission of resources (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). According to Padgett and Pascarella (2012), individuals who possess high levels of social capital are well trained in interpersonal relationships and have an advantage in an environment such as higher education. What each of the definitions or descriptions of cultural capital have in common is that they signify a certain level of experience, savvy, and skill that is valued and utilized to impact social mobility within the higher education setting.

The presence of capital or lack of it is visible during the early stages of college preparation. Typically, students seek help from their parents, school counselors, or college counselors when they are available. In a study analyzing the impacting factors of a successful transition from high school, Zhang and Smith (2011) found that black students were more likely than white students to report guidance counselors as being more helpful, while white males were more likely to receive help from their fathers than black males, and were more likely to have both parents with a college degree. Parental knowledge is significant to helping students navigate the application process; the lack of such information compromises students' ability to navigate the culture and bureaucracies of higher education (Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata,

2016). Alternatively, first-generation students are less likely to have access to this knowledge. Students entering college with more “college wherewithal” or social capital are likely to be more successful socially and academically. In a study of grit and social capital of FGCSs at a private four-year university, Almeida, Byrne, Smith and Ruiz (2019) found that access to social capital was a significant predictor of the cumulative GPA of first-generation college students. Social and cultural capital are significant elements that impact and influence academic and social outcomes for FGCSs. Research shows students from different class backgrounds have varied academic experiences based on the type of capital to which they have access. Hinz (2016) states that middle-class children are more likely than working-class children to succeed in school because they have cultural capital, such as middle and upper-class cultural traits including speech style, dress, manners, tastes, and knowledge about the education system (p. 286).

Students who are the first in their family to attend college often lack the types of college knowledge that other students, who are not first in their family to attend college, have access to through their parents, and their parents’ network. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) describe this reality:

Cultural capital is obtained when a parent acquires significant and meaningful college experiences – going through the admissions process, experiencing freshman orientation, interacting with faculty, doing college-level work, being self-directed, learning the language and customs of higher education, living with other students, taking finals, navigating the library, making decisions about majors and career pathways, developing help-seeking skills. (p. 8)

Obtaining such skills and knowledge is a cumulative process that happens over time (with parents) or over the course of college attendance and completion. Duncheon and Relles (2018)

illustrate the salience of the common expression ‘you are who you surround yourself with’ to explain the significance of social ties and social/cultural capital:

While members of the upper class have access to resources-rich networks that are connected to mainstream institutions, low-income networks are dislocated from dominant forces (Bourdieu, 1973). This tendency for individuals to develop relationships within their proximal networks constrains social mobility, and, in turn, contributes to social reproduction. (p. 3)

In part due to their class status and limited networks, first-generation college students and their families are less likely to have access to connections within their immediate circle to increase their cultural capital related to college access and success.

Within the higher education setting, faculty and staff play a key role in supporting and advocating for students. Specific positions within departments, such as student affairs, often connect with students on a consistent basis through advising, programming, supervision, and student organizations. Stanton-Salazar (2011) explain that these faculty and staff roles are connected to social capital as their staff are institutional agents. An institutional agent can be understood as an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status and authority (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). An institutional agent could be a friend of the family who works in admissions or a mentor on a college campus who shares opportunities with a student and/or vouches for them to be considered for an internship. This individual, when linked to a students’ social network, can be influential in helping to negotiate or transmit highly valued resources on behalf of the student. The institutional agent is a key player in helping the FGCS to navigate and capitalize on social capital. This agent can also be vital when advocating or vouching for the student to gain access to certain opportunities or experiences. Kezar and

Kitchen (2019) support the notion that institutional agents are “central actors in students’ postsecondary lives, and they can provide messages and cues that affirm students’ capabilities for college success – both social/personal and academic – that encourage student success” (p. 3). Access to the appropriate resources, agents, and/or campus connections may assist first-generation students to successfully adapt to their new college environment.

Because FGCSs lack an abundance of social capital, which includes knowledge of how to successfully navigate their new environment socially, they are more likely to have part-time jobs, live off campus, not participate in extracurricular activities, and be less involved in academic learning experiences, including studying abroad or participating in faculty research opportunities (McCoy, 2014). Moreover, FGCSs often feel a deficit in their sense of belonging. When students are not able to connect, other areas, like academics, might be affected. Hinz (2016) suggests that “students who feel that they do not belong because of their social class, or whose cultural capital does not match that of their institution, could experience negative social and academic outcomes” (p. 286).

In a study analyzing the experiences of first-generation students at four elite colleges in the Northeast, Grice et al. (2016) found that social capital played a vital role in the ways students straddle between campus and home life. Students reported struggling at school with the values of their particular institution related to social and cultural capital, and at home they saw that adopting the values of the institution created distance from their families. Students often feared that their family perceptions would change due to adopting the culture of college. Without the skills and know-how social or cultural capital related to college permits, first-generation students are at a disadvantage during their first year of college, thus commencing their college experience

behind their peers. Like cultural and social capital, race is also an important factor in how FGCSs experience the world and also college.

Race

Like class, race is a factor that influences the experiences of first-generation students at private and elite universities. FGCSs of color have different experiences than their white peers, in part due to their race. When attending a predominantly white institution, race is one of the many factors that rests on the minds of many students of color. In her study on FGCSs experiences at an elite university, Aries (2008) found that black students who participated in the study were twice as likely as whites to feel that race had an impact on their lives (85% versus 42%) (p. 36). Race is particularly salient for students of color when entering any space where the majority of students are white.

There is a complex history surrounding race in United States, involving power, white supremacy, oppression, discrimination, and systemic racism. Historically, people of color in the United States have experienced, and continue to experience, racial injustices, negative treatment, and problematic stereotypes. As a result of systemic racism, education has a history that parallels the treatment of African Americans and other marginalized populations in the United States. Schools were segregated until the 1950's when it was declared "unconstitutional based on the argument that separate schools could not provide equal resources to their students" (Goyette, 2017, p. 92). After decades of inconsistent efforts at desegregation, the education system experienced waves of "de facto segregation" caused by white flight (whites moving from neighborhoods with blacks), and housing regulations that kept the poor and people of color within the same neighborhood, which, according to Goyette (2017), was a period in time called "second generation segregation."

Second generation segregation also refers to racial segregation that is due to practices within schools. Ability grouping and differential course taking also separate students within schools by race. This occurs when white and Asian students are disproportionately found in honors or AP classes, and blacks and Hispanics are found in regular or vocational tracks or even in special education classes. (p. 94)

Practices such as tracking and grouping are common within the public school system today, often impacting students from marginalized groups the most. Additionally, schools that serve high populations of students of color, or students from families with a comparatively lower income, often have less funding and resources at their disposal. These schools are often under-resourced, have high teacher turnover, few qualified teachers, and low overall academic performance. Segregated schools are often minority serving, tend to be located in poor neighborhoods, have less money to buy equipment, make repairs, or run special arts programs as compared to better funded schools (Goyette, 2017). All of these challenges place students at a disadvantage in obtaining the academic resources necessary to be prepared for college.

FGCSs of color often experience stress, weak academic performance, and feelings of academic inadequacy. In a study examining the levels of culture shock for low-income students of color, Jack (2014) shows that due to racial and socioeconomic segregation, black students from low income families traditionally live in distressed segregated communities and have limited access to cultural and academic resources. Schools are ultimately a direct reflection of the neighborhood they serve, and in turn, students are a direct reflection of that school. While the United States public school system has taken many strides to grow and evolve, the system still suffers from issues reminiscent of its inception. At the same time, there are government initiatives and grants available to attempt to even the playing field by offering financial

incentives to schools for performance, programs that provide college preparation support to under-funded schools, and programs that provide novice teachers to some of the lowest performing schools in the country. However, it can be argued that these education programs are merely temporary solutions to much more serious issues of racism and economic marginalization.

One important aspect of racial discrimination is whiteness. Whiteness offers a form of privilege that people of other races do not have access to. White norms, ideologies, and privileges are a pervasive part of our social fabric, but more significantly, our school system. Students of color typically attend schools where the curriculum reflects the culture and experiences of the dominant white culture. Whiteness, according to McIntosh (1988, as cited in Stuber, 2011), “is the set of unearned assets that benefit whites in their day to day experiences... It includes experiences of attending schools where the curriculum, pedagogy, and power relations reflect the experiences and perspectives of white people” (p. 119).

Reflecting on educational experiences in a qualitative case study at an elite private university in the Northeast, Aries (2008) found that when speaking of the social advantages and disadvantages of race, over 80% of black students felt that race opened up social opportunities for them and allowed them to feel included. Black students were also more likely to seek out other black students to connect with. Comparatively, in the same study, white students (4%) perceived their race as not providing any advantages and were also unaware of the actual advantage their race provided (Aries, 2008). White students from low-income families have the privilege of blending in with other white students but “may lack the financial capital it takes to participate in activities such as meals out, vacations, etc.” (Stuber, 2009, p. 119). These experiences are indeed unique to each individual, but also impact the experiences of low income

FGCSs. Similarly, in a compelling qualitative study on the experiences of FGCSs participating in a first generation support program, students reflected the impact of the negative campus perception of the program. This study showed that at this particular university, admissions requirements were lowered for participants of the GenONE program “the alternative admission criteria meant that on average high school grade point average and standardized test scores of GenONE students were lower than that of the institutions general body; the majority of GenONE students were African American and LatinX and emphasized the perception of not belonging at the institution was also racially and ethnically influenced (Schelbe, Swanbrow Becker, Spinelli, & McCray, 2019, p.70). Understanding the impact of race on the college experiences of first-generation college students is essential to grasping how they navigate academic and social life.

College Readiness and Preparation

Loosely defined, college readiness means that one is adequately prepared academically and socially to succeed in college. Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) draw upon David Conley’s description of four common skills that are essential to obtaining college readiness: “content knowledge and basic skills, core academic skills, non-cognitive skills and norms of performance, and college knowledge” (p. 190). Content and basic skills can be associated with the essential tools students would ideally learn throughout K-12 schooling such as writing, reasoning, math, logic, problem solving, and written and oral communication. Behaviors such as good study habits, discipline, time management, and social navigating skills are among the necessary “non-cognitive” skills. When students are ready to apply to college, having a base level of “college knowledge” is pertinent in navigating the college application process. This knowledge ranges from understanding college fit, to knowing specific college terms used while applying for financial aid. As a means to ready students for the college application process, high

schools, community-based organizations and even colleges/universities have established specific programming aimed at helping students and families become college ready.

Pre-college programs are programs developed specifically to increase college preparation of high school students. Some pre-college programs target specific populations, particularly first-generation college students and/or low-income students to support access to post-secondary education for this population and to supplement the lack of college knowledge compared to their continuing generation peers. Acknowledging that many first-generation students lack the social capital needed to make informed decisions about college, pre-college programs serve as a conduit to help students prepare for, apply for, enroll in, and persist through college (Le, Mariano, & Faxon-Mills, 2015). Several programs housed within TRIO, “a set of federally-funded opportunity programs that motivate and support disadvantaged students in their pursuit for a college degree,” currently serve over 812,000 first-generation and low-income students in the United States (www.coenet.org/trio). For many FGCSs, getting involved in pre-college programs like Talent Search or Upward Bound was the first step toward considering going to college (Engle et al., 2006, p. 19). These programs play a significant role in bridging the college-knowledge gap for FGCSs and their families. A considerable contribution to being college ready is first believing in ones' capability of attending college. According to personal student accounts, Engle et al. (2006) found that students state that their involvement in pre-college programs helped raise their aspirations for college by increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence in their academic abilities. Moses and Diego (2014) agree that college readiness and preparedness begin with school staff and stakeholders; “if teachers and administrators don’t have the correct information about the requirements for college and career success, they are likely to communicate erroneous and limiting messages to students” (p. 2). This sentiment is true for

many students who participate in college access programming across the country. College readiness and preparation encompass so many soft skills that first generation and low-income students don't have access to. Gewertz (2016) recalls comments from a college access program director from Notre Dame University stating that college preparation goes beyond academics and knowledge, it also includes "developing a sensibility for college" (p. 3) which includes learning responsibility, how to manage time while taking a full course-load, and strategies for interacting with faculty and staff.

FGCSs often experience challenges when trying to successfully navigate the college application process, including college selection. First-generation students are less likely to complete the necessary steps toward enrolling in college as compared to their peers (whose parents have postsecondary experience), especially to a four-year institution, even if they are college-qualified and aspire to attend college (Engle et al., 2006). Additionally, upon deciding on which institution to attend, FGCSs who enroll are likely to choose to attend a less selective two-year or four-year college and university, even when they are qualified for admission to more selective institutions (Engle et al., 2006, p. 17). These decisions are difficult and can be intimidating without someone to help decode the language of higher education. If students are not connected to college access professionals or do not seek assistance from guidance counselors, they are more likely to make uninformed decisions, become overwhelmed, and/or be intimidated by the process.

First-generation students from low-income families, who have attended lower-resourced schools in low SES communities, are less likely to be academically prepared for the rigor of college. Due to a lack of resources, schools may be limited in college preparatory courses they are able to offer; they also struggle to retain highly qualified teachers to teach them. Conley

(2008) defines college readiness as “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed without remediation in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution” (p. 24). For potential FGCSs to be academically prepared for college, high schools should offer a wide range of challenging college prep courses to help students become acclimated to college rigor. A rigorous high school curriculum, particularly one that includes advanced math, can greatly improve the chances that first-generation students will go to college (Engle et al., 2006, p. 15). Unfortunately, when schools do offer rigorous courses, low income and minority students are less likely to enroll in them, thus, are ultimately underrepresented in college preparatory and AP courses (Le, Mariano, & Faxon-Mills, 2015).

To supplement gaps in school curriculum, some school districts have adopted an early college model and or partnered with local community colleges to give students access to college level courses and college credit for free or reduced cost. By participating in advanced level courses through these partnerships, students are able to strengthen those much-needed academic skills necessary to be successful in college such as critical thinking, studying, logic, and reading comprehension. Students in these programs dually enroll in college courses while enrolled in high school. This allows students access to higher level math, writing, language, and certification courses that can lead to a skill or trade or better preparation for a four-year degree.

Part of academic preparedness involves personal connection or encouragement from a teacher or school staff toward students. Because first-generation students are less likely to receive encouragement or a ‘push’ to take challenging courses from parents or family members, teachers or support staff often assume this responsibility. First-generation students often lack confidence in their own academic ability. The literature supports that close connections and relationships with adult school staff helps students achieve academic success (Reid & Moore,

2008). In a qualitative study analyzing the academic preparedness of first-generation students from urban schools, students participated in a combination of a biographical survey and interview to share the elements that contributed to their success. Using social capital theory as a framework, Reid and Moore (2008) examined the academic and social experiences contributing to FGCSs successful transition from high school to college. Students shared that the relationships they had with certain high school teachers, counselors, and administrators helped them prepare for college through encouragement and motivation to help students see their own potential to attend college (Reid & Moore, 2008). These findings from this study exhibited the importance and impact of consistent positive reinforcement for first-generation students over time.

First-generation students, particularly students from low-income families, are likely to need much more than academic support to fully prepare them for a college experience, including encouragement, challenge, and motivation. To assure that first-generation and low-income students are prepared for college, schools must focus their attention on on-going early implementation of academic preparation beginning as early as middle school. The literature suggests that to prepare urban students for successful transition to postsecondary education, it is essential that districts include college exploration and planning programs throughout middle and high school (Reid & Moore, 2008). This early implementation may include creating a systemic college-going culture within schools including visible signage, curriculum, programming, and overall positive messaging toward college access and success. Changing attitudes and perceptions around college is often the first step toward college access and success.

College Experiences of First-Generation College Students

In this section, I present an overview of FGCSs experiences. I discuss issues related to transition, involvement and connectedness, identity development, and academic performance and

persistence. I organized this section to highlight the progression of college life as a student might experience it from enrollment to completion. Each subtopic is a significant element of the college experience, even as these sections are not representative of the range of things students experience in college.

Transition

Once students have completed the application process and are enrolled in college, FGCSs are likely to experience challenges in transitioning to a college lifestyle, especially if they move away from home to attend a four-year college or university. Schreiner et al. (2012) outline six hallmarks of a successful student transition:

(a) students perceive challenges positively as opportunity for growth; (b) students use healthy coping skills during the transition to approach the transitional activities rather than avoid them; (c) students believe they have the support they need to move through the transition successfully; (d) students access resources during the transition for relevant information, assistance, and support; and (e) students emerge from the transition having grown in personally significant ways. (p. 4)

It is impossible to pinpoint the experiences of all first-generation college students and their challenges in transitioning to college expectations because all experiences vary. However, there are some common challenges many FGCSs experience. Various circumstances are likely to cause distress for these students during their transitions:

The perceived reasons for academic distress among first-generation students include a lack of awareness of university resources, limited adult or parental guidance, the need to be a caregiver to a family member, pressure related to a sense of obligation to other/family, a lack of strong academic preparations/high school rigor,

depression/anxiety, financial stress, self-identification and peer relations. (Alvarado, Spatariu, & Woodbury, 2017, p. 3)

The list displayed above only identifies some of the most common challenges experienced by FGCSs and does not represent an exhaustive list. The challenge to transition smoothly often begins with high or contradicting expectations from family. In an exploratory qualitative study on the ways in which first-generation students of color transitioned to an extremely predominantly white institution, McCoy (2014) found that interview participants had high familial expectations of their college attendance and academic performance. Many FGCSs begin college with the pressure to exceed the expectations set for themselves and by their families.

To remedy the angst of transition, some colleges and universities offer bridge or transition programs that are geared toward incoming freshmen, and sometimes specifically first-generation students. McCoy (2014) found that FGCSs responded positively to their experience in a summer transition program. Participants stated that the summer transition program offered an opportunity to “connect with other first year students, and faculty, staff and students of color in an effort to become more familiar with campus” (McCoy, 2014, p. 162). FGCS transition programs are also likely to incorporate a cohort model that provides students with a sense of community or family as they learn their new environment surrounded by other students experiencing the same transitional struggles. If eligible students opt out of participating in such bridge or transition programs, they are more likely to have difficulties connecting to the college culture, adjusting to college life, and ultimately persisting in college. In a study on higher education student retention and transition, scholars used a quasi-experimental design to analyze the transition to college of first year students. Research supports the argument that students who

participated in transition programs felt more prepared, more connected, and were 80% more likely to persist from first to second year of college (Van Herpen et al, 2019).

Involvement and Connectedness

The ability to connect to a college or university, along with a sense of belonging, have been found to correlate with persistence for college students. Means and Pyne (2017) define “belonging as a student’s perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (campus community) or others on campus (faculty/staff)” (p. 908). This sense of belonging is connected to one’s ability to learn the unwritten rules and culture of campus both in and outside of the classroom. In a qualitative study on the experiences of FGCSs at private colleges and universities, students reported feeling a sense of cultural dislocation and referred to feeling lost and at times marginalized (Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016). If FGCSs struggle to learn hidden college rules while also feeling like an outsider on a college campus, it is likely they will continue to struggle to feel like part of the community. Along with a sense of community, it’s important for new students to feel like a member of their campus community. Strayhorn (2012) explains that membership is the foundation of a sense of community because it implies that one has a rightful place in that community (as cited in Nelson et al., 2012). The ability for FGCSs to connect with and feel a sense of belonging as a member of their campus community is strongly related to their overall college success. In an interview-based qualitative study focusing on the experiences of first-generation students at elite universities, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) found that students attributed their success to their connections to peer and faculty mentors.

A lack of connection acts as a domino effect as FGCSs struggle to obtain resources necessary to sufficiently support them while in college. Means and Pyne (2017) describe campus resources or “institutional support” as the “institutional academic and social spaces such as departments, programs, residence halls, classrooms, and student organizations, designed to support student learning and success as well as employees of the university” (p. 908). As FGCSs become more disconnected from the campus community, they are less likely to reach out for support or take advantage of on campus resources such as academic support, tutorial services, and counseling services. Consequently, FGCSs are more likely to isolate themselves if they fail to initially connect to the campus community. If students are unable to connect to the university socially and are academically insecure, they are at high risk for not completing their undergraduate degree. Studying the cultural transition of FGCSs, Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) used focus groups to gather a better understanding of student experiences at a small regional university in the southwest. The researchers found that FGCSs were likely to resist support from on campus resources because of fear or the need to be self-sufficient (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). This possibly results in low overall academic performance, high stress and anxiety, and high attrition rates.

Lastly, with the increasing costs of residential living on a college campus, many students opt to live off campus or at home with families to avoid housing expenses. In a longitudinal study conducted as part of the National Study of Student Learning on college student experiences and academic outcomes, first-generation college students were found to be more likely to live off campus while in college, which meant less participation in clubs, organizations, and extracurricular activities associated with college (Pascarella et al., 2004). This disconnect is often due to many secondary responsibilities or circumstances such as significant financial obligations

to their family, including the need to pay for college tuition and/or living expenses. With these competing demands, FGCSs struggle to be fully engaged in the college life experience and ultimately miss the abundance of resources and opportunities the campus community has to offer.

Identity Development

While first-generation students adapt to college life, they often struggle with their new identity as a college student in addition to their other intersecting identities. This can be challenging for any student, but specifically for FGCSs as they attempt to find their footing. Using findings from their qualitative study on the experiences of FGCS of color who participated in a student success program, Hart and Pacheco (2011) argue that as FGCSs attempt to negotiate their place in college, they often minimize their interactions with peers, professors, and others due to a lack of understanding of their new surroundings and who they are as individuals in that space. As a result, students often become isolated or less likely to connect with faculty, staff, or peers. It is worth asking how one's identity becomes influenced by one's surroundings. Golden et al. (2002, as cited in Orbe 2004) describe identity as being located or established within four different frames: “(1) within individuals, (2) within relationships, (3) within groups, and (4) communicated between relational partners and group members” (p. 134). Students of color attending predominantly white colleges and universities experience difficulty navigating social settings in which they may feel like outsiders.

In a qualitative study conducted to determine the saliency of first-generation college students with their FGCS identity, Orbe (2004) drew upon 79 student narratives to conclude that “... being a FGCS may be highly salient to one person’s identity, not important at all to another, or somewhere in between for a third, depending on the situation” (p. 134). Here, the term “high-

saliency” (Orbe, 2004, p. 134) refers to the level of importance or value a student places on their identity as a FGCS. Further, Orbe (2004) argues that the label of first-generation college student often comes with a stigma that could lead to “out-ting” students who do not want to be further marginalized or only identified as a first-generation college student. This stigma may lead students to opt out of receiving any resources provided by their respective institutions. While the findings from his study were highly variable, Orbe (2004) also argued that:

students with high-saliency to their FGCS status were more likely to be students of color, students from low socioeconomic status, and nontraditional female students. Those with “variable-saliency” were most likely to be white, mid-high socio-economic status, and considered a traditional college student. Those with low-saliency were likely to be white males, regardless of socio-economic status. (p. 140)

First-generation identity had variable levels of significance and meaning for students in Orbe’s study.

Predominantly white campuses often cater to the culture of the dominant group. Wilkins (2014) states that college campuses are “class-linked by cultural knowledge and expectations shape how students participate in social aspects of college life, helping class advantaged students make friends and stockpile social and cultural capital” (p.172). First-generation college students often experience what Torres (2003) refers to as “cultural dissonance or the experience of conflict between one’s own sense of culture and what others expect” (p. 540). FGC students who attend colleges or universities with less diverse populations may experience discomfort and pressure to blend in or adapt to the dominant culture. Students also may experience a sense of guilt or a betrayal of who they are as they struggle to identify with their new surroundings. Orbe (2004) found that some FGCSs choose to maintain two distinct identities: home and college.

First-generation students of color, particularly those attending predominantly white colleges, may find themselves stuck between who they are and who their environment might pressure them to become.

FGCSs of color may experience covert and overt forms of racism, or what scholars term microaggressions or macroaggressions. Sue (2010, as cited in Gray, Johnson, Kish-Gephart, & Tilton, 2018), defines microaggressions as “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostility, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely on their marginalized group membership” (p. 1128). At a large predominantly white state university, Gray et al. (2018) interviewed 31 FGCSs who were participants in support programming for first-generation students. This study focused on the identity work of first-generation students, and the intersection of race and class as they combated microaggressions (Gray et al., 2018). The researchers found that to survive their college environment, students of color developed four types of identity work to help them navigate barriers. This included methods such as “code-switching” or “dodging” (p. 1243).

Code-switching involves the ability to switch between language/dialect/jargon, behaviors, and mannerisms, to respond to different contexts based on race or social class differences as a means to effectively communicate or fit in with the dominant culture (Gray et al., 2018). FGCSs often find themselves creating a double consciousness, or they are left feeling that in order to “make it” they must adopt a middle-class culture and leave their own culture behind (Hinz, 2016, p. 286). This can be difficult, particularly for students who may be struggling with their identity; code-switching almost mimics the adaptation of another identity to manage as the situation changes. Citing Jenkins (1994), Grey et al. (2018) describes code switching as the “masks the oppressed learn to wear for different occasions” (p. 1244). As a means to avoid disclosing their

“stigmatized” identity, students try their best to maintain a higher status identity and disassociate with being a FGCS (Grey et al., 2018).

Through interactions with other students, faculty, staff, family, and friends from home, first-generation college students are constantly engaging in various spheres that challenge their identity. Kaufman (2014) asserts that:

...as a location of social interaction at a time when individuals are moving from one developmental stage (young adulthood) into another (adulthood), college is a crucial site whereby individuals strive to find consistency between their personal identity (self-avowals) and their social identity (ascriptions from others)...college is a site where students construct a sense of self that situates them in a particular social location with a set of corresponding social roles. (p. 37)

Like many new stages in life, the college atmosphere is a phase of life for students to discover who they are and prepare themselves for the initial stages of adulthood. Students are actively seeking to belong, to be assured of themselves and their abilities, and to affirm who they are within the context of a college setting. Students often ping-pong between embracing their identity as FGCSs or negating this part of their identity overall. In a two-year study of first-generation students at a selective university, Wildhagen (2015) interviewed 30 FGCS to analyze how they identified with their FGCS categorization. According to Wildhagen (2015), some students embraced the first-generation identity as a way to define themselves in terms of individual achievement over associational relationships, while others opted to reject this form of connection to this part of their identity. In an attempt to understand who they are, students are also likely trying hard to establish who they are not. As the rules of engagement often alter, first-

generation students attempt to navigate who they are on and off campus while managing a full academic course load.

Academic Performance and Persistence

Given that many low-income first-generation students enter college at a distinctive academic disadvantage compared to students whose parents had some college experience, these students often struggle academically. This is often predicted by the academic habits or behaviors students exhibited in high school such as school attendance, study skills, and the ability to self-motivate. In a qualitative study to gain a better understanding of student experiences and adult development, Byrd and MacDonald (2005) conducted in depth interviews with eight students from a small urban university in the northwest. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) stated that FGCSs often lacked those tacit skills required for success in college, including attending class, being prepared, using course materials, and collaborating with classmates. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics on the academic performance of first-generation college students, Chen and Carroll (2005) report that nationally, FGCSs were less prepared academically for college as demonstrated by their lower rates of taking higher-level mathematics courses in high school, their lower senior achievement scores, and their lower college entrance examination scores. For comparison, studying a cohort of high school graduates from 2003-04, NCES (Bennet, Cataldi & Chen, 2018) reports that compared to students whose parents have bachelor's degrees (45%), fewer FGCSs (27%) enrolled in upper level 'college rigorous' math courses such as pre-calculus or trigonometry. Academic preparation is vital to successfully enrolling, persisting, and ultimately completing college.

Once enrolled in college courses, FGCSs, on average, earned a total of 18 credit hours by the end of their first academic year compared to students who were not the first in their family to

attend college, who earned 25 credit hours (Chen & Carrol, 2005). Additionally, on average, FGCSs have lower first semester grade point averages (2.5 versus 2.8) (Chen & Carrol, 2005), are more likely to drop out the first semester, and are likely not to return for their second year (Orbe, 2004), thus contributing to high attrition rates. Based on a NCES dataset of dropout rates according to parent's educational attainment, Ishitani (2016) reported that 29% of FGCSs dropped out of their 4-year institution compared to 18% of students whose parents had college degrees.

Being underprepared academically can lead to a lack of confidence in academic ability, impacting overall academic performance. Low motivation coupled with low self-esteem can impact academic performance. In a study using data collected from the national Making Achievement Possible assessment, Woosley and Shepler (2011) analyzed the experiences of first-generation students attending a public mid-western institution. Over 3,000 students completed the survey and Nauman et al., (2003) stated that "students who believed they were capable of doing academic work were more likely to engage in learning strategies that led to better academic performance" (as cited in Woosley & Shepler, 2011, p. 3). Furthermore, in terms of college completion, FGCSs frequently take longer than six years to acquire a bachelor's degree or are likely to not complete a bachelor's degree. According to the Pell Institute report for college students who enrolled for the first time in 2003, only 11% of FGCSs earned a college degree within six years, compared to 55% of their peers who were not first-generation or low income (PNPI, NCES, 2012). The Center for First-generation Student Success reports that only 20% of FGCSs attained a bachelor's degree within six years of entering college, compared to 49% of their continuing generation peers (firstgen.naspa.org). While FGCSs often have many

challenges to traverse from enrollment through completion, many overcome those challenges and persist toward degree attainment.

Chapter Summary

I began this literature review with an overview of the definitions and characteristics of first-generation college students. I use the following definition of first-generation college students in this study: undergraduate students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree and thus are likely to lack cultural capital and college knowledge. I constructed this definition from several definitions found throughout the literature supporting the lack of college knowledge and cultural capital among parents. The literature showed that first-generation college students are more likely to have a gap in college-going knowledge, less familial support in the area of college-going knowledge, experience challenges transitioning into college culture, as well as variable challenges when faced with college academic rigor due to poorer academic preparation.

To explore the experiences of FGCS, I discussed the ways in which culture, academics, and class intersect and create a unique experience for FGCSs in college. I reviewed literature that illustrated that the experiences of FGCSs at private universities are varied, influenced by race and socioeconomic status, and often challenging. These experiences and challenges are intensified when first-generation students attend private, elite colleges and universities that are predominantly white. As the research on FGCS is variable, and much of it is dated, a new study of the individual experiences of first-generation students can help to reveal contemporary challenges faced by this population.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of first-generation college students at the predominantly white private liberal arts school, Hamilton University. I begin this section with a brief description of a pilot study which lead me to this inquiry. I used basic qualitative methods to gain insight into the lived academic and social experiences of non-cohorted first generation students at Hamilton University. The study addresses one research question: How do students experience being a first-generation college student at a private, selective institution that is predominantly white? After discussing the pilot study, I give a detailed account of the methodology that includes a description of basic qualitative methods, participant selection and profiles, data collection strategies, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Pilot Study

Prior to finalizing a topic for this dissertation study, I piloted a similar study to explore the experiences of first-generation students, in particular, their connection to their identity as a FGCS. My sample population were students who were identified as first-generation college students. I conducted interviews with three students who were participants in the First Scholars scholarship program at Hamilton University. I emailed students and asked them to voluntarily participate in an interview. I interviewed one Latino Male who was a first-year student, one African American female who was a second-year student, and one white female who was a graduating senior.

Interviews took place on campus in my office and I conducted them each individually for a total of forty-five minutes to one hour. As an employee of Hamilton University, I had a previous relationship with each participant and because of this, it was easy to establish rapport. I

used open-ended interview questions and worked to create a space of safety and trust. To begin the interview, I shared a brief overview of my background, research interests, and my intentions with this interview. I allowed each participant time to ask questions regarding their participation in the interview process. I had a prepared list of open-ended questions, but I allowed the conversation to flow depending on participant responses. Each question was crafted to solicit relevant data that would be pertinent to the study. This pilot study was primarily focused on identity and salience of first-generation status, so the questions reflected that. Participants answered each question completely and at the conclusion of the interview, I gave participants the opportunity to share any final thoughts and or ask any additional questions. Based upon findings from the pilot study, I expanded the list of questions I used in my dissertation to focus on capturing a more holistic perspective of the student, as well as to gather a better understanding of both social and academic experiences.

From this pilot study I learned the following: 1) In order to gather data efficiently and effectively, I need to be better prepared and familiar with voice recording equipment. 2) Interviewing three students offered me varied perspectives but did not provide enough data for me to draw any meaningful conclusions. 3) Structuring the study around first-generation student identity alone would limit the research. Identity is merely one piece of the college experience puzzle, and for some, a very minute piece. My pilot study experience led me to the current study, which I think provides a wealth of insights into the first-generation population at Hamilton University overall.

Research Methodology: Basic Qualitative Methods

I used a basic qualitative research methodology in conducting this study. I addressed the following primary research question: How do students experience being a first-generation

college student at a private, selective institution that is predominantly white? Additionally, I explored the following secondary questions:

1. How do the experiences of first-generation college students differ across socioeconomic backgrounds and cohort status?
2. What barriers and or challenges do first-generation students experience at a private, selective, predominantly white university?
3. How do non-cohorted first-generation college students leverage resources, including academic and social support on campus?

Basic qualitative methodology is grounded in the constructivist belief that “knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). Basic qualitative methodology is a type of qualitative research that involves the collection of data via interviews, observation, and the analysis of documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that basic qualitative research is the most common type of research in education, presenting accessible strategies that allowed me to grasp, understand, and analyze the lived experiences of student participants.

I was drawn to the use of this methodology because it focuses 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). Researchers implementing a basic qualitative methodology center participant experiences as the focal point for gathering a deep understanding of a topic. They analyze experiences to identify themes, then interpret those experiences in conversation with existing research to construct meaning. This particular methodology allows for a flexible framework which was an important element when designing this study. In this study, I collected data on the experiences of first-generation college students, including their social and academic experiences, at Hamilton University. Participating students

shared their perspectives and discussed their individual successes and challenges while enrolled as a student.

In the interviews I conducted, I invited participants to think critically about their social and academic experiences as first-generation students at Hamilton University. I designed and organized interview questions in such a way that would lead to openness and an organic recollection of experiences. There is a lack of information about the general body of non-cohorted first generation student experiences because they are not connected to a specific program on campus and typically when first generation students are referenced at Hamilton, they are referring to students in the First Scholars program. As a result, I was intentional about framing each interview as an opportunity for each participant to share their individual experiences honestly and candidly. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is not only to inform the programmatic practices of the first-generation staff at Hamilton, but to inform the practices and support of similar universities who want to provide support and programming for first generation students. By engaging and understanding the lived experiences of these students, researchers and practitioners may be able to draw on their perspectives to inform better practices of support and resources for future first generation college students who hope to attend private PWI's.

Participant Selection

Participant selection and data collection for this study began in the fall of 2020. In the spring of 2020, the United States began to see its first cases of novel corona virus Covid-19 which led to a nationwide stay at home order. As a result, many colleges and universities switched to a virtual learning model which forced students to attend college courses full time through a virtual platform such as zoom or webex. These changes significantly impacted my plans to conduct in-person interviews and impacted my ability to reach participants.

Consequently, I conducted all via Zoom, a virtual platform provided by the university. All subsequent communication, including follow up interviews and a focus group were conducted virtually as well. By the end of the spring semester, students began to show signs of “zoom fatigue” as they were adjusting to limited in person interactions and increased virtual class time. These factors impacted the rate to which students were volunteering to participate and responding to email communication. As a result, this prolonged the interview data collection process into the fall of 2021.

Participant Criteria and Selection

Prior to conducting this study, I acquired approval and permission from the Hamilton University administrators and staff to move forward with the study. I relied heavily on the support and expertise of the Assistant Director of First Gen Support. With the help of this staff member, I solicited study participation via email. The Assistant Director of First Gen Support has a spreadsheet of students who were identified as first-generation college students by the Admissions Office. Students either self-identified during the admissions process or were identified by Admissions personnel using information from their admissions application. Students had the opportunity to opt in to participate voluntarily by submitting responses to the pre-survey questions that I sent out with the initial email invites (see Appendix A). To qualify for participation in this study, students needed to be currently enrolled at Hamilton University, identify as a first-generation college student, identify as not being part of a cohort program, and provide a response to help characterize their family socioeconomic status. Once students completed the pre-survey, I followed with an email sharing details about the study along with a link to schedule a zoom interview. Students who were selected to participate were students who

ultimately completed the pre survey and followed through with scheduling and were available to complete a one-on-one interview.

Participant Recruitment

Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Recruiting participants for this study was a crucial step in the success of this study. My goal was to interview as many non-cohorted first generation college students as possible. Recruiting students for this study was challenging since these students had little connection to the First-Generation Student Support office as well as little connection to me. I was very cognizant of this element and was intentional to be as transparent with participants as possible by providing detailed information about the study, having open communication, offering to answer questions, and providing multiple ways to connect with me if needed. Furthermore, I used multiple strategies to recruit students for this study. First, I crafted email language that would be sent from the First-Generation staff; this way, communication would be coming from a familiar source. The communication consisted of a brief introduction along with some background information about me. My hope was that this small introduction would help to remove any barriers around unfamiliarity. This strategy proved to be the most successful as many students eagerly signed up to participate by completing the pre-survey. The pre-survey generated a list of emails of potential study participants. Students who signed up to participate and had yet to schedule a one-on-one interview would receive a weekly email reminder to encourage participation, which was my second strategy: frequent communication. The pre-survey also provided a list of students who were not eligible to participate (students who were part of a cohort program). As a third strategy to increase participation, I encouraged those students to share study information with other first generation students.

The study was open to any first-generation student who was non-cohorted; my goal was to interview as many students as possible. At the time of initial correspondence with potential study participants, no incentives were offered. Students willingly signed up to participate without the use of incentives. However, as the school year continued, student responses dwindled, and interviews slowed, largely in part due to the impact of Covid-19. As a result, I used a fourth strategy by offering a gift card as an incentive with hopes of increasing participation. This strategy proved to be ineffective and had no impact on student response. As a fifth and final strategy, I opted to send personal emails to potential participants, sharing flexible options to schedule an interview. I also included targeted emails to students who identified as seniors, hoping to capture the full scope of their experiences at Hamilton from freshman to senior year. This communication initially would have taken place during the middle of the semester, when students were more likely to be overwhelmed with schoolwork. With this in mind, I paused weekly emails and waited toward the end of the semester, after finals and over winter term, to reach out to students again. Waiting for students to complete their semester increased student response and participation.

Throughout the recruitment process, I was able to identify thirteen non-cohorted first-generation college students to participate in this study. These are students who are not participants in a university initiative cohort such as a scholarship or fellowship program. Study participants were representative of various collegiate classification category (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), socio-economic backgrounds, and ethnic identities. See Table 1 below to view a description of participant demographics.

Table 1: Study Participants

Name	In/Out State	Family Income	Race/Ethnicity	On/Off Campus
Erica	In State	EL: less than \$20,000	Latinx	
Brian	Out of State	EL: less than \$20,000	Latinx	On
Jonna	Out of State	EL: less than \$20,000	Biracial	Off
Catherine	In State	Low: \$20,000-\$40,000	White	Off
Erin	Out of State	Low: \$20,000-\$40,000	White	On
Corrine	In State	Low: \$20,000-\$40,000	White	
Meagan	Out of State	Middle: \$45,000-\$139,000	White	On
Mia	In State	Middle: \$45,000-\$139,000	African American	Off
McKenna	Out of State	Middle: \$45,000-\$139,000	Asian American	On
Ryen	Out of State	Middle: \$45,000-\$139,000	White	On
Jen	Out of State	Middle: \$45,000-\$139,000	White	On
Richard	In State	Upper Middle: \$140,000-\$149,000	White	On
Jenna	Out of State	Upper Middle: \$140,000-\$149,000	White	On

(Pewresearchcenter.org)(Lumenlearning.com)

Data Collection

Data collected for this study came from four sources: (a) a participant introductory pre-survey, (b) in depth one-on-one interviews with each participant, (c) a focus group, and (d) researcher reflexivity journal, which captured my reactions, challenges, and feelings throughout the study and data collection process. I began data collection in the fall of 2020 and concluded in the spring of 2021. When collecting data, I used semi-structured interviews “to gain a deeper understanding of each informant’s experience as well as to understand each participant’s manner

of thinking and the way he or she makes meaning of experiences” (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016, p. 37).

Introductory Pre-Survey

Potential participants were emailed by the First Gen staff member to solicit participation in the study. This introductory survey was put in place to identify whether students were part of a cohort model program at Hamilton University. Students who were emailed were on a general FirstGen list serve which includes both cohorted and non-cohorted students. To be eligible in the study, students needed to identify as not being part of a cohort program. Questions in this introductory pre survey helped to identify student emails, cohort status, socioeconomic status, and academic level (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). Over 30 students completed the introductory survey; however, many students self-identified as being part of a cohort. Of the twenty-two students who identified as non-cohorted, thirteen students participated in this study.

Participant Interviews

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 108). The goal of the interview was to gain a better understanding of how each student identified as a first-generation student and how this impacted their journey to college and their academic and social experiences once enrolled. Once students were identified through participation in the introductory pre-survey, they were immediately contacted individually with further information about the study and a link to schedule their individual interview. This email contained information regarding details about each phase of the study, consent, and instructions on how to schedule their individual interview that would take place via zoom. By scheduling an individual interview, participants

acknowledged their understanding of the information provided and consented to participating further in the study. After participants scheduled their individual interview, they were sent a zoom link and passcode to enter their personal interview session. Participants were instructed to notify me if their plans to attend changed, and were also given a link to reschedule their individual interview if needed.

Using a semi-structured interview method, participant interviews included open-ended questions that allowed for participants to share as openly as possible. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed study details and information regarding study consent. I also shared the purpose for this study and my personal connection to being a first-generation college graduate. My reason for using individual interviews as a primary method of collecting data was the desire to genuinely capture the lived academic and social experiences of students to offer the most organic perspective from their point of view. Ultimately, the “overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24).

During this one-on-one interview, I used a prepared list of questions (Appendix B). Each question was open-ended to encourage participants to share their responses freely and in rich detail. Additionally, I asked follow-up questions to help clarify the participant’s responses or to elaborate on a particular comment that would lend more insight into their experiences. Questions during this interview helped to provide context for a student’s family background, high school experiences, transition to college, and experiences as a college student. The interview followed a set of questions (see Appendix B). Each interview varied between 45 minutes to over an hour depending on the participant. During each interview, I would take detailed notes that would include observations of participant reactions to questions or non-verbal responses. However, I was intentional about not taking too many notes to avoid interrupting the flow of the interview.

Following each interview, I reviewed my observations and wrote additional notes based on my initial thoughts in the moment.

I gave each participant the opportunity to select a pseudonym. However, many participants were very transparent and didn't mind their name being used. Yet, to maintain anonymity, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant. In the following section, I share a brief profile of each study participant. When studying the experiences of first-generation students, it is important to remember that while many students share similar experiences, they also have individual experiences that are unique to who they are as people and to their circumstances. This uniqueness is why it is important to me to share a quick snapshot into their background to give context to their social and academic experiences at Hamilton University.

Participant Profiles

Meagan: Meagan is a white female who is completing her second year in college at Hamilton. Her parents own a successful fundraising business and she is an only child. Meagan attended public school in Florida and was part of the International Bachelorette program. While in high school, Meagan didn't have much guidance from school to support her college search. Outside of the IB program, she wasn't part of any college preparation programs that provided support. However, Meagan's family was able to afford a private college advisor, through a family friend, to help. During her college search, Meagan toured a few other private campuses that were similar to Hamilton (small, private). When deciding on a college, she was looking for a school with a small teacher to student ratio, somewhere where she could feel comfortable and connect with her Jewish culture, and somewhere she'd be happy. After touring Hamilton, she fell in love with the welcoming campus environment and decided to enroll.

Meagan's parents relocated from Florida to Asheville, NC during her second year of college to be closer to her. When applying to Hamilton, she did apply for the First Scholars program, but wasn't accepted. She's since joined a sorority, become part of the Hillel community, started a radio show, and is working an on-campus job. Her college experiences have been pleasant in terms of feeling a sense of belonging, being involved, and finding genuine connections with other students. Meagan was really looking for a sense of community and she has been able to find that at Hamilton: she really loves it. Meagan is proud of being a first-generation college student because her parents didn't have the opportunity to go to college.

Erica: Erica identifies as a Latina woman who is also a first-generation American from North Carolina. In high school, she opted to attend a historically Black high school not too far from Hamilton University that offered a STEM Academy. This high school was outside of her school district, but she knew it would be a better academic experience for her. Erica really enjoyed her high school experience and is proud she was able to attend the STEM Academy. The school really inspired her to pursue higher education and she hopes to be able to give back one day. Erica shared that the guidance office wasn't able to provide many resources to support her college search, but she was part of several community college-access programs. Being from a low-income family, Erica knew that her participation in these programs was vital to gaining access to financial resources for college. These programs helped provide college tours, leadership opportunities, and help with her college applications.

She began her college journey at another local private institution because she did not receive enough financial aid to attend Hamilton initially. After completing one year at her first institution, she applied once again to Hamilton. Erica was admitted and was provided enough financial aid that her parents felt comfortable with her enrolling. Erica felt that Hamilton

University was a better fit and was happy with her decision to transfer. She identifies very strongly as a first-generation college student because it gives her a sense of pride and accomplishment. Erica's parents are undocumented and she acknowledges her parents' sacrifices of coming to this country so their family would have a better life. Since attending Hamilton, Erica struggled to find a connection to campus. She shared that entering as a transfer student was a challenge in and of itself, as there wasn't much support or community for Transfer Students. Additionally, there were many cultural differences and struggles with adjusting to the academics. Erica found her people through her on-campus job in the Center for Racial Identity and by connecting with the First Gen staff.

Catherine: Catherine is a local student from the county. She identifies as a white female and is double majoring in Anthropology and Theater Studies. Catherine comes from a blue-collar family and has two older siblings who didn't go to college. Catherine attended a local county high school for one year, then transferred to a charter school for the smaller student population and class size. Catherine shared that her charter school experience helped prepare her for college because she had the opportunity to enjoy learning. Her classes were never larger than 15 students, her teachers were engaging and challenging, and she described the school environment as "comfy." When preparing for college, Catherine stated that her school counselor was very helpful, but there was no formal college preparation. She was able to take the ACT for free at school and her school counselor helped her complete college applications for free as well. She applied to several schools and was even admitted to Duke University but decided to attend Hamilton because of the school size and affordability. She felt prepared academically but adjusting socially has been a challenge. As both a sociology and theater major, she was able to find good connections to other students within the departments. She was also very grateful for

the opening of the First Gen office. Being a local, Catherine felt like an outsider, since many students at Hamilton are from the northeast part of the country and locals don't typically feel welcomed on campus at Hamilton. Financially, Catherine received a substantial grant that pays her tuition and additional grants that help support her research. Catherine is a commuter student and lives at home while attending school. This has made it difficult to feel an affinity connection to the university.

Erin: Erin is a second-year student currently majoring in music performance. She identifies as a white female and strongly identifies as a first-generation college student. Erin moved to Roanoke, VA after completing her first year of high school in Minnesota. Erin described her high school as being in a "high income area" and shared that her family was very low income. In high school Erin took several AP and Honors courses which prepared her for academics at Hamilton. She was aware early on that she would have to apply to a school or program that would be able to provide for her financially. During her college search, Erin received more help from her music teachers than from her school counselor. Her teachers helped her find and prepare for college music programs and auditions. All other college search and preparation was done on her own. Erin expressed the challenges of qualifying for scholarships offered at her school: many were aimed toward students who grew up in that community or, scholarships were connected to participation in athletics.

While at Hamilton, Erin found her community with the first gen programming and through her creative arts living learning community (LLC) in residence life. She attributes her strong sense of belonging to her participation in events sponsored by her LLC and through connecting with students through her major. As a music student, Erin doesn't have a lot of free time to participate in clubs and organizations. She does, however, manage to juggle two on

campus jobs during the school year and a full-time summer job to help cover her expenses.

While she was offered some financial aid, a significant amount of her aid is student loans, which she is currently paying off on her own while in school. Overall, Erin says her college experience has been positive so far because of the first gen community she's become part of.

Mia: Mia is an African American female student who is a senior Business Analytics major. Mia's family lives about 2 hours away from Hamilton University and she's wanted to attend Hamilton since the 8th grade. Her family has always wanted her to go to a Historically Black College or University, and Mia applied to appease them, but she always had her heart and mind set on attending Hamilton. Mia attended a predominantly Black charter school from K-8, then transferred to a predominantly white high school. She learned that she would have to advocate for herself much more in high school to prove she belonged in rigorous courses. When it was time to prepare for college, Mia's family was familiar but not 100% certain about how to move forward.

Mia's elder sister attended college over ten years prior and helped to guide her, but Mia had to navigate the process mostly on her own. Mia applied for the First Scholars program but wasn't selected for the scholarship. Her first year at Hamilton was a challenge. She was the only African American female on her residence hall floor, and often the only African American or student of color in her classes. It took a while for her to find her community, but she found connections through her Resident Assistant (another African American female), who connected her to other African American and first-generation students. This connection really made a difference for Mia as it broadened her network and access to other students of color and avenues to get involved in student organizations. As a senior, she's pleased with the experiences she's had. She was able to really have an impact with her leadership in several student organizations.

Mia participated in internships, studied abroad, and took full advantage of her access to faculty and staff at Hamilton. Mia plans to attend graduate school in the future.

Brian: Brian is an out of state student from New York. He identifies very strongly with his identity as a first-generation college student and first-generation Ecuadorian American. He's wanted to attend Hamilton since finding out a main character from a popular TV show was a Hamilton Alumnus. Brian is a second-year film studies major and hopes to work in the industry as a screen writer or publishing editor upon graduation. When preparing to apply for college, Brian shared that there weren't any college access programs in his area, so he did all of his college search on his own. Hamilton University was the only school Brian applied to because of the cost of applications and was very grateful he was admitted. Brian shared that he did apply for the First Scholars program but wasn't confident in his application quality; he didn't make it past the first round or application review.

Upon arrival at Hamilton, Brian found his connections through the Student Success Center and his participation in the LGBTQ+ student organization. He admitted that it was a challenge adjusting to the affluence at Hamilton, and he missed his friends from home a lot, which made the transition difficult as well. As a second-year student, Brian is still experiencing a financial challenge. At the time we spoke, he'd just had a conversation with his parents about possibly having to leave school due to cost, but he was awarded a scholarship just in time which allowed him to stay. Outside of the lack of diversity he's experienced, Brian shares that he's grateful for the opportunity to be at Hamilton to learn and he's happy about his decision to enroll.

Richard: Richard is a first-year student from Charlotte, NC. He identifies as a white male. Richard's dad owns a successful electrical services business that he co-runs with Richard's

mother. Richard has an older brother who is currently a student at UNC Charlotte. Richard attended a public high school and was very involved in clubs. Richard shared that it was difficult trying to navigate through the college application process. He received a significant amount of support from his mother who was helpful with his essays and with looking up colleges he might like to attend. Richard stated that he didn't use his school counselors much and he wasn't part of a college access program. Hamilton was one of Richard's top choices in schools because of its small student body and home-like campus environment. Richard didn't apply for the First Scholars program because he believes he didn't qualify due to finances.

Since Richard is only a first-year student, his experiences at Hamilton have been limited. It was also the first "Covid Semester" when I interviewed him and students were very isolated, taking online courses, and limited to their dorm rooms. Richard shared that his experiences at Hamilton have been positive; he was grateful for the opportunity to at least be on campus since many larger schools were shut down due to Covid. Richard feels that being a first-generation student hasn't impacted him that much. He's been able to easily connect with his roommate and others within the residence hall. He's looking forward to getting more involved with the First Gen programming and other student organizations on campus.

Jonna: Jonna is an out-of-state student from New Jersey majoring in communication studies. Jonna is a junior and identifies as a biracial female who is African American and White. Joanna was raised by her grandparents and was the only child in the home. After touring several campuses in the south, Jonna chose to attend Hamilton because of its location, small-town feel, and cozy campus. Jonna attended a college preparatory private school and felt very prepared academically to attend college. She shared that she received a good amount of support when searching and applying for college. She was able to tour campuses with her family before

making a final decision. Joanna applied to the First Scholars scholarship program but was not selected to move forward. As a result, Jonna is covering Hamilton's tuition with all student loans. This has had a significant impact on her experience because she is constantly worried about her finances.

Jonna admitted to not thinking about being a first-generation student until she matriculated on campus and had to figure things out on her own. Jonna struggled socially to find her community. Things weren't the best with her first-year roommate and Jonna even considered transferring. Eventually Jonna began to connect with other students by joining a sorority her second year and participating in student organizations connected to the communications department. These connections have really made a difference in Jonna's sense of belonging to campus. Overall, Jonna's experiences at Hamilton have been generally positive. However, she emphasized the lack of financial support for students. Her grandparents are unable to help her financially, so she's taken on a huge responsibility in accepting a significant amount of student loans to cover the cost of attending Hamilton.

Jessica: Jessica is a first-year student from Massachusetts. She identifies as a white female from a working-class family. Both of her parents attended some community college and have jobs working for the city. Jessica attended a private catholic school for girls with other students who were upper income. When preparing to apply to college, she understood that she couldn't apply to many schools because of the cost of applications. She was also more concerned with applying for scholarships than her peers. She received a lot of support from her guidance counselor, and her parents were able to provide support by reaching out to their friends whose children went to college. Jessica didn't apply for the First Scholars program, but she did apply for a fellowship. She was awarded a small scholarship to study abroad, which helped a little, but

her parents are able to help cover her cost of attendance. As a first-year student, Jessica is still trying to adjust to her environment. She's been able to connect easily with people in her residence hall and in her classes. She's yet to get involved with any student organizations but is interested in being a tour guide. Since Jessica took IB courses in high school, she was able to transition effortlessly into college academics. Overall, the only challenge Jessica has experienced is getting adjusted to 8 am classes and the walking distance from class to class.

McKenna: McKenna is a senior out-of-state student from California. She identifies as an Asian American and strongly identifies as a first-generation college student. She's always wanted to attend college but knew she didn't want to attend college on the West Coast. Hamilton came on her radar from a random email and she decided to apply. McKenna is from a working-class family; her mother and her mother's family are refugees from Vietnam. When preparing to go to college in high school, McKenna shared that she doesn't remember a strong college-going culture at school. She doesn't recall using a guidance counselor for her college preparation, nor was she part of any form of college access program. To develop a college list, she reached out to an older cousin who'd attended college a few years earlier. Her college research surrounded music programs since McKenna was a serious choral singer. McKenna admittedly regrets not applying for the First Scholars scholarship program, but she did apply for fellowships which she wasn't awarded. McKenna attended a large public high school and took several IB courses so adjusting to college academics was an easy transition for her. Socially, connecting with other students was a challenge; it took her a while to find "her people." Through participation in a multicultural conference planning committee, McKenna developed close connections with other students and staff of color on campus. She's since continued to help on this planning committee for over 3 years which has helped her connection to campus. Outside of this commitment,

McKenna isn't involved in many student clubs or organizations because she feels they just aren't the best fit for her.

Ryen: Ryen is a second-year student from Maryland. She identifies as a white female and is a pre-health major. She's from a small community about an hour west of Baltimore and attended a large low-income, diverse high school. Ryen really enjoyed her high school experience. When beginning the college application process, Ryen shared that her high school didn't provide many resources to support her college search. She was able to get help through a friend of the family who was a college counselor. Ryen was grateful that her parents were able to afford to pay for a private college counselor. After touring a few schools in the south, Ryen compared Hamilton to a school in Virginia and ultimately decided on Hamilton because of the traditions and school size. Transitioning to college academics was a challenge for Ryen coming in as a STEM major. At orientation, the parents met the advisors and Ryen was advised to immediately get a tutor. Ryen shared that Biology was the hardest course she'd ever taken in her life. She was generally shocked because she took AP courses in high school, but they were no match for college Biology.

Socially, Ryen was able to connect quickly. She and her roommate linked up on social media before arriving at school; they are still roommates and close friends. Ryen was also able to connect with other students in her residence hall and in her classes. Ryen reflected on the lack of diversity at Hamilton and shared that it was a challenge since it was much different than her high school environment. Additionally, Ryen joined a sorority during her second year and has since made many friends and connections through her participation. She admitted to applying for the First Scholars Scholarship but didn't try too hard on the application because she felt others were more qualified. She was offered a grant to help cover her tuition and feels "lucky" that her

parents are able to pay for college through student loans. Overall, Ryen has had a positive experience at Hamilton and is looking forward to being more involved with a leadership position within her sorority.

Jen: Jen is an out-of-state student from Pennsylvania who is also a student athlete. She identifies as a white female and is a senior majoring in environmental sustainability. She was recruited to attend Hamilton to be a student athlete. Jen wasn't a strong student in high school and believed that athletics was her only opportunity to attend college, so she was grateful to have been recruited by Hamilton. High school was a challenge for her academically and she wasn't 100% sure she wanted to attend college. Jen is from a working-class family and attended a large public high school. She didn't participate in any college preparation or college access program, nor did she take many rigorous courses in high school. She admitted to only taking one honors course in high school. Jen's athletic scholarship covers her tuition, room, and board, but she also works part time at a local farmers market for extra money. Adjusting to college academics wasn't a challenge but balancing her team schedule with her course schedule was her biggest hurdle. Thankfully, the university provides student athletes with additional academic and advising support, so Jen felt that she received a lot more support than the average Hamilton student.

Jen also found it difficult to connect with other students outside of her team members. Being a student athlete is very demanding and doesn't leave much time to participate in any outside clubs or student organizations, so her teammates have become her community. Jen recognizes that she is a first-generation college student but admits that she's not really connected to being a first-generation student. While going to college has always been an expectation, she's never really thought about being a first-generation college student. She's grateful for the

opportunity to attend college and as she prepares for graduation, she's thankful for the opportunity to graduate debt free. Overall, Jen had positive experiences while enrolled at Hamilton. During her time here, her biggest challenges were being disorganized, time management, and staying on top of her busy schedule.

Corrine: Corrine is a senior in-state student majoring in film studies. Corrine identifies as a white female from a very low-income family. Corrine is also a transfer student who transferred to Hamilton University after completing two years at a community college close to home. She identifies strongly as a first-generation college student but shared that her experiences have been connected mostly to being both a transfer student and first-generation student. When preparing to go to college, she was under the assumption that she wouldn't be able to afford a four-year institution. In high school, she wasn't part of any college access program, and didn't receive much guidance from her school counselor, so a lot of the information she received was from hearsay or assumption. As a result, she felt that due to finances, community college was her only option. While enrolled in community college, Corrine worked full time to cover her cost of attendance.

After her two years were complete, she became interested in Hamilton after seeing an advertisement on the highway. Initially, Corrine wanted to attend Hamilton because of their strong business program with plans of majoring in international business. When she arrived at Hamilton, she changed her major to film studies. Transfer students receive less scholarship opportunities, so Corrine had to rely on financial aid to cover her tuition costs, which included mostly student loans. She was also, as a transfer student, unable to apply for the First Scholars scholarship or other fellowships. As a transfer student, Corrine felt that she didn't receive a lot of support or guidance upon arrival, so she had to do a lot of navigating on her own. She also

struggled with connecting to campus because she couldn't afford to live on campus and she worked full time. Academically, Corrine really enjoyed her coursework but often doubted her academic ability. Additionally, she felt that many professors assigned a lot of busy work, which was a lot different than what she was accustomed to in community college where professors understood that students were possibly working full time. Corrine's biggest struggle was balancing a full work schedule with a full course load; this took a toll on her overall physical and mental health. In terms of making connections, Corrine's work schedule limited her free time to attend club meetings or extracurricular activities that could lead to building connections with other students. Corrine's experiences have been more challenging than not, but despite her challenges, Corrine remains positive and persistent as she prepares for graduation.

Follow up Interviews and Focus Group

Following each individual interview, a digital transcript was configured by zoom. I reformatted and edited each transcript while listening in order to correct misspelled and missing words that may have been left out of the recording. I then reformatted each document into two columns on a page where the left side reflected the recorded interview conversation, and the right side was left blank for observation, notes, and questions. This method was helpful to clearly capture my thoughts, observations, codes, and questions while I reviewed each transcript. After each interview, participants were emailed a copy of their transcript to review. Additionally, each participant was asked to participate in a follow up interview where I would ask tailored questions regarding their interview; they were also invited to participate in an optional focus group. As mentioned previously, data for this study was collected during a time when universities pivoted to a full virtual or hybrid model of instruction which I termed, "Covid-19 semesters." During this time students were fatigued with virtual interactions and virtual platforms; as a result,

participants were given the option to respond to follow up questions via email in lieu of an additional follow-up meeting on zoom. This strategy proved successful as many students appreciated the option, but still opted to meet virtually.

The follow-up interview fulfilled a few purposes: (a) to clarify any mis-heard statements from the recording, (b) to ask additional questions that arose while reflecting on the initial interview, and (c) to give the participant the opportunity to make any additional statements to their interview. By nature of a virtual interview, there were several instances where there was a weak internet connection and participant responses were muffled, left out, or hard to understand; the follow-up interview helped me to reference a specific moment in the transcribed conversation and to ask the participant for correction or clarification. Follow-up interviews also allowed study participants to reflect on the time elapsed since our interview that may have yielded additional experiences pertinent to the study.

Lastly, focus groups provided an opportunity for member checking and trustworthiness. I had hoped to use focus groups as a strategy to provide feedback on my initial analyses while giving study participants an opportunity to share experiences with each other. I invited study participants to register for one of three focus groups that would take place virtually. Participation in the focus group was also completely voluntary. However, only three participants registered to participate in the focus group and only two attended. While the lack of participation greatly limited my data here, I was able to glean some helpful insight. In addition to being first generation, both participants were also low-income and were working to cover their expenses. However, the difference in their experience was one participant's ability to live on campus first before moving off campus. She shared that living on campus was very helpful to her ability to connect to campus. The other participant shared that due to a lack of on campus housing for

transfer students, she didn't have the opportunity to live on campus, nor could she afford it. Without additional scholarship support or their family's ability to support them financially, I realized that while many of their experiences were in part connected to being first-generation, those experiences were exacerbated by also being low-income. Overall, the most important part of the focus group was being able to provide an opportunity for these two participants to connect. This was particularly important during the pandemic semester and it really created a space for these two students to share their experiences and learn that they had many common challenges and success as students at Hamilton.

Researcher's Reflective Journal and Notes

During each interview I took attentive notes as participants responded to each interview question. I was careful not to get distracted with attempting to capture the participant's full response because I was taping the interviews; instead, I focused more on their body language or non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, physical reactions to questions, emotions, key words, and general observations. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), observations should be highly descriptive and reflective. My interview notes consisted of initial thoughts or reactions to the participants' responses, as well as questions I wanted to follow up on. Following each interview, I would spend a few moments reflecting on the interview, jotting down my reactions, emotions, and thoughts. This reflection and the notes I wrote in my reflexive journal helped me process my thoughts and think about the ways in which the research process was impacting me as a researcher.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the interviews and focus group qualitatively. Data analysis “involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so you can figure out what you have learned and make sense of what you have experienced” (Glesne, 2016, p. 183). Using a constant comparative method, I began to analyze initial interviews while continuing to collect additional data. Substantively, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that “data analysis is a complex procedure that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation. These meanings or understandings or insights constitute the findings of a study” (p. 202). My data analysis process consisted of four steps: (1) reading the transcripts for key statements, words, and my researcher’s notes, (2) recording key statements from each interview into a spreadsheet, (3) recording common statements onto a large chart to identify categories, and (4) using categories to identify themes. During this process, I proceeded to go back and forth between transcripts and descriptive notes. This process allowed me to identify common themes in a step-by-step manner.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the ability of the researcher to collect reliable and credible data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that “it is the training, experience, and intellectual rigor of the researcher then, that determines the credibility of a qualitative research study” (p. 260). Being trustworthy involves carefully considering the methods and behaviors of the researcher, as well as the methods utilized to collect and analyze data throughout a study. Maintaining a high standard of trustworthiness is important and it requires a high level of transparency and integrity when conducting interviews, interpreting, and analyzing data. To assure the trustworthiness of

this study, I implemented the following strategies: reflexivity, member checking, and collaboration with participants. Below I will share details of how I implemented these trustworthiness measures.

Reflexivity entails the researcher reflecting critically and deeply on the ways in which their experiences or background might impact the study. By reflecting on these experiences and connections, the researcher is able to share any potential biases and beliefs, as well as how they control for these, thus allowing readers to have a better sense of why the researcher comes to the conclusions they do (Creswell, 2016). As an employee of Hamilton University, I am cognizant of the assumptions or biases that might impact this study. To address and control for these possible biases I maintained a reflexivity journal; collecting notes and thoughts of critical reflection throughout this process. Journaling allowed me a space for the researcher to reflect on the questions, interactions, and overall reflections (Glesne, 2016). For example, in my journal, I wrote about having negative preconceived notions about white female sorority members due to previous experiences with other Hamilton students. After meeting with participant Meagan, I wrote “I was instantly turned off when she mentioned sorority...why is that?” There were two participants who shared that they were members of sororities during their interviews. Following each of their interviews, I reached out to ask follow-up questions to learn more about their interest in joining their organizations and how the experience of joining impacted them. Each participant was very open and honest about both the positives and negatives involved with joining a sorority at Hamilton, but they’ve both taken interest in using their membership to make positive changes within their organizations.

Member checking entails the researcher following up with research participants to assure the information gathered is indeed accurate according to the participants. “Member checking is

when the researcher takes back to the participants their themes or entire stories and asks whether the themes or stories are an accurate representation of their responses” (Creswell, 2016, p. 192). I utilized the strategy of member checking in two ways. First, I sent individualized follow-up emails to participants to ask them to clarify or expand upon issues they discussed in their interviews. I gave them transcripts of their interviews, alongside my preliminary list of themes, for them to comment upon. Second, I invited participants to focus groups, though only two students participated. Participants were given over a week to review their transcripts prior to beginning the focus group.

As a final means of ensuring trustworthiness, I collaborated with participants by asking for their recommendations on how I might use my findings. Creswell (2016) explains that this strategy helps the researcher to “check in with participants and involve them in key decisions in the research process” (p. 192). Since this study is centered on first-generation student experiences specifically at Hamilton University, I felt it was important to allow them opportunities to share input on ways to improve their experiences at Hamilton.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I outlined the research methodology I used in this study, beginning with an overview of basic qualitative research methodology. I provided a brief description of a pilot study that I conducted prior to conducting this dissertation study. I described my methods in detail, from participant recruitment, to data collection, and data analysis. I also provided brief participant profiles to provide insight and context to study participants. Finally, I addressed the issue of trustworthiness as it relates to this study. My research study findings and themes will be presented in the two remaining chapters. Chapter 5 will consist of discussions connecting my findings to the literature on first-generation student experiences. That concluding chapter will

also answer my research questions, discuss their implications, and end with reflections and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

For this study, I interviewed thirteen first generation students to gain a better understanding of their academic and social experiences at Hamilton University. I also conducted a follow-up focus group with three participants. These student stories are important because in addition to being first-generation college students, they are also non-cohorted students. This means they are not connected to any specific scholarship or fellowship program sponsored by the university. We know less about this group of students than those who go through cohorts that provide resources and support for first-generation students.

Understanding the experiences of non-cohorted FGC students can help guide other universities who are developing and building support programming for first-generation students on their campus. Additionally, practitioners who are looking to improve support for this population of students can glean from these student experiences to inform their programmatic efforts.

I organize my findings from the interviews into four categories: preparation for college; influence of high school preparation, race, and family income on experiences; how it feels to be first generation; and barriers and needs of non-cohorted first generation students. Drawing from interview transcripts of students' experiences and understandings, in this chapter, I discuss how study participants prepared for college, experienced academic and social life on campus, reflected on their first-generation college student identity at Hamilton University, and finally, the barriers they identified and how they articulated their needs. I end this final section with a list of suggested programmatic or institutional improvements, as suggested by study participants, to better serve first generation students.

Preparation for College

Preparation for college includes a bevy of elements such as taking rigorous high school courses, practicing successful behaviors such as good study habits, understanding the college application process (college knowledge), and navigating college expectations. College knowledge can be understood as “the information and skills that allow students to successfully navigate the complex college admissions and financial aid process, as well as develop an understanding of college norms and culture” (Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca, 2009, p.190). This topic is important because the level of college preparation or lack thereof directly impacts the ways in which students prepare for, and transition to, college. However, first generation students are likely unaware how underprepared they might be for college. Additionally, college preparation also informs how students perform academically and navigate the college system. Study participants shared their experiences with navigating the application process, choosing a university to attend, applying for scholarships, and adjusting to college level coursework and expectations.

High School Academics

One of the first steps to college preparation is understanding the importance of academic rigor and the necessity of having access to and enrolling in rigorous courses. Nelson and Moses (2014) assert that being prepared for college, or being college ready, means that students must be academically and socially prepared to succeed in college-level academics and not need to enroll in remedial course work. Additionally, students need to be equipped with the necessary soft skills that show a level of readiness, such as responsibility, accountability, study skills, help-seeking behaviors, and a general understanding of how to navigate college. This sort of

wherewithal falls under the umbrella of college knowledge. Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) describe how understanding first-generation college students as learners is “an equity issue because while first generation college students are a heterogeneous population a significant portion of this group is composed of students who are racially minoritized” (p. 140). This means higher education institutions must consider a students’ intersecting identities, life circumstances, academic background, and access to rigorous learning experiences when evaluating their learning outcomes, particularly if those students are from historically marginalized populations. Access to rigorous courses such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or Dual Enrollment has been shown to correlate positively to postsecondary enrollment and academic transition (Chapman et al., 2016).

When asked about their college preparation and high school experiences, including courses taken during high school, all study participants shared that they had taken at least one honors course, some AP courses, dual enrollment courses, or were enrolled in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Only one participant shared that they had only taken one honors course in high school total. Describing her experience, Erin shared that in preparation for college, she knew that she had to take a lot of honors and AP courses to have a chance at earning scholarships because she understood the level of financial difficulty she would face with affording college. Two study participants shared that they transferred from larger public high schools to smaller private or charter schools that had a focus on college preparation to increase their chances of being admitted to college and to earn scholarships. Jonna shared that after middle school she begged her grandparents to enroll her in a college preparatory private high school because she believed she’d have more opportunities for college as a student there:

High school was interesting. I went to public school all my life until high school and then I convinced my grandparents to let me go to private school for high school. I went to a college prep high school and it was a lot harder than public school. I really enjoyed it. I liked all my friends that I made, the opportunities that it gave me, and it just opened me up to so many more things I didn't know was out there.

Alternatively, Jen mentioned that she'd only taken one honors course and didn't do well in it. Jen shared that she wasn't a strong student academically, and her guidance counselor didn't push her to enroll in more upper-level courses. Jen knew that as a student who wasn't academically strong, she had to rely on an athletic scholarship as her way into college, which is how she arrived at Hamilton.

Some participants who only took honors courses and no dual enrollment courses expressed a challenging transition into college academics. They struggled to develop successful habits related to organization, study skills, and time management. Students who took AP courses in high school and elected to major in a STEM subject, reported to struggle tremendously with adjusting specifically to college level Biology or Anatomy due to a lack of study skills. For example, Ryen mentioned that "Chemistry was definitely the hardest class I've taken like in my life so far at that point but I just kind of learned my study habits." Similarly, McKenna reflected, "Academically it sucked. I came in as a STEM major – I didn't love the STEM department here – I took CHEM my first semester and it brutalized me as well as some of my other friends. We were just taking fat L's first semester. The first year, was hard." "Taking a fat L" refers to consistently failing exams or assignments throughout the semester.

College Knowledge

In addition to academic preparation, many first-generation college students prepare for college through participation in college access programs such as TRIO or community-based programs that are set up to expose students to collegiate experiences. Through participation in these programs, students receive support to learn about the college application process and develop college knowledge. College access programs may also help students strengthen the non-cognitive skills that are essential for college success including (but not limited to) “behaviors that reflect greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control – study skills, work habits, time management, help-seeking behavior, and social problem-solving skills” (Roderick, Nagoaka & Coca, 2009, p. 190). College access programs help low-income students and or first-generation students gain exposure to role models, mentors, college campuses, and experiences that will influence their collegiate aspirations or perspective. Further, college access programs often help to increase college awareness and social skill development, provide campus visitations and cultural enrichment, and academic skill training (Bloom & Lang, 2008).

Among my participants, only one mentioned being part of a college access program which she referred to as a “leadership program.” Erica shared that the program took them on college visits, provided mentors, and taught them leadership skills. Alternatively, three participants attended college preparatory high schools that supported them through the college application process. Their high school provided a college counselor, college campus tours, access to leadership opportunities, and information sessions about financial preparation for college. One participant noted that, “In the Academy, I received a little bit more support than your average Drake high school student.” She attended a collegiate STEM academy that was housed within another large and predominantly African American high school. In the Academy,

school counselors were able to spend more time with students since their case load was much smaller in the Academy than with the general student body. When other participants were asked about their participation in college access programs or the like, they shared that they either didn't feel the need to participate or there weren't any such programs available.

The support of high school staff is vital to the college application process. Students often lean on school counselors or college advisors (if available) for guidance when applying to college. It is safe to presume that some high schools have a stronger college-going culture than others; in such schools there is great emphasis on applying to college and providing support throughout that process. Jen shared that "there was no college help with applying. I guess if you wanted it and you really sought it out, I guess they would help you, but it wasn't really offered or pushed." Erin also shared a similar experience with her school counselor: "I pretty much did everything on my own. I would talk to my counselor, but he wasn't super helpful. The most he did was wrote a letter of recommendation for me and that was about it." Other participants shared comparable experiences of only using their school counselors for letters of recommendation. However, participants shared that they relied heavily on college support from their teachers. Erin was interested in applying to music programs at colleges that required two applications, performance portfolios, and sometimes an audition tape. She shared that her music and theater teachers were tremendously helpful with finding programs and scholarships for her to apply to.

Support During College Process

For many students, relying on the support and advice from teachers is their only option, and when school staff aren't available, many students rely on themselves to do college research. Several study participants reflected on their college application process of doing it all alone.

Although she was enrolled in an IB program at her public school, Meagan shared that “there was zero college prep... and her high school didn’t provide many resources.” Brian shared that there weren’t “any college access programs near us.” Alternatively, when schools do have college counselors in house, support might look differently depending on the size of the school population and resources available. Mia shared that there was a school counselor present during her junior year of high school and the most helpful resource she provided was “helping us make a brag sheet to give to teachers to help them write letters of recommendation... at the end of the day, I feel like I still did a lot on my own.” Other participants and their families used their network to garner support during the college application process. For example, in addition to using her school guidance counselor, Jenna shared that “my parents didn’t go to college they were really big on staying involved in the process and they reached out to family friends who had kids that went to school.”

Like Jenna, some students have parents who were able to reach out to their network to help their children with the college application process. Other students have parents who were able to help guide them through the process or help with elements of the application like the college essay. For example, Richard shared that his mother helped find colleges for him and, because she was great at writing, she helped write his college essay. However, if families have the financial means, some students have access to private college counselors that might develop personal college lists, revise essays, and suggest scholarships for students to apply to.

Participants like Ryen and Meagan were able to afford private college counselors to help with their application process. Ryen stated “she edited my essay and told me which schools to tour”, and Meagan’s family paid over \$3,000 for the services of a private college counselor. Each participant shared that their families found these services through their network of friends. It’s

important to note here that first generation doesn't always mean high financial need. Only six out of the thirteen study participants reported their family incomes as being low or extremely low, which is \$44,000 or less. Meagan and Ryen reported that their family was middle income, which can be anywhere between \$40,000 and \$130,000. This income, partnered with other factors such as being the only child, allowed for more financial capital to help provide additional support. For this study, I was unable to acquire official income data information for first-generation students at Hamilton University; the figures I have were reported by the students. Alternatively, participants like Erica, whose parents have no connections, expressed that she was "coming from a low-income school, so I took what I could get and ran with it."

Students had a variety of experiences leading up to and during their college application process in high school. Many participants expressed frustration with the lack of support they received from school staff, while others just assumed that it was their job to do the research on their own. The notion of self-reliance continually rose to the surface through many participant's responses. This internalized belief of "doing it on my own" created challenges that some students wouldn't have experienced had they reached out for help or had adequate access to resources and support to utilize. Some shared that they reached out to family members or friends of family that may have attended some college, but overwhelmingly, many participants struggled from a lack of information and misinformation surrounding the college application process. This was particularly the case for students who were extremely low-income and had little college-going or social capital.

As an example of a student who struggled some during the application process, Corrine shared that she assumed she wouldn't be able to afford to go to a four-year college, so she decided to go to community college. She applied to a few private universities within the area but,

even with the scholarship she was awarded, she wasn't able to afford the tuition. Corrine attended a local community college immediately after high school, worked full time, and paid for it all herself. Corrine shared, "I got a scholarship to go to Lenoir-Rhyne but I still couldn't afford to go, so I ended up working after high school – I worked two jobs – one was a minimum wage job at the mall and the other one was at Lowes." Corrine could have benefited from the support of a guidance counselor's expertise on how to read award letters, apply for scholarships, and make wise financial decisions about college. A college advisor might have informed students like Corrine that applying to schools like Lenoir-Rhyne, a private university that doesn't meet 100% of demonstrated financial need, is not the best financial choice for low-income students. Like the college application process, applying for scholarships is another challenging task for students that takes knowledge and strategy to be effective. Students who are savvy enough to crack the scholarship code can be very successful, but for others it can seem like a daunting task to impossible to conquer.

Scholarship Search

The scholarship search can be tricky, especially for students with little to no guidance. The scholarship search is almost like a twisted corn maze: in order to be the most successful you have to have guidance and a strategy for how to navigate the vast playing field. Many students searching for college funding focus on national scholarships that are usually the big dollar scholarships, and they can get lucky sometimes. However, the average student is less likely to be awarded those scholarships when they're competing against Harvard-level applicants. Thus, college advisors typically counsel students to apply for a mixture of scholarships, including local; those specific to a city, state, or town; and collegiate merit-based scholarships that are connected to the colleges and universities they're applying to. Participants like Eva never had a

chance at local scholarships because she moved to Virginia from Michigan. Eva reflects, “It was really frustrating at times, so I had to find a lot of the scholarships that I applied to myself. Even though I went to the guidance office, most of the scholarships were based on sports or what elementary school you went to in that area and I didn't grow up in Roanoke so I didn't qualify for a lot of the local scholarships.” For students like Eva, with a bit more guidance to help her strategically search and apply for scholarships, she might have been a bit more successful in her quest for funding. Like other students seeking to attend private schools, Eva sought after those highly coveted merit-based scholarship and fellowship awards at Hamilton. To cover her expenses, Eva is working multiple on campus jobs during the school year and working full-time during the summer. She received a small scholarship from the university; this helps with some of her cost of attendance and the rest is covered with student loans.

Hamilton University has a longstanding scholarship that was established to support first generation college students with high financial need. The First Scholars program meets financial need through scholarships, university grants, and some small loans. This program also brings scholarship recipients in as a cohort of about 45 students and provides them with ongoing support through professional staff, peer mentors, and tailored programming throughout their time at the university. As part of their interview, I asked each study participant if they were aware of the First Scholars Scholarship opportunity and whether they applied for it or not. Participant responses were diverse, with several of them admitting to applying for the scholarship but ultimately not progressing past the first round of interviews. Two participants were transfer students and were not eligible to apply for the First Scholars program, as the scholarship is only available to incoming freshman. Other responses were accompanied with either underlying tones of indifference, regret, or even bitterness toward the application process overall.

There was a common theme among participants from families with a slightly higher income: since their financial need wasn't as great compared to the financial need of others, they were less likely to have applied for the scholarship. Those participants shared statements similar to "my parents told me to pick the school that I want and not to worry about the rest." Richard seemed indifferent when asked about the First Scholars program. He responded, "I didn't apply, I think there was a financial part that I didn't qualify for." Richard disclosed that his family was middle income, but he did not elaborate on available financial resources for college. Richard also has an older brother in college who is completing his junior year at a local state school. Jenna, another student from a middle-income household, shared a similar statement: "I did not apply for the scholarship, I think it was because of time and I was already applying for another major scholarship at the same time, so my parents just told me to look at that [scholarship opportunity]." Other study participants simply weren't aware of the First Scholars program scholarship. Jen, a student-athlete who was awarded an athletic scholarship to cover her expenses, admitted to never hearing about the First Scholars program until I mentioned it during our interview. Similarly, Catherine also was not aware of the scholarship, as she offered, "Unfortunately, I didn't know about scholarship program until my 2nd year - I wish I would've known in like senior year of high school." For these participants, it's possible that the financial need wasn't as great. These participants also could've received other private scholarships beyond the university. In the college admissions realm, there is a saying that some families are in a better position financially and can "afford" to go into more debt than others if necessary.

For other participants, like McKenna, the college application and scholarship process were overwhelming. As an out-of-state student from the west coast, McKenna's college enrollment was dependent upon some form of scholarship award. During college application

season, students are inundated with information and it is often difficult to decipher between what's important and what's not. When asked about applying, McKenna shared "I didn't apply, and it is one of my biggest regrets at Hamilton because I remember seeing it a couple times, but I didn't realize how important it was. Hamilton has a very few select scholarship programs and they only apply to people when they come in and once you don't have anything you're kind of screwed." McKenna's statement is one part of the reason some other participant responses were laced with bitterness. The opportunity to earn scholarship money significant enough to offset tuition, room, and board dwindles after the freshman year admission process. If students fail to land a scholarship or fellowship at the time of admission during their first year, there are fewer opportunities to earn funds afterward.

Some other participants seemed a bit jaded based on their assumption that many scholarship programs are for "poor kids" and the supposition that students with high financial need have to pimp their trauma or hardships to garner attention from scholarship committees. Mia said she applied but learned from her friends who received the scholarship that they "knew it was a need-based hardship program so I kind of played on that fact... gave them my life story and cried a little bit on the phone," and Mia didn't. Mia believed that, because she didn't speak about her hardships in detail, she wasn't awarded the scholarship. Meagan shared that she also applied for the scholarship because she wanted a smaller community within her larger Hamilton community. Unfortunately, Meagan was also unsuccessful and felt that she "wasn't poor enough." Other participants also mentioned various factors that may have influenced their not receiving a scholarship. Jonna shared, "I applied but I was stressed out during the interview process because I'd never done anything like that before." For participants who depended on scholarship dollars to afford college, not receiving a scholarship impacted their college

experiences. Some participants had to take on multiple on and off campus jobs to help cover their college expenses and to begin to pay off student loans. Working multiple jobs while being enrolled as a full-time student has an impact on the academic and social college experiences.

Influence of High School Preparation, Race, and Family Income on Experiences

Transitioning into college academics and into the college space is only one element of conquering college. The ability and wherewithal to navigate the college academic space entails a unique set of skills students must master to be successful. These include practicing good study habits, exercising help-seeking behaviors, utilizing resources, developing strong communication skills, and experiencing a level of comfort interacting with professors. Three major academic challenges for study participants were time management, adjusting to a new style of learning and expectations, and dealing with the unexpected.

Three participants who attended college preparatory schools seemed to have an easier time adjusting to college expectations when it came to time management as opposed to others who struggled with their new course schedule. Jenna, who is a communication major and attended a college prep high school, shared “I was already used to time management. It was nice just having two classes a day, and a nice adjustment of just being able to have only four classes to focus on.” Alternatively, Jen, who attended a large public high school and majored in environmental studies shared:

My biggest challenge was managing my schedule... I was very disorganized and I could never keep up with what was due when or where I had to be. Not only that, with trying to get assignments done and trying to manage practice and meetings and then struggling to keep up academically. I've never been the smartest person and I've always needed some support from my professors to keep me on track. So that was a learning curve of how to

deal with that. And then just like the pressure to perform like on the team and classroom for the team.

Time management was also difficult for freshman Richard who, in response to my question about challenges, shared “I guess organizing time because I have a lot of stuff to do and so it's a lot like now that my classes aren't like from 7 to 2 every day, it's kind of hard to find like okay... what do I have to fit in between these two classes so it's definitely a different experience.”

Adjusting to a new style of learning and expectations from professors was a common challenge for study participants. These expectations included having access to new materials, purchasing software with no prior notice, or what they felt like were excessive numbers of assignments. In terms of financial struggles, sophomore Erin shared:

Academically, sometimes it's hard. The teachers and professors they sometimes don't always understand unless you go and talk to the person and be like hey, you know it's going to be another week before I can have this textbook because I don't get paid 'til next week. Or a lot of times they'll expect you to be able to have all these things and put this money down like boom- boom- boom right away and it's like... I *could*...but give me a week or two and then I can pay for it. So academically, I feel like I haven't had problems like that but if there's been anything holding me back, it's been finding a way to afford everything for my academics.

Transfer student Corrine shared a similar experience with adjusting from community college professors to university professors. She reflected upon struggling with learning the new style of teaching and academic expectations of college professors:

The major difference at the community college ... people go to CC because they are working at the same time, so your professors don't give you as much like busy work

outside of class, or if they do give you like major projects, there's only a couple and they're spread out because they know that you don't have time, like you have other responsibilities. College professors have this idea that you don't have anything else to do with your time besides hang out with your friends or go to a party or whatever. So, [they assume that] you have all the time to do these projects and that's not true in my case... so it felt like a lot of unnecessary work.

Additionally, for Corrine, working while enrolled as a full-time student was essential for her. She went on to share the guilt that accompanies the disclaimer she gives to each of her professors at the beginning of each semester. She explained that, when she introduces herself to professors, she asks about their late policy and explains her work schedule may not always allow for assignments to be submitted on time. Unfortunately, many low-income college students share Corrine's plight. She often wonders what it would be like to be able to just focus on school and not worry about money.

While students commonly struggle with challenges of time management and adjusting to the new expectations of the college academic space, other students wrestle with issues they cannot easily prepare for such as incidences of racial bias. McKenna, an Asian American female, began college as a business major. Coming from a very racially and socioeconomically diverse community in California, she'd never been around so much affluence until coming to Hamilton University. She shared a different type of challenge that many students of color are more likely to experience at a predominantly white college or university. She recalled the following experience during one of her first-year economics courses:

I'd have conversations with people in my business classes and when you look around, I'm the only person of color. I remember a convo in my ECON class about the recession and

they made a blanket statement that was like... well we were all hit pretty equally by the recession, and I made the point that it depended on what field your parents worked in... and he's like yeah...in finance, like all of our parents. He was basically implying and assuming that everyone's family was in finance. And that's kind of how people are, I think people kind of assume you have equal or semi equal money to them.

Similarly, Mia, an African American female, shared a comparable experience with a professor during her first year of college when she was the only student of color enrolled in the course. She recalls incidences when the professor would critique her work and not offer any means of improving the work when asked. Additionally, she reflected on a time when she did a group project and everyone received a higher grade than she did. When she asked the professor for clarification, she was given a vague explanation. She explained how she felt confused, discouraged, and intimidated by this faculty member whom she later reported to the Dean of the school. Mia described her experience:

The academic style is different ... I think everybody says you remember your first professor is like a little... not racist but, a little prejudice when it comes to having students of color. And I could not do well in her class... and like of course, in high school, it was ingrained to get good grades you know... get A's and B's and get a high GPA. I think I ended her class with like a B+ and looking back, I'm like oh, that's not that bad, but I was devastated - I didn't know what I did wrong.

For other study participants, academic course work was not a significant challenge, unless they were STEM courses, which I mentioned in the section about transitioning to college. However, additional common academic challenges that participants spoke briefly about were the following: reluctance to ask for help, intimidation around interactions with faculty/staff

members, not using resources or the resources not being helpful, not knowing how to study and struggling to learn how to study, and placing too much emphasis on making all As and adjusting personal expectations.

Low-income study participants were more likely to express reluctance toward reaching out to faculty/staff for help; these students were also more likely to exhibit a stronger sense of self-reliance. Although low-income students were reluctant to reach out to faculty and staff initially, once a rapport was established, they were more comfortable with asking for help. Alternatively, study participants who were of higher income were more likely to be more comfortable with reaching out to their professors for help early on. Study participants generally were less likely to utilize university resources or faculty/staff as their first option for help. They often mentioned utilizing a friend network or upperclassmen peers such as Resident Assistants before a professor or staff member.

Self-reliance can also be connected to both pride and shame when avoiding help seeking behaviors. Students expressed a sense of pride to be doing school “on my own”. Thus, needing help could possibly tarnish that Medal of Honor or label them as being less independent and incapable. Some viewed asking for help as a sign of failure. Some FGCSs would rather struggle on their own before asking for assistance while navigating their challenge. Additionally, students may also feel intimidated by affluence, race, and class which could also impact one’s level of confidence and comfortability when they’re a minority in a space. Students of color in this study shared they were often the only minority representative in their class and were less likely to speak up in class. McCoy (2014) describes students as intimidated and overwhelmed by whiteness and affluence on private college campuses. Low-income student responses, particularly white students, were connected to feelings of shame and feeling less-than other

affluent white students. Initially, these students were more likely to isolate and maintain friendships separate from the campus body. Over time, however, they became more comfortable with their surroundings.

Lastly, participants struggled to adjust their academic expectations for college. For most first year students, switching from a high school mindset of ‘I must earn all As’ to grasping a new college mindset of truly digesting information is a challenge. While students rarely struggled with academic content, many of the low-income first-generation study participants struggled with the level of pressure participants placed on themselves regarding their college performance and success. For low-income students, being unsuccessful in college wasn’t an option because they felt pressure to do well with hopes of changing their family’s financial standing. Whether this pressure was self-imposed or not, college was a means to end their family’s financial challenge and several study participants felt it was their responsibility to do so. Alternatively, participants who were from higher income families were less likely to mention feeling familial pressure to do well in school; of course, they were expected to get good grades, but there wasn’t an overwhelming felt sense of pressure. Since the financial need wasn’t as dire in comparison to low-income study participants, these students were less likely to connect college success with their family survival.

Overall, study participants felt more academically prepared for college than other aspects of college life such as college culture, adjusting to affluence and wealth disparities, and utilizing help-seeking behaviors. Unlearning high school behaviors and adjusting to the new rules of affluent college culture can be a learning curve for many first-generation students. Student responses expressed the importance of college preparation beyond academic success. Being

equipped with help-seeking behaviors, and one's overall confidence in navigating a new culture, could help first generation students be more prepared to adjust to campus life.

Social Experiences

Arriving to campus can produce a mixture of emotions. Students generally feel excited yet anxious about fitting into their new environment, being away from their family, leaving their friends from home behind, and making new friends. In this section, I address how study participants' social experiences varied and were influenced by race and income. I also discuss the university's role in providing support and a sense of belonging on the Hamilton campus.

When asked to describe their social experiences at Hamilton University, I specifically asked participants to think back to the first semester of their first year. For three participants, this study took place during the first semester of their first year. For many participants who lived on campus, their social experiences were similar. They expressed feeling welcomed, however, finding friends was challenging for some. For those participants who were white, traditional students (non-transfer), and middle income, the process of finding friends who looked like them was simple because the student population at Hamilton University is predominantly white. Participants shared they were able to bond with their roommates, and some joined clubs or sororities where they connected with upperclassmen. Students are eligible to rush some sororities and fraternities (predominantly white organizations) as early as second semester of their freshman year and many freshmen take advantage of this opportunity to connect or make friends. Others made friends by connecting with other students on their hall, or within their housing neighborhood through community events.

On campus, there are a wealth of opportunities to socially connect and mingle with other students, either through housing, campus events, or interests. Unfortunately, students who were

on campus or began their freshman year in 2020 had a more limited social experience. Campus activities came to a standstill at the onset of Covid-19 which postponed all on campus programming and social gathering for the fall semester. Student activities were moved to virtual experiences and all social gatherings were limited to very small numbers of people. Study participants who were first year students expressed their frustrations with the social limitations, as Covid-19 regulations derailed their ideal college experience. However, they were grateful to be on campus when other college campuses sent students home for the duration of the academic year.

Students of color, however, described a different social experience and had to take a few extra steps to find community. Mia, an African American female, shared:

I was the only black girl on my floor in my dorm freshman year and there was one other black girl that lived on my floor, and I was like YES, so we're going to be friends, and she's literally my roommate now. So, I just hung around her and her group of friends, and we all just became like a little group but that was really how I made friends. So, for people who maybe don't have someone as extroverted to bring them in, it will be very difficult.

As Mia stated, for students who aren't very out-going, it can be a challenge to make friends, especially for students of color at predominantly white colleges and universities. This is also true for students who might be feeling a little homesick. For students like Brian, a Latinx male, it was very helpful to attend events hosted by his on-campus residence hall, or to find student organizations that spoke to his interests. Brian, shared the following experience:

I had a pretty hard time my first year – I kind of held on a little too tight to my friends back home. So going to the meetings of organizations really helped me to meet people

similar to me. And even going to neighborhood events helped me meet kids who were first gens as well.

Jonna, a biracial female, thought making friends with her roommate would be a simple task.

Jonna shared, “I was struggling because I didn't get along that well with my freshman year roommate at first and it was hard seeing all my friends with their roommates.” During the second semester of her freshman year, Jonna joined a sorority and found it easier to make connections with other members of the group. She never became close friends with her roommate. Similarly, Erica, a Latinx female, found her community through an on-campus job and shared the following experience:

I work at the Center for Diversity and I work specifically with the Latinx Community so I found sort of my niche there. They have a lot of people that identify as students of color, low income, first generation, bi-lingual... there's a lot of people there similar to my background that understand these struggles of feeling like you don't belong at this sort of elite university and being ok with that feeling...and feeling empowered. So, I feel like at work... I feel very at home.

For study participants who were first generation and low income, or who were first generation, low income, and a transfer student, they did not have the privilege of time and money to socialize with others. While enrolled as full-time students, these students were also working two to three jobs to help cover their college expenses. Corrine curtly stated that “whenever you're working so much it's really hard to make friends.” And sadly, another fellow transfer student quickly realized that the college experience she'd hoped for is something she wouldn't be able to have; she says:

As far as having that typical college experience, initially that's what I wanted, but I just had to come to the realization that that wasn't for me... it wasn't going to happen because I'm low income. I have to have jobs in order to make it through college.

Erica's comments struck me and forced me to think deeply about who gets to have a "typical" college experience. It's unfortunate that, for students like Erica and Corrine, they often have to choose between merely surviving college to achieve the degree and taking advantage of all the experiences college has to offer.

Erin provided a great summation of her social challenges when she arrived at Hamilton: Socially I struggled. The first couple of weeks I'm having to try and find a group that I fit in with because it was the same thing of people wanting to go... like oh let's go get coffee, let's go get all these extra things I'm like ok, I'll come along but you know... not buy anything. And sometimes it was just, I didn't really want to come along because I didn't want to be that person who felt like they were imposing if someone noticed I hadn't bought anything or like offered to pay for me. But having to explain you know... my situation just made kind of want to avoid people for the first couple of weeks.

Fortunately, because of the Living Learning Community and the first gen community, and music program, I was able to reach out a bit. It was about a month and a half before I really found a group of friends.

Erin's reflections are powerful and show the impact of social class on small daily interactions on a college campus. Expressed feelings of shame and embarrassment only came up for two other participants who were low-income white females. One of those participants was also a transfer student, and the other was from the local community which surrounds Hamilton University. They each spoke about moments where they had to work in order to be able to afford to

participate in certain activities. The participant from the local community reflected on a moment when her older car broke down in front of a major crossing in the middle of a class change. She said she was so ashamed and never felt “more like a poor hick” in her life. For low-income white students, being surrounded by affluent white students, it’s often a challenge to feel like you belong when you look like you belong but can’t afford to belong.

Further, transfer student participants shared the difficulty of meeting friends through their majors. Typically, when a transfer student arrives, they’ve completed one or two years of college at another university and enter directly into their major courses. Unfortunately, at a smaller university, current students within a particular major, especially if the major is small such as German, have built a rapport with each other by taking the same courses together over time. When a transfer student arrives, the comradery and friendships are already established. This can make it challenging to connect, especially if the transfer student is also working part-time jobs. In addition to the diverse social experiences of study participants, students were also affected by other factors that had an impact on them socially. Several participants disclosed that their emotional wellbeing and mental health played a part in the inability to connect with the university completely. For example, Jenna shared:

I was also going through a lot with my mental health so that played a big part in me belonging. First, I thought Hamilton wasn't for me, but I realized that other stuff was going on after I started talking to a therapist; I realized that it was more internal stuff and not the school. I thought I didn't fit at Hamilton and I thought it wasn't the right place for me and I was so upset and wanted to transfer. I just felt like whatever I was doing it was just a distraction. I was still very unhappy and I automatically blamed it on the school.

Participants also shared that many of the social challenges they faced, such as unhappiness, depression, and loneliness were partly due to untreated and undiagnosed mental health concerns. Due to the impact of Covid and university restrictions on gathering, students were much more isolated during the school year, which likely exacerbated feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Students were encouraged to limit their social interactions with other students and were not allowed to gather in large numbers. If they contracted Covid-19, they were placed in isolation for two weeks. Students were also encouraged not to travel home while at school, so many of them were also isolated from their families. The university provides counseling services free of charge to students and two study participants shared that they didn't address their mental health concerns until they came to college. Brian stated that he requested to see a psychologist but was made aware that this service would not be covered by his insurance and it would be an additional charge of \$150 for the first appointment and \$80 for each additional appointment. This cost would be added to his student account; he ultimately rescinded his request because he simply couldn't afford it.

Two study participants who commuted to campus reflected on feeling like outsiders. These students found it easier and more affordable to live at home with their families. While interviewing Catherine, a student from the local community, I was made aware of some existing tension between the surrounding community members and the university. According to Catherine, the university has a reputation within the community for being a place for "rich Yankees." She expressed how she was often made to feel like an outsider since so many of her classmates were from states like New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Connecticut. She recalls being asked "why did you come here, why didn't you go away to college?" Catherine provided

an interesting perspective on local students attending a university in their own back yard.

Catherine described her experiences:

I felt like kind of a fish out of water at Hamilton for like the first 2 years, like I had a marker on me for both being a first-generation college student from the county... I felt like I was infiltrating their space. I really grew up knowing about Hamilton and what I knew about it was that it's rich, it's white, and they don't look kindly upon us (county people). Oh, and it's like full of yankees (northerners). They don't like people from the south and they don't like people who aren't rich and white and that was like the idea most of us growing up in the county have of Hamilton... and then when I came to here, I was like, that's not totally true. I kind of showed up and a lot of things I thought were confirmed.

While Catherine's experiences are those of one student, it would be interesting to learn more about how local students experience college at Hamilton. In my experience with first-generation students and low-income families from the surrounding community, I've encountered families and students who've never stepped foot on Hamilton's campus before enrolling in our program. Students in our program have also exhibited reluctance to apply to Hamilton following high school at the fear of not fitting in.

Finding a sense of belonging at a college or university is often an expected challenge for any college student. However, study participants shared the many nuances and factors that may impact one's ability to make connections on a college campus, particularly if that college campus is affluent and predominantly white. Part of feeling a sense of belonging is the presence or availability of a strong support system which includes faculty and staff who offer targeted support to first generation college students. Before Fall 2020, there was no designated university

support, programming, or staff dedicated to non-cohorted first generation students at Hamilton University. First generation students who were part of the First Scholars program were provided a cohort, staff support, programming, scholarship funds, and ongoing support through college completion. However, students who weren't part of the First Scholars program did not have direct access to those resources.

In the Fall of 2020, the university hired a staff person to focus on supporting non-cohorted first-generation students. This staff person is a man of color, a first-generation college student, and an alumnus of the university. Study participants who were upperclassmen at the time of their participation in my study reflected on university support of non-cohorted first-gen students. Mia shared, "As a first-year student here before the First-Gen Staff person, you were really on your own. But up until the first-gen office kind of existed there was really no support for first-gen students on campus." Participant responses to the arrival of a First-Gen staff person to support them were overwhelmingly positive. The office has since established a community for non-cohorted first-generation students to seek support. Erica shared, "I talk to the First-Gen Staff person a lot. We've developed sort of like a mentorship relationship, so I rely on him for a lot of advice when it comes to like how do I apply for this job, how do I build my resume, how do I go after an internship." Erin also shared, "I'm able to go to the first-gen community and the First-Gen staff person and have someone understand it's refreshing." The office shares a newsletter providing information about scholarships, leadership opportunities, campus events, and social events for students.

Overall, study participants who were students of color and low income were aware of the First-Gen support office and were appreciative of the support the office provided. It's important to note here that the four participants who disclosed having a higher income background shared

that they were aware of the First-Gen student support staff, but it wasn't an essential part of their support system at the university, and they wanted to get more involved with the First-Gen community at some point.

How it Feels to be First Generation

This third category relates to first generation identity. I reflect on how student participants navigated the nuances of the college experience, and what it felt like during that process. Each study participant had their own circumstantial elements that played a role in their academic and social experiences at Hamilton University. While participants provided a wealth of individualized experiences, there were several commonalities related to how it feels to be a non-cohorted first-generation college student at an affluent university. I describe these shared experiences in sections on Self-Reliance and No Room for Error. I then discuss their experiences more broadly.

Self-Reliance

One of the major differences between first-generation college students and students with a history of college education in their family is the presence of someone in their life who has completed a college degree. The absence of a family member who understands the realities of college life is a void that is felt when first-generation students go to college. Study participants repeatedly referred to statements such as "I'm doing this on my own," or, "there's no one before me," and, "there's no one to help me." McKenna described an early interaction with a roommate:

My first-year roommate was the epitome of the Hamilton demographic: she has money, she was on the dance squad, and [has] a very good relationship with her parents and she'd be like "oh my mom helped me with this when I got here... and I'm like... you know I

did everything but the flight right? So, it definitely sets you apart on both ends of the spectrum...I didn't have the privilege of people telling me what to do or helping me out.

Statements such as this one really struck me as students shared their feelings toward earning a college degree all on their own. For some participants, “on my own” also alluded to the lack of university support provided by the university at the time. It also meant that some students were also providing for themselves financially and even sharing financial responsibilities with their families by sending money home for bills. Jonna shared the following experience as she reflected on a moment that she felt like a first-generation college student, “It wasn't until I realized how hard certain things were to navigate – since I was the first to go. When I graduate...hopefully since I've gone through it myself and I'll be able to help my kids and hopefully that will help them with their kids and start a new line of college generation for my family.” During Jonna's interview, she spoke about completing financial aid and loan paperwork on her own. She discussed really needing someone to explain the details of her student loans:

The whole loans and money thing has been a big challenge because it stresses me out and I'm going to be in so much debt. Like after a year when tuition was raised and they didn't raise my grants either, so I had to take out more loans. I reached out to financial aid and they weren't very helpful. Even when I have like basic questions for them, they're always just very like... rude isn't the right word, but just not helpful and I mean this is annoying to say it, but it's their job to help me and guide me, and I feel like I'm being a burden by going to them with my money questions. It's just frustrating.

Jonna was raised by her grandparents and during the interview, she expressed how frustrated she felt because it seemed like no one at school could help her, and as much as her grandparents wanted to help, they couldn't. In her case, some additional financial guidance would've been

helpful as Jonna is paying for college with student loans. Luckily, she's able to save some money by living off campus, sharing rent with other students in a house, and paying for groceries instead of an expensive meal plan. With tuition and fees at Hamilton being more than \$35,000 per year, Jonna could possibly be looking at over \$100,000 in student loan debt just from her undergraduate degree alone.

Mia also expressed frustration around financial aid and loan terms like understanding the difference between a subsidized and unsubsidized student loan. She shared:

Financial aid was a really big one for me just because I know I needed it and when I first applied they weren't giving me a lot like at all. So, we went and talked to financial aid and you know, my sister kind of helped prep with things to ask them, and what to say. They had some of the EFC (estimated family contribution) copied wrong – it was a lot higher than it actually was, and so after we had that meeting with them the scholarships started to flow in. I didn't understand the loans... unsub vs sub, but I had to figure that out myself.

Mia also shared that she was initially reluctant to set up a meeting with the financial aid office. She felt that she didn't want to be a "bother" and she also didn't want her mother to ask for the availability of more scholarship money. In the end, Mia was glad she went to meet with financial aid; it was an important lesson in advocating for herself as a student that she'd implement in other aspects of her college career. However, understanding college terms linked to financial aid is directly connected to college knowledge that many first-generation students don't have. And even when they recognized the language of loans, most didn't have a good understanding about how student loan interest accumulates and the terms of paying back loans. Financial literacy was a gap for low-income students.

Being the first means that no one has paved the way, and thus, family members often cannot relate to the challenges that come with being a college student. This is especially true when one's parents are from another country. Erica, who is a first-generation American, first-generation college student, and a transfer student said, "I would try to talk to my parents about struggles and they wouldn't really know how to guide me because they grew up in Mexico and in a different time and under different economic standards." Corrine shared a similar perspective about the inability to reach out to family for help about college related things, "... another impact of being a first-gen student ... you don't have that support system at home... my family is like oh we're proud of you for going to college, but if there's anything college related, you know... like we can't help you."

Describing the importance of self-reliance, Erin, stated, "Everything's kind of figure it out as you go. So, I haven't had people ahead of me who have been like... ok here's what I've done this let me show you how to do it. Everything's kind of been like ok... what do I do now... and I have to figure it out myself." When students lack access to the appropriate means of support and guidance, it is challenging to navigate through certain college experiences and to focus on school. Jonna's frustration was palpable when she said, "I'm basically doing everything myself and learning and mapping everything myself and trying to figure things out, make ends meet on my own and it's frustrating when other people just don't get it." If students are overly stressed about finances, or navigating college challenges on their own, they are less likely to perform at their fullest academic potential and gain a full college experience.

No Room for Error

While study participants reflected on their own self-reliance, they also shared they felt an immense amount of pressure to not "mess up" the opportunity to be in college. Being the first in

their families to go to college, many study participants felt that either because of finances or opportunity, failing in college was not an option because they weren't just in school for themselves, but for their entire family. For students who are first generation and from a low-income background, obtaining a college degree is their opportunity to help bring their family out of poverty, which is a daunting responsibility for a young adult. Transfer student Corrine shared that not only does she experience pressure, but “the emotional burden of trying to make your parents proud or whoever proud like you can't ... like... its tough. You're not really going to college for just yourself, you're going to college for your parents who didn't get the opportunity to.” Two other participants, Brian and Erica, who, in addition to being first-generation college students, are also first-generation Americans, also shared similar statements like “I'm the sibling that has to make it.” In addition to the emotional burden, participants spoke about having a plan for their major before coming to college and not switching majors to avoid adding more time and expenses. Other strategies were planning ahead to assure they could afford certain experiences such as studying abroad or living on a tight budget to afford unexpected course expenses.

At Hamilton, studying abroad can feel like an impossible expense, however, the university does provide numerous opportunities for students to apply for scholarships. If students are part of the First Scholars program, part of their scholarship includes the opportunity to study abroad with their expenses covered. Non-cohorted first-generation students must take advantage of other scholarship offers through the Center for International Studies; however, students must figure out how to navigate the process by seeking information about those financial opportunities. When Erin, who is a performance major, learned of the study abroad requirement to Italy, she immediately worried how she could afford it all. She stated:

I had an experience where they called a meeting after one of my classes for the music program... and they were talking about how much it cost to study abroad. The thing that kind of put me on edge is they were talking about it like it was nothing, like it was not a big deal to pay \$10,000 to go study abroad. And at the end, I remember specifically somebody called \$3500 a big scholarship... and I thought that might be too big for someone who's not gonna have to worry about paying that 10k but for me it doesn't cover the cost. And so basically, every time I get paid, I'd put like \$100 of that away... usually get paid like \$200 for the two weeks and so I put half of that away into an account and then I use the rest of it to get me through the next two weeks. I also have a summer job here at home. Over the summer here I work about 37 hours a week, so that's how I manage to handle things financially so that maybe, I can join my friends and go on this study abroad requirement.

Like Erin, Mia knew that she wanted to study abroad and anticipated the financial challenge that would come along with that aspiration.

I think the biggest thing about my experience that is different from other students is that I had to plan a lot in advance. Like you know, I plan my freshman year that I wanted to go to London during my spring semester junior year and I feel like other kids like say that, but then they switch [change their mind] or you know, knowing it's fully paid for, and it don't matter what they do, or where they stay. I had to plan that in advance. I had to start saving for that... I had to start researching weather so I can make sure I had enough clothes... I had to plan all of that. My mom retired this year, so I was going to have some trouble with financial aid coming into the fall because they would see that she "made a lot of money" so I was planning to have to take out more loans. Trying to figure out who

I needed to email in financial aid to explain my financial situation to. I had to think about all of that way back then and I feel like often times people who are in different [financial] circumstances than me don't necessarily have to do that.

During her second year of college Mia was offered a position to be a student worker in the Center for International Studies and used that opportunity to ask questions and get guidance from the staff. Mia shared that the staff was extremely helpful in guiding her through scholarships and helping her to select a study abroad program that was a great fit for her and her major. She also shared that, had she not been a student worker in the Center for International Studies, the process of studying abroad and searching for scholarships would've been much more intimidating.

For other participants like Brian, going to college and ultimately graduating would mean a lot to him. During his interview, Brian shared that his parents attended college but never finished. His older brother also started college and didn't complete a degree, so he felt the pressure to be the brother to complete a college degree. He also shared that his family struggled financially for a while and he wanted to do his part to help his parents out. Brian shared the following about being first in his family to go to college:

It's a pretty big responsibility for me at least because I'm the youngest so it kind of falls on me to be (or it feels like it does) the most successful out of my three older brothers. My three older brothers are much older than I am and so they're kind of putting their hopes that I'll be very successful and able to kind of take us out of the kind economic problem area we have been in my entire life. So, it's a little stressful but it's also very rewarding to study and put my skills to use, and think that maybe in the future, I could help my parents.

While it may not be the family's intention to pressure students to be the first to "make it," many first-generation students internalize that mindset and often view it as a goal to accomplish. Not only can it be a heavy mental load to carry, but this mentality can also be a sense of motivation. McKenna described the pressure she feels so profoundly. As the daughter of Vietnamese refugees and the first in her family to go to college, she feels that being a first-generation college student is "the pressure of not wanting to perpetuate that cycle but also like not having the resources." McKenna went on to say:

To me, being first gen means a great deal of perseverance in the face of very little resources, which is a great thing. I think that it's a very strong identity in the sense that if you know you are to have kids or your family's continued on your line, you know that you are a tipping point in what was a better opportunity and probably what your parents and grandparents hoped for which is nice.

Many participants shared McKenna's dual perspective that while daunting, the pressure of being the first in one's family to attend college can also provide the motivation to push students toward college graduation.

Experiencing First-Generation Status

At a predominantly white affluent college or university, first-generation students who are not affluent or white experience difference in many ways. For non-cohorted first-generation students who are accustomed to either ethnic diversity or socioeconomic diversity, attending a university like Hamilton could be a culture shock. When a non-white person steps on the campus of any predominantly white private university, the wealth and pervasive whiteness can sort of slap one in the face. And for students who have possibly never been the minority either racially or financially, being a student at Hamilton could require adjustment. Participants provided an

array of responses to the differences they felt between students of color, low-income students, students from the local community, and higher income white students. These differences can be described as difference in treatment, class difference, or simply a difference in experiences than other students who have (seemingly) different backgrounds or circumstances that they've observed.

A common expression among study participant responses was the sense of being appreciative of the opportunity to be in school. For so many participants, the sense of gratitude and gratefulness was shared among them, regardless of race or income. Participants shared this common ideal of internalizing the belief that it is a privilege to be in college at all, and specifically to be a student at Hamilton. Participants who were students of color and or low-income were more likely to allude to the belief that they didn't come to college to have fun. This belief comes from the understanding of their family's (or their own) financial sacrifice to get them there but also the belief that, first-generation students don't get to focus on fun for a variety of reasons. With references made to the idealistic college experience portrayed in movies with parties and wasting time, students compared their college experiences to other students they've encountered on campus. Brian shared the following sentiments regarding the difference between first generation college students and students with a history of college education in their family:

In terms of for people who aren't first gen, I feel like there' a lot more leniency of what they can do, and you know, parties can be a big priority for them whereas I have to really think about what I'm doing and what I'm spending my time on because I know that it's a lot of money that's going into my education. I don't really prioritize having fun even though it's supposed to be "the best time of my life." I feel like it is in a different way... I'm finally able to learn in an environment that fosters that and I feel like that's more

important to me than what other people might find important about college. I've always felt envious of a first-gen cohort.

Brian's experiences are unique to him. While many of the participants shared similar interactions with students whose families aren't low-income or have a history of college attendance; participants perceived those students to be less likely to be concerned about money, able to go on trips, not as concerned about landing an internship or job because of family connections. These interactions and perceptions are just from a fraction of students at Hamilton and are not meant to reflect on the larger Hamilton student body. I also believe that the perception of the ideal college experience is derived from what is shown in the media. Brian's statements "best time of my life" is an ode to the care-free life that college students are "supposed" to have or that's portrayed on television and movies; it's certainly not a reality for many students.

Local study participant Catherine shared her unique perspective regarding how it feels to be a community member at Hamilton. Before Hamilton became expensive and assumed the title "university," it was Hamilton College and much more affordable for members of the surrounding community. Catherine's comments about perceptions held by the local community are directly related to class and income. As an employee, and someone who works closely with the local community, I notice that many of our students and families often feel that there is a barrier between them and the university. While Hamilton University's campus is open to the public, some members of the community feel that they don't belong. Additionally, because of the cost of attendance, students from the surrounding area are less likely to apply and enroll. Catherine shared her perspective as a student from the community:

I was fine academically and then socially is where it was weird and hard because even though campus is still small, I was suddenly going from the county entering into this, like

other world of Hamilton and for the first time, I was like allowed to be on campus and like permitted as a student to be on a campus that my entire life had been kind of like cordoned off.

Catherine also reflected on her interactions with students in her class. Many students who attend the university are out of state students from states like New York, Maryland, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. With so many students from the northern part of the country, there is a particular culture that they bring with them, and as the majority, those students drive the culture of the student population. Catherine shares how she struggles with being proud to have been accepted to Hamilton as a local student, but also feeling ashamed:

When Hamilton kids from MD asked me, how did I get into Hamilton... like first of all, I live here, but then also I don't want to say if there's a little bit of like first-gen guilt and like embarrassment, and you feel ashamed. It's so funny because if you're embarrassed, and then you're ashamed that you're embarrassed... I'm here because I couldn't afford to go anywhere else, but you don't want to say that to people because then they either pity you or they start to have ideas about your family. Yeah, it's both like guilt, it's like shame because you're considered less fortunate and embarrassment/shame because you don't want people to pity you. But it's also your lived reality. And then it's also like guilt for feeling that way because you're like, I shouldn't be ashamed of myself or my family, and then also there's pride of being like, I never got like assisted, I wasn't coddled throughout school and I also didn't have all this prep stuff, but I'm in the same exact place.

As someone who works with high school students on college advising, I thought it was interesting for Catherine to share that she couldn't afford to go anywhere else. It was also a bit confusing because I know there are less expensive places to go. In some cases, a private school

could offer more scholarship funds than a public state school, thus making it more affordable to attend the private school. I also know that there are many other factors aside from costs that go into making a final college decision. I followed up with Catherine to get a better understanding of her decision to go to Hamilton and she said,:

I applied to Duke, Chapel Hill, Mount Holyoke in MA, Hollins University in Virginia, and Barnard College in NY. I got into Duke University, but it was extremely expensive, and I was waitlisted at UNC. I went to a very small high school (35 people in my graduating class) so that's why I applied to a majority smaller schools and private schools.

Based on her response, Catherine only applied to one other state school that could've been more affordable than Hamilton. Additionally, Catherine was admitted to Duke which meets 100% of financial need, meaning, based on Catherine's family's income, Duke would've covered that need through scholarships, grants and small student loans. It's possible that Catherine wasn't aware of this about Duke, which speaks to her lack of college knowledge. In my experience with college advising, many students and families have chosen to enroll at a more expensive school even when there was a more financially feasible option simply because the student always wanted to attend that particular school. In Catherine's case, it's possible that if she'd had guidance from a college advisor, she may have had more information to understand her financial aid package at Duke and enrolled. A major factor for Catherine's decision was the size of the institution, and it's important to note here that the more affordable options are also much larger universities which, based on Catherine's preferences, would not have been the best fit for her.

Due to Covid-19, Catherine shared that she was uncomfortable with the possibility of attending Duke and living on campus, and she was much more comfortable with living at home

and going to Hamilton. Following her first semester at Hamilton, Catherine went on to share that she talked with her parents about transferring to a different school because she wasn't sure if she fit in. She said she felt "kind of like an alien about being here and then also the wealth gap happening, and it was just very difficult socially constantly feeling like an outsider in my own home, in my own land." It's certainly an interesting position to be in; stuck in the middle of mixed emotions of pride, shame, embarrassment in a place you've called home your whole life... and now you're an outsider. This dynamic could potentially be an opportunity for further research to gain better understanding how other students from the county and local community experience Hamilton once enrolled.

A lack of diversity was also a common perception shared among study participants. For students of color and white students who came from very ethnically and financially diverse high schools, neighborhoods, and communities, adjusting to Hamilton's student body was a challenge. McKenna from California said, "I'd grown up with mostly other Asian kids through all of my life and I was not used to seeing as many white people on a regular basis and especially not white people with money." Ryen, who grew up in Maryland, spoke about her high school experience and really loved that it was very diverse and that she "loves Hamilton, but it's very NOT diverse." Catherine presented an 'us vs. them' perspective when she shared, "It's like they (affluent students) are the baseline and the rest of us are seen as like not fitting into that...we're alternative college students... it's still weird to be in higher education spaces as one of those minorities."

Study participants who identified as white and from a higher income also shared their thoughts about the ways they experience being first generation. Three study participants explained that being a first-generation student is easier for them because of their race and

income. However, they've experienced the difference their first-generation status makes when observing the ways in which their friends are able to reach out to their parents for help. At the same time, because of their race and moderate income, they're able to blend in with the affluent white population. While not ashamed of their status as first-generation students, they are aware that their experiences are indeed different from students of color and low-income students.

Meagan shared an interesting perspective by comparing being a first-generation college student to being Jewish. Meagan shares:

It's kind of like being Jewish, people don't know unless you tell them. People just assume that your parents went to college. I hate to say it but it's also a racial thing. People see black people not as educated and just assume that their parents didn't go to college and that mine did. I'm not ashamed of it [being first gen].

During interviews, I noticed that the low-income first-generation students sought out other first-generation students or if they were students of color, they wanted to seek out other first-gen students and or students who reflected other pieces of their identity (race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc.). Jenna, a white female, shared a time when she noticed the differences between her and her friends who weren't first-generation college students, such as the types of conversations her friends would have with their parents.

I know like a lot of my friends they'd be talking to their parents and they'd be like... oh talk to your professors about like these things and my parents are just like oh, call every weekend I like call them every Sunday and people like oh you call your parents like you have a schedule... I'm like yeah. And they'll talk about serious things with their parents... and sometimes mine are just trying to catch up. I realized that none of my friends are first gen.

Before arriving to college, Richard (white male) admitted to never processing what it meant to be a first-generation college student. Even during our interview, I specifically asked what being first-generation meant for him, and he could only articulate that it was “different.” Richard said, “I’ve never really thought about it because, you know, my brother went to college, so it wasn’t a big deal to me. But now that I’m here, it’s just different not having parents that went through the process as well.”

A common thread among the majority of study participants were moments when they were either made aware of their first-generation status or reminded about being the first to go to college. These reminders come from direct and indirect experiences such as class discussions, conversations or interactions with classmates and friends, and/or the inability of family members to relate to college experiences. This awareness doesn’t also mean that being first generation was salient for all participants. For example, for the middle-income white participants, being first generation wasn’t a major factor of how they identified; these participants were often unsure about whether they were first generation or not. Alternatively, for the lower-income white participants, being first generation was a salient part of how they identified themselves; they began their interviews with statements like “Hi my name is _____, and I’m a first-generation college student” or, “I’m proud to be first generation.”

Further, based on participant responses, for some first-generation students, it was difficult to get a sense of what it feels like to be a first-generation college student before arriving on a college campus. However, McKenna shared that her early sense of feeling first generation began while completing the college application. McKenna surmises a very elevated perspective on how it feels to be a first-generation student when she states:

There is no concept of legacy, which is something I think at any PWI in general, you feel that you're surrounded by legacy... you can see the buildings are named after people.

When you apply, they ask you, do you know anyone who went here. You see people talking about like "oh my mom was in a sorority and that's why I'm in a sorority."

McKenna has had the opportunity to work closely with professionals at Hamilton to learn more about equity, access, and diversity which has allowed her to have a more informed perspective.

The concept of legacy is something that is often overlooked and taken for granted when we think about the college space. Legacy impacts one's aspirations and motivations to follow in the footsteps of those that have come before them. However, as McKenna stated, many first-generation students don't have this privilege. McKenna reminds us that the higher education system sometimes perpetuates this idea of legacy through its policies, practices, infrastructure, and culture. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the culture of higher education can be viewed as an unspoken membership that first generation students must gain access to.

Barriers and Needs of Non-Cohorted First-Generation Students

Study participants spoke candidly when asked to share challenges they faced as non-cohorted first-generation college students at Hamilton University. It's important for me to note here that some participants had more challenges than others. Low-income students and students of color were more likely to share challenges than students who reported having higher incomes. One participant bluntly responded, "There's no shortage of challenges at Hamilton." In this section I outline the barriers and needs expressed by study participants such as financial support, access to opportunities, resources, and staff support.

Paying for College

Financial support is the number one barrier for the majority of non-cohorted first-generation college students who participated in my study. This was no surprise since first-generation students are more likely to also be low-income students, but also, attending any private university without a full scholarship would be a financial challenge for any student who's high financial need. As it was a key criterion for participation, students who participated in this study were not recipients of the First Scholars Scholarship or any university funded fellowships. These sources of funding either provide students with a substantial amount of funding to meet all demonstrated financial need or cover the cost of attendance including tuition, fees, room, and board. If students aren't awarded these funds as first-year first-time admissions applicants, they do not have an opportunity to apply for these scholarships again. However, this doesn't mean that study participants weren't awarded some scholarship funds. Several study participants shared they were awarded grants, a Presidential Scholarship, research scholarships, scholarships directly connected to their major, and need-based aid provided as part of completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For some participants, these scholarships were enough to cover tuition, and for others, these sources of funding only helped to cover some of their expenses. Other participants are using student loans to cover their cost of attendance, which could amount to about \$45,000 per academic year. Participants overwhelmingly commented that the university should offer more opportunities to earn large scholarships beyond the first-year application process. In addition to additional funds, two participants really struggled with understanding the costs surrounding college enrollment. Financial Aid can be intimidating and can feel like you're asking questions you 'should' already know the answers to. Jonna shared that she just wanted someone to sit down and go over her loan paperwork to" help her

understand it,” but when she asked questions, she felt rushed and dismissed. On the other hand, first-generation students can also feel a lack of agency when seeking guidance. Mia shared that when she had questions about her financial aid, she was nervous about going in to talk with the staff and felt her mother had done something wrong when she asked for more financial aid and scholarships, when other higher-income families may have felt entitled and more comfortable with negotiating power and navigating that conversation.

The university recognizes this need and has made need-based scholarships a major priority across several funding and development efforts. Something that stood out to me was the likelihood students were willing to stay and struggle financially instead of transferring to a more affordable college or university. This choice is connected to first-generation students overall lack of college knowledge and wherewithal to make sound financial college decisions. While the university has recognized this need, one could argue that there are certainly more affordable college options for students to select from and as a private institution, the university simply doesn't have the ability to sustain large amounts of scholarship gifts at this time. I think it's important to note that the university joined the Common Application process in 2019, which is a platform that allows student to apply to multiple colleges and university through one platform, thus reducing the cost of application fees. This gesture has placed Hamilton on the radar of more students, including first-generation students and those with high financial need. From 2018 to 2019, Hamilton saw an increase of 878 applications, and from 2019 to 2021, there was an increase of over 5,000 applications (Admissions Report). It's likely the university didn't anticipate such an increase and wasn't as prepared with resources to support such a shift in interest and applications.

The literature supports that first-generation college students may be more likely to have lower levels of financial literacy than other students because of their parent's education status (Mandell, 2009). Additionally, students who are first generation and also high financial need are also more likely to not have guidance during the college process and not understand the financial aspect behind a college decision. College is often presented as 'good debt' and many students/families make college decisions based on emotion, familial influences, and opinion, not finances. In my professional experience working with students and families with high financial need, even with all the information and advice against making poor financial decisions around college choice, some families still decide to move forward with enrolling their child in a university they can't afford. Colleges and universities also use tactics to appear more affordable by offering "discounts" or grants to help cover some college expenses. To students and families, receiving these offers from schools like Hamilton while not receiving any additional scholarship offers from less expensive schools makes Hamilton appear to be the better choice because the student was offered a scholarship. Unfortunately, I can attest to the fact that some students and families make huge financial decisions based on everything except the financial facts, which often leads to mountains of student debt and consequently a poor college choice in the long run.

Access to Opportunity

The absence of social capital often reduces first generation students' access to opportunities. The common saying "it's about who you know" specifically relates to social capital and the ability to network through connections. Students with no history of college education in their family are automatically at a disadvantage when it comes to gaining access to coveted college internships, for example. For many students, internships unlock the doors to potential full-time employment, or provide valuable professional experiences for their resume.

Students who apply to Hamilton typically are enamored by the university's reputation for internship opportunities. Students have interned with Google, CNN, Fortune 500 companies, and popular department store brands such as Macy's. Obtaining an internship, particularly a paid internship, was something many study participants had ill feelings toward. Paid internships are generally the minority in the pool of available internships. Oftentimes, internships that are not local to the university come with additional living expenses that aren't covered by the employer. As result, students must determine whether they can afford to participate in a summer internship that might cost them more than they will be paid.

When asked about access to opportunities at Hamilton, study participants shared a collective perception that affluent students at Hamilton have been able to gain access to internship opportunities through their parents or family connections. Students whose parents have college degrees are more likely to have a wider social network of other college educated friends and family. Moreover, the social capital web of connections runs deep at affluent universities and non-cohorted first -generation college students are well aware of the opportunity gap that exists. Meagan reflected on her family's lack of social capital, "My friends who have parents that went to college have endless connections. I have zero. My parents don't work for a big company, my dad works alone, he has no employees, so that's the biggest disadvantage for me." Meagan went on to share that she had friends that have gotten internship offers because of their parent's friendships. I asked how she'd feel about using her social connections to gain access to internships and she said, "I'd feel bad like I was using my friends, and I don't want to do that." I found it interesting that Meagan didn't want to use her connections to get an internship; even more so that she perceived this as "using" someone and not simply networking. Another study participant, Erica, expressed a similar frustration, "like how do I navigate the

space where Samantha was given an internship because her dad is the head of the CIA or something you know... my dad works in a factory."

Other participants also shared their frustration with the perceived inequity in opportunities. While first-generation students can apply for many of the same opportunities as all students at Hamilton, they often have to decline the position because they're unable to afford it, or students have to get additional part-time jobs while also participating in an internship. Erin asserts, "It's like, if you have to go out and get a job while you're working an internship, what's the point of doing the internship because you're not getting to process or have time to really immerse yourself in that opportunity." I was really shocked to hear Erin's comments. It never occurred to me just how many internships weren't paid. And those that are paid might be in other cities far from that student's home where they can't afford living expenses during the internship. I often share internship opportunities with my students and encourage them to take advantage of them, without grasping the reality that many of them can't afford to not work during the summer and certainly don't have the privilege to work for free.

Study participants that have yet to arrive at the internship search phase of college expressed worry surrounding the possibility they might not land a big, coveted internship. Since many first-generation students are less likely to have networks of support that link them to opportunities or social capital, staff members like the First-Gen support office become that network. To remedy this opportunity gap, a key function of the First-Generation Staff is to serve as a conduit for those students by sharing access to opportunities, access to resources including connections to other professionals that might lead to internships and learning experiences for non-cohorted first generation college students. Through a monthly newsletter, the First-Generation Staff shares internship and job opportunities through the university's job network, as

well as connecting students to other fellowship or research experiences on campus. According to the literature, first generation students report that the connection to resources and assistance of designated staff contributed to their retention in college and success (Schelbe, Becker, Spinelli & McCray, 2019). It will be interesting to see the impact of the First Gen support office on student retention, engagement, and success over time.

Guidance

Gaining access to opportunities and information about internship and career opportunities is one barrier, however, understanding how to navigate a wealth of information is another. Many study participants spoke about the challenges around the lack of guidance and support, particularly during their first two years at the University. In my experience with students, it's easy to become overwhelmed with information, such as deciphering the difference between a BA or BS, or not having the language to email a professor about a research opportunity; sometimes knowing where to begin stifles students into not beginning at all. Some study participants admitted to not reaching out for help; albeit, at the time, there wasn't a designated staff person to reach out to for guidance. For the older study participants, the First-Generation support office had yet to be established, so those participants had to seek support from other resources or figure it out on their own. Mia described her experiences with gaining access to resources prior to the First Gen-Staff newsletters. She shared that she'd signed up to receive information about research opportunities but never received any emails. Mia said, "it just seemed like everybody else knew a professor that they could do research with, or everybody knew what they wanted to start on and where to find a professor and I'm like...how do you know?" Mia shared that she didn't know where to begin. She talked about a time earlier in the semester when she received an email from the First-Gen Support staff sharing information about the research opportunities

she'd been looking for. She explained that she never would've known about the opportunity without the newsletter.

Transfer students, however, had a different experience in accessing campus resources compared to traditional first-year students. While all first-year Hamilton students take a required Freshman Seminar course, the transfer version of that course is optional for Transfer students. A common saying among student affairs is students often don't know what they don't know; one could imagine a transfer student not understanding the importance of a transitional seminar. First-year students often don't understand the importance of a freshman seminar course until well into their college career when they need a resource that they learned about in Freshman Seminar. If given the option, most freshman students would opt to not take that required course...hence, the requirement.

Students who identified as non-cohorted first-generation students and transfer students were doubly confused until the First-Generation support office was created. Erica shared, "There's a lot of information I didn't know until junior year...I didn't know about the leadership scholarship or honor society programs, my experiences are a little different because I was a transfer student... I didn't have the freshman seminar thing." Corrine, another transfer student, also shared that she identified more with being a transfer student than a first-generation student because of her experiences. She shared, "there are no scholarships for transfer students. The transfer house started about 6 months to a year after I came to Hamilton. I've gotten more emails and stuff about first generation than I have for transfer students." Overall, while study participants technically have access to the same information that other students have access to, study participants who were low-income or transfers expressed the need for guidance to help

navigate through campus information such as research opportunities, how to register for classes, and scholarship opportunities.

Representation matters as first-generation students seek key faculty and professional staff who they can identify with and trust on college campuses. Recruiting faculty and staff members who are representative of first-generation students, students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities is vital to assuring students see themselves in their administration. One of the First-Gen Support office initiatives has been developing a directory, present on the website, of faculty and staff who were themselves first-generation college students;. These individuals were also encouraged to add the “I AM FIRST-GEN” graphic to their email signature. This has helped to begin to build a network of support for students to easily identify administrators within the First-Gen network.

Having many different avenues of support is especially important for low-income first-generation students who are students of color at a predominantly white college or university. Students like Mia, an African American female, had life changing experience with another African American female who was also a faculty member at the university. Mia reflected on this interaction and shared that it was truly a pivotal moment in her collegiate career:

In the Deans suite, there's a black female that works in there...she was fantastic. Since my freshman year, she literally walked me through everything. I made a meeting with her, and was like oh... it's a Black lady that's working here - never seen her! She walked me through every major, helped me narrow it down to Management, helped me pick the track she thought was best for me based on my interest and past academic experience. She helped me get into little convention things here and there and would invite me to dinner with the Dean and Board of Advisors so I could meet people.

Experiences such as these are influential moments in a young college students' career. For students of color, these interactions are more than just an advising session, they entail being seen, affirmed, and supported by someone who looks like them in a respected role at the university.

Student Needs

During the interview, I asked participants about what they needed to be successful academically and socially as non-cohorted first-generation college students. It's important to mention there that many of the comments and suggestions came from older students who had been at the university beyond their first year. Students who were in their first semester or first year of college at the time of their participation in the study were less likely to have had any concerns or major challenges. Student comments ranged from programming improvements at orientation to connecting students to alumni who also identify as first-generation college students. Among participant comments was a consensus of simply making it known to students within the first-generation community that there is support and a community available; students want to know they have a designated place or person to go to for help. Some statements are direct quotes from study participants and are designated by quotation marks, and others are paraphrased from a collection of statements from two or more participants:

1. **More Transfer Student Resources: Transfer orientation needs to be more tailored to student needs and resources. The “Freshman Seminar” course should be mandatory for transfer students (Corrine & Erica).** The University requires first-year Freshmen to take a Freshman Seminar course that acclimates them to the university's resources, and provides support with major selection and course selection. This course is optional to incoming Transfer Students. These participants believed that more targeted information on this course and its purpose would have been beneficial during the orientation and

transfer process. Additionally, a required transfer seminar course would have provided more academic and social support.

2. **Increase of Faculty/Staff of Color (participants of color).** Participants of color spoke specifically about the importance of representation among faculty and staff at the University. The opportunity to connect with other men and women of color who identify in ways that resonate with students allows students to feel seen and to see themselves in “adults” in positions of power.
3. **“If the University is going to actively recruit first-generation, low-income students of color, they need to also provide resources to support their needs” (Erica).** For two participants, this was a resonating statement. They both expressed that enrolling in school was not the issue but staying in school is a concern. Students who are low-income and or first-generation are faced with issues such as affording tuition, food insecurity, homelessness, lack of access to basic school supplies, pressure to work, and competing priorities. By developing the First-Gen Support office, the University took a major step toward providing ongoing support for students.
4. **“Sororities and fraternities should provide and advertise payment plans to be more accessible and affordable for low-income students to participate” (Ryen).** Membership in a fraternity or sorority can be expensive. Fees or dues can be upwards of \$1500 or more. For some organizations, there are costs associated with initiation, membership, and then on-going annual dues to remain active in the organization. For a low-income student who may want to join, the cost could be a major deterrent. Ryen shared that her organization offers a payment plan and sponsorships for students who may need assistance and other organizations offer the same options, however, they are

not advertised nor is it widely offered to potential members. As a way to encourage membership, Ryen hopes to change the financial stigma of her sorority by making sure individuals are aware of the payment options available to help.

5. “Mentorship program for first-gen students with university alumni” (Mia, Kaitlyn).

Two participants offered ideas for how the First-Gen support office could generate support and opportunities by connecting undergraduate first-generation students to alumni. This would ideally increase opportunities for mentorship, build professional networks, and could potentially create internship opportunities.

6. Don’t tokenize first-gens or students of color for diversity agenda (Catherine & McKenna) -

Two participants had strong sentiments around institutions “tokenizing” first generation students and marginalized populations for various reasons. At a predominantly white institution, marginalized students often feel they are the representative for their group. While the university may be attempting to be more inclusive, this could be perceived as tokenization, specifically if the university is highlighting the same group in advertisements, admissions communications, and other diversity efforts.

7. “A big welcome program for first-gen students in fall during opening weeks of school” (Mia).

As an opportunity to build community, Mia suggested that the First-Gen office sponsor a welcoming event during the opening of each semester. Since first generation students are more likely to live off campus, this would be an opportunity for students to build community with each other, meet the First-Gen staff and learn about the resources available, and begin to engage with campus.

8. **“Provide a resource fair catered to First-Gen students that includes information about off-campus housing options, on-campus job opportunities, and internships.”**

This was a common sentiment among the two transfer student participants. These students spoke about their personal challenge with the lack of outreach and support upon their arrival to Hamilton. Both shared that they received more contact in the form of email regarding first-generation support instead of targeted transfer student support.

9. **Demystify financial barriers of studying abroad and provide info sessions for first-gen students that explain the process (Mia).** Mia shared that for her and many of her friends, the idea of studying abroad and the costs associated with traveling internationally was a significant barrier to taking advantage of this opportunity. She shared that working in the Study Abroad office helped her to understand the resources available for students to help make studying abroad less of a barrier for students. Traveling is a privilege and traveling internationally can feel out of reach for many low-income students, however with the right guidance and planning, studying abroad can be a realistic option.

10. **Increase financial resources (shared sentiments many participants).** Study participants shared the following comments about the necessity of more financial resources at Hamilton: They wanted access to more scholarships beyond first year, access to specific scholarships for non-cohorted First-Gen students, more on-campus jobs reserved for low-income First-Gen students, and better guidance from financial aid on loans and financial paperwork.

Study participants were more than willing to share their input on ways the university could help improve programming to support first-generation students at Hamilton. These are also

interventions that other institutions could consider as they work to build or improve their first-generation programming.

Summary

In this chapter I shared findings from interviews and a focus group with thirteen study participants. I presented and organized the data by four topics: college preparation, college experiences, first generation student identity, and student barriers and needs. Non-cohorted first-generation students at Hamilton University shared a variety of shared and distinct academic and social experiences at the university. Many student experiences were impacted by the student's individual financial background, race or ethnicity, or student status. I concluded this chapter with student statements that describe and outline areas of need to help them better succeed socially and academically in college. These statements represent the experiences and suggestions from study participants; I don't assume they are representative of the total non-cohorted first-generation student population at Hamilton University. In the next chapter, I conclude this study by placing my findings in conversation with the existing literature. I answer my research questions, discuss recommendations for research and practice, and reflect on the overall contribution and impact of my study.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of first-generation college students at Hamilton University. These students were non-cohorted, meaning they were not part of any university-led scholarship or fellowship program that provided them with support or guidance. I interviewed 13 first-generation college students to gain insight into the ways in which they navigated the college application process and experienced college at a predominantly white and affluent private university. I used an open-style of one-on-one interviews that allowed participants the opportunity to reflect on their college-going journey and to share insights into how to better improve the support provided to first-generation college students at Hamilton University. Their insights may also help others who want to develop first-generation support programming at elite private universities. Participants in the study came from diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, family income, and level of college completion. Out of thirteen participants, eleven identified as female and two identified as male. The majority of participants self-identified as white and reported their family household income to be between low income (less than \$40,000) and middle income (between \$40,000-139,000). The differences in income in many ways led to different college experiences. Residency status also varied as several students shared that they were in state-students, while six students were attending from out of state. Family background, high school culture, and home life also varied among participants, which served as important elements when understanding a student's college journey and college experiences.

One purpose of this final chapter is to put my findings into conversation with the literature I reviewed in chapter two. I also draw on some new literature that I uncovered while analyzing my findings. Another purpose of the chapter is to answer my research questions

directly. I also share recommendations for future research, recommendations for practitioners, and conclude with my personal reflections as a researcher. I organize the first part of this chapter by primary and subsequent research questions: (primary) how do students experience being a first-generation college student at a private, selective institution that is predominantly white? My secondary questions were how do the experiences of first-generation college students differ across socioeconomic backgrounds and cohort status? What barriers and or challenges do first-generation students experience at a private, selective, predominantly white university? How do non-cohorted first-generation college students leverage resources, including academic and social support on campus?

How Non-Cohorted First-Generation Students Experience College

My primary goal in this study was to explore how non-cohorted first-generation college students experience college at Hamilton University. As a reminder, I chose to use the following definition for first generation college students: undergraduate students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree and are likely to lack cultural capital and college knowledge. I chose to use this definition because this study was centered on the experiences of students attending an affluent private institution where the lack of college knowledge and existence of capital is a significant form of currency that often impact the ways in which students experience college.

The First-Gen Student Profile at Private White Institutions

An important distinction to make is that the first-generation student profile that is often cited in the literature seems to reflect the average first-generation student population across colleges and universities - primarily public colleges and universities. Ives and Castillo-Montoya

(2020), along with several other scholars such as Engle et al. (2006) and Ardoin (2018), have noted that first-generation college students are statistically more likely to be low-income, non-native English speakers, and have racially minoritized identities. However, participants in this study were 60% white, 90% female, all of traditional college age (17-21), no dependents, and a majority from middle to low-income homes. Roderick et al. (2009) note that first-generation students are also less likely to be academically prepared, academically confident, and college ready following high school graduation. In contrast, first-generation students in my study were mostly very academically prepared, took rigorous courses in high school, and were very confident in their academic ability to perform at the university. Study participants attended a mixture of public and charter schools with access to rigorous course options. Students who attend private liberal arts colleges and universities are typically stronger academically due to higher admissions requirements than their public school counterparts. For context, Hamilton is a competitive university with the typical student applicant applying with an average high school GPA of 3.8, an ACT score of 27, and an SAT score ranging from 1170-1320.

Other literature also commonly characterizes first-generation students to have little parental support or guidance through the college application process and lack college knowledge (Cabera, Deil-Amen, Terenzini, Lee & Franklin, 2006). Dennis et al. (2005) mention that the parents of first-generation college students lack the first-hand knowledge of the college experience and typically cannot help students directly with college goals. For study participants, these characterizations are only partially true. It's important not to correlate lack of parental knowledge with lack of parental support. Each study participant shared that while their parents weren't particularly knowledgeable about college information, they were motivated to be involved and supportive. The lack of parental knowledge also encouraged a strong sense of self-

reliance among my participants. They expressed parallel senses of pride and angst with “figuring it out on my own.” Since their parents were often unable to help or understand their questions about college, participants often relied on school staff or on their own ability to find the answers.

The students in my study provide a different perspective than what Reid and Moore (2008) found, which is that first generation students often choose a college close to home that is not necessarily a good fit (p. 242). With nearly half of the study participants from out of state, it suggests that students who seek an education from a private and more elite university are more likely to be willing to venture a little further from home if they can afford to do so. It also suggests that other elements go into making the college decision. Several participants specifically wanted a smaller private university that felt like home, which is how they landed at Hamilton. Additionally, financial fit plays a significant role in a student’s college decision; the study findings are consistent with Horn and Nevill (2006) and Warburton et al. (2001) who describe how first-generation students are more likely to work part time jobs while attending college, thus limiting their ability to participate in other academic and social experiences vital to college. Study participants who were working while enrolled were focused on paying their student loans before graduation, as well as earning money to live. Despite sophisticated college knowledge and financial literacy, study participants chose to attend Hamilton even when the long-term financial implications were uncertain.

Lastly, researchers studying this population suggest that first-generation students are likely to be students of color and low-income. Again, I believe this is a general representation of the first-generation college students at the majority of public institutions and not private institutions. Over 60% of the participants in this study identified as white; that is eight out of thirteen study participants. This small sample is representative of the non-cohorted first-

generation student population at Hamilton with over 63% of the class of 2023 identifying as white and 37% identifying as students of color (Hamilton Admissions Data, 2020). Of course, we know that white first-generation students exist, however, much of the literature seems to focus on students of color.

How do the Experiences of First-Generation College Students Differ across Socioeconomic Backgrounds and Cohort Status?

Guided by the first secondary research question, I sought to determine how the experiences of non-cohorted first-generation college students differed from each other based on socioeconomic status and also from their peers who were associated with the First Scholars Program. Findings show that socioeconomic status influenced the ways in which students identified with being a first-generation college student.

Am I a First-Generation Student?

Students navigated their social and academic experiences in ways that reflect how they negotiated intersecting pieces of their identities such as being first-generation, their race or ethnicity, and their social class. Being first generation is often accompanied with an assumption of low socioeconomic status. Participants who were lower income and students of color were more likely to closely identify as being a first-generation student. In my sample, first-generation did not necessarily correlate to low-income. Although study participants were majority high financial need, there were four students who self-reported middle to high income (\$40K-\$139K). Participants from families with higher income reported that their parents were successful business owners, or their finances “appeared” higher because their parents were receiving retirement benefits. Unfortunately, I was unable to gain access to financial information of all

first-generation students at Hamilton. However, if using the study participant income data as a guide, first-generation students at private colleges and universities are likely to come from a higher socioeconomic background than their public-school counterparts. It's important to note here that being middle income doesn't equate to being rich, but it could mean a range of experiences since families can sit on either end of this spectrum of \$40k-139k. It also could mean that families within this range are able to make different financial decisions such as affording to pay tuition in installments or accepting loan debt.

Orbe (2004) states that when first-generation students enter college, they may feel like outsiders at school as well as at home. This feeling of limbo is due in part to students processing through different parts of their identity, such as being a first-generation students, being a working-class student among affluence, or identifying with a minority race and ethnicity. During interviews, I can recall one participant very clearly explaining the difficulty with negotiating this feeling of being stuck between being a student at Hamilton and a member of a working-class family from the local community. Social identity theory and Chickering's (1969) theory of identity development supports the idea that students undergo several phases of discovery as they learn more about themselves and their identity. These two theories helped me to answer the research study's first question: how do the experiences of first-generation students differ across socio-economic backgrounds? For example, study participants were equally seeking spaces to belong; whether that space was an organization, finding students who looked like them, or finding comfort in connecting with others through affinity groups. Study participants made meaning of their experiences based on the ways in which they found connection to groups or other individuals. Social identity theorists argue that one's emotional significance to group membership helps contribute to one's self concept (Aries & Seider, 2007). This was true in my

study as participants who'd "found their people" through sororities or fraternities, leadership opportunities, work study, or through the first-generation office were more likely to share positive experiences about connecting to college.

Additionally, I used social identity theory as a basis to help me understand why the majority of study participants who were low-income had a stronger connection to being first-generation. When reviewing their transcripts and reflecting upon the "emotional significance" of group membership, for those study participants, being first-generation was also connected to other experiences such as struggle, sacrifice, or poverty. Participants who verbally expressed having a sense of pride in being first generation also spoke about financial struggle, family sacrifice, or the lack of opportunity. Orbe (2004) described one's likeliness to closely identify or disassociate as "saliency." Accordingly, Orbe (2003) states that for one student, being first generation may be highly salient to their identity and not important for another student. Orbe (2004) further argues that students who identified as white or were from a higher socio-economic status were more likely to have a low saliency toward their first-generation identity. My findings support Orbe's conclusions as participants with "variable-saliency" were most likely to be white, middle to upper-middle socio-economic status, and considered a traditional college student. Those with low saliency were likely to be white males, regardless of socio-economic status (Orbe, 2004, p. 140). Higher income white study participants were more likely to be unsure of their first-generation status, unlikely to self-identify as being a first-generation student, and were less likely to seek resources from the first-generation support staff.

Alternatively, students whose first-generation status was more salient to their identity were more likely to explicitly state "I am a first-generation college student" in their interviews, and to seek resources in connection to being first-gen. Orbe (2004) asserts that students with

high-saliency to their FGCS status were more likely to be students of color, students from low socioeconomic status, and nontraditional female students. In my study, participants who identified closely with being first-generation were students of color, transfer students, and low-income white students. These study participants were also able to better articulate what being a first-generation college student meant to them and how being a first-generation college student had impacted their college experiences. While there is ample research on identity development, Orbe's research was a rare piece of literature that spoke directly about the saliency of one's first-generation identity in relationship to their college experience. This study helps to confirm Orbe's findings that study participants who were non-traditional or transfer students, students with a lower socio-economic status, or students of color were more likely lead with their first generation identity status. Other participants in this study who were white and came from a higher income family were more likely to be unsure of whether they were first generation or not, and lead with other pieces of their identity which they identified closer to such as their religion or sorority/fraternity/team/organization affiliation. This study also aligned with Orbe's study findings that student's identity connections were greatly influenced by several variables, such as their life situation, home experiences, the type of university they attended and the influence of that atmosphere. This study highlighted Orbe's (2004) connection between privilege and status whereas, first-generation students on an affluent campus found it more beneficial if there was "privilege associated with being male, European American, middle/upper class" (p.144).

Cohort Status

A cohort is defined as a group of about 10-25 students who begin a program together, participate in a series of experiences such as classes or workshops, and ultimately complete the program at the same time (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood & Wright-Porter, 2011). Seven out

of thirteen study participants applied for the First Scholars Scholarship program, which had they received it, would have meant they were part of a cohort. Participants didn't apply for several reasons: two didn't apply because they didn't know about it, two were transfer students and hence ineligible, and two believed they didn't qualify due to income. As a reminder, the First Scholars scholarship program would provide students with a cohort of other first-generation first-year students, upper-class mentors, designated support staff, and financial support through graduation pending they maintained academic and programmatic requirements. Study participants who were familiar with the program also reported being friends or associating with students who had been accepted into the scholarship program, so they were privy to the level of support these students received.

The major difference between cohorted and non-cohorted students at Hamilton in reference to the First Scholars program is cohorted students receive financial support, cohort support, and ongoing guidance from designated staff through college completion. Lei et al. (2011) share that students who are part of cohort models benefit from the use of mentors, a sense of community and unity, support, and the "ease of navigating institutional procedures." Study participants who desired more support expressed a sense of celebration for and jealousy towards those students who were selected to participate in the scholarship program, and admired the level of support they received. They also expressed feeling left out because they needed the same type of support, but there was none.

Schelbe et al. (2019) state that programs like the First Scholars program for first-generation students often increase retention as well as grade point average for students in the first year of college. Like Schelbe et al. (2019), Hasinoff et al. (2003) also found that cohorts impact student retention by providing a community for students to be surrounded by students with

similar academic goals and aspirations. Additionally, a cohort provides a sense of “family:” it creates a network that helps to motivate and hold students accountable for each other; not wanting to disappoint the family (Schelbe et al., 2019). One participant described the reason she applied to the First Scholars program was to be part of “a small thing in a big thing;” she wanted a smaller community to connect to within the larger student community at Hamilton. Non-cohorted students who desired a sense of community ultimately found it through their participation in residential events, joining sororities or fraternities, getting involved with student organizations, connecting with classmates, or through other campus involvement like on campus work.

Navigating Race and Class Experiences

Intersecting identities related to class and race influence how students experience college, particularly at an elite college or university that is predominantly white. Abraham-Jack (2014) maintains that while many private and elite colleges and universities have become more attractive to first-generation and low-income students, student’s “low stock of capital” creates a disadvantage for students trying to successfully integrate into their college campuses. Aries (2008) agrees that many students “arrive at college from communities that have given them little experience with peers from diverse backgrounds, racially or socioeconomically” (p. 5). For participants of color and low-income white students, attending Hamilton was the first time they’d been around an abundance of white and or affluent people, thus creating a sense of culture shock for some. Abraham-Jack (2014) describes culture shock as “the strangeness and discomfort students feel when they matriculate” (p. 454).

Similar to findings by Hinz (2016), my participants who were from working-class families often felt like outsiders on a campus with so many upper-class students. For many low-

income students, arriving to campus was a culture shock and they found themselves looking for other students from similar ethnic or racial backgrounds to connect with. All low-income students expressed thoughts of transferring because they didn't feel that they'd fit in with Hamilton's student body. Fitting in might look differently for each student, however, affluence is displayed through materials such as expensive cars, labels and name brands, electronics, and one's ability afford to socialize. Hinz (2016) argues that students who feel they do not belong because of their social class, or whose cultural capital does not match the university, could experience negative academic outcomes. At the time of the study, participants shared they were thriving academically and didn't report any negative academic outcomes as a result of not fitting in with their affluent peers. However, given that they self-selected into my study, they may be the first-generation students who are most successful at Hamilton. It is hard to know what other first-generation students experience at Hamilton.

My students struggled with issues of class and race in their small daily interactions with peers, staff, faculty, and surrounding campus community. As Aries (2008) shares, students on elite college campuses often must decide whether to self-segregate into groups with people like themselves or negotiate ways to get along with a diverse group of students and take advantage of opportunities. Study participants who identified as students of color expressed challenges with initially finding a sense of belonging among a predominantly white student body. They also shared the necessity of learning to code-switch when interacting with professors or adapting to the campus culture. Others also sought out same-race peers and felt relieved when they were able to develop these relationships.

Alternatively, low-income white participants expressed tendencies to isolate from others because they couldn't afford to socialize over meals or expensive cups of coffee and didn't want

to feel obligated to explain their finances to their peers. Aries and Seider (2005) found that lower-income white students are underrepresented at highly selective colleges and universities; while white students can blend in with the crowd, their lack of financial capital is exposed when they're unable to display wealth comparable to their affluent white peers. White participants in my study, both from low income families or from families with slightly higher income, confirmed Stuber's (2009) claim that white students have the privilege of blending in with other white students but may lack the financial capital it takes to participate in activities. Four of the eight white study participants self-reported their family's socio-economic status as being middle to upper-middle income. Two of the eight were from lower-income families. One study participant compared her ability to blend-in as a white student to being Jewish... "no one really knows unless you tell them, they just assume because I'm white, my parents went to college."

Pascarella et al. (2004) uncovered that when compared to their peers from higher income families, first-generation students were more likely to work more, spend less time in noncurricular activities, live off campus, and had fewer peer interactions. Wapole (2003, as cited in Martin, 2015, p. 276) agrees that "students from low SES backgrounds tend to exert more energy into accruing economic capital such as through working while in college, than their peers from high SES backgrounds, leaving little time for other college activities or experiences." The working-class participants in my study spent the majority of their time outside of class working and were regularly concerned about paying bills. Unlike Wapole's (2003) conclusion that low SES students are working to get ahead, Martin (2015) states that low SES students are more concerned with just making ends meet. Study participants who were lower-income expressed their dependency on the availability of on-campus jobs, working part time, and the ways in which they spent and budgeted their money in comparison to other students. These students were

also more likely to have a jaded or emotional reaction to questions that compared their experiences to students who were middle or upper class.

Low-income participants displayed an “us vs. them” attitude when disassociating themselves from “those other kids” who they perceived to be, as Stuber (2006) describes as “lazy and lacking appreciation for what they have.” Abraham-Jack (2014) shares this sentiment that working-class students feel “intimidated by and inferior to their wealthy peers” (p. 454). Among my participants, this felt sense of “us vs. them” was mostly only evident for the one study participant from the local community. Catherine offered a unique vantage point as someone who grew up in the community and now was a student. She reflected on her feelings of her new acquired access to campus as a student to a place that has always felt “cordoned off” to the community. She expressed mixed emotions of feeling pride to be a student, shame and embarrassment when students from the north made fun of her southern accent, and a later developed sense of empowerment once she became more comfortable in her new environment. Hurst (2016) nicely captures her feelings, as well as those of other working-class students, including a mixture of feelings such as guilt, resentment, anger and then pride for accomplishing goals despite those feelings.

When it comes to race and this study, racial issues weren’t mentioned as much as I anticipated. While a couple of study participants shared isolated incidents of racial bias or microaggressions by white students or professors, none of the non-white participants discussed any on-going issues of racial bias or discrimination, even as I asked about racial identity and racialized experiences. For context, Hamilton is a small private predominantly white university nestled in a small predominantly white community of about 11,000 people. McCoy (2014) would characterize Hamilton as an EPWI (extremely predominantly white institution) because the

university has a “history of racism and exclusionary practices; the local surrounding community is overwhelmingly white (exceeding 90%) and offers limited resources and/or services for people of color” (p. 156). The surrounding county is home to about 170,000 residents with about 69% of residents identifying as white, about 25% African American, and roughly 6% Hispanic (Datausa.com).

This study took place during the 2020 Presidential election between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. This was a time of very polarizing political views and protests against racism. The county in which Hamilton University is situated voted 54% and 53% Donald Trump in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections respectively (CNN.com). The surrounding community and county were filled with very vocal Trump supporters, a sentiment which often spilled over onto the campus community. One incident that came up for a couple of participants of color was a large Trump Truck Caravan that traveled through the main public roads of campus. Following a Trump rally in the community, Trump supporters made their way to campus, driving pick-up trucks and displaying Trump and confederate flags while shouting obscenities to onlookers. During this time, study participants (mainly students of color) expressed feeling unsafe on campus and when interacting with members of the surrounding community.

Overall, it seemed my study participants did not have the language to easily articulate the impact of race and class on their experiences, but they were evident in the data. Only three participants explicitly mentioned the words “race” and “class” verbatim in their responses, while others either didn’t mention it, or described their experiences as “different” than others. Participants who were low-income and non-cohorted are spending their free time working to afford their college life, missing out on their college experiences, and feeling forgotten about by the university. Participants with slightly higher income and financial support from their families,

have a bit more freedom to experience college without the necessity of working to afford college. All students exhibited the tremendous ability to work hard. However, for students who were from working-class families, their social and academic college experiences were shaped by how much freedom they could afford. Ultimately, non-cohorted students had varied college experiences that were impacted by the intersections of their race, social class, and socioeconomic status.

What Barriers and or Challenges do First-Generation Students Experience at a Private, Selective, Predominantly White University?

In asking the second secondary question, I aimed to examine the barriers and challenges faced by non-cohorted first-generation college students at Hamilton University. I discussed these barriers at length in my findings chapter. They include limited access to college knowledge, challenges with feeling a sense of belonging on a predominantly white and affluent campus, difficulty affording college expenses, and a general felt sense of a lack of campus support.

Lack of College Knowledge

Whether study participants acknowledged it or not, study data shows many of my participants lacked some general understanding of vital college knowledge before and during the college application process. This statement is particularly true for study participants who had access to private college counselors to assist with their college application process – they were aware they were lacking this information and sought out support. The difference among participants is whether they received support or guidance from other sources such as parents, teachers, counselors, or private college counselors. Only one participant reported participation in a college access program. As Kezar and Kitchen (2019) state, increasing college knowledge for

first-generation college students is a vital intervention to help improve college success. Lower-income participants were least likely to have received on-going support during the college application process. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) agree that first generation students often lack the institutional knowledge and access to support through social capital to help with applying to college and making college decisions. The absence of strong college knowledge was truly evident in some participant's college search process and eventually, their decision to attend Hamilton without substantial or sufficient financial support.

College knowledge includes how to search for a best fit college, how to efficiently search and acquire scholarships, and a general understanding of specific college terminology in reference to financial aid and student loans. Additionally, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) maintain that first-generation students are more likely to lack the institutional knowledge helpful for achieving academic success since typically no one in their immediate family has completed a college degree. However, in my study, some of my participants had siblings who were in college or who had graduated; these siblings provided them some college capital. My study participants who didn't have additional support during their application process leaned on their own 'expertise,' which often leads to uninformed decisions, missed opportunities, and misinformation. In my professional position, when guiding first-generation and low-income high school students through the college application process, I help them create a college list based on their standardized test scores and GPA, as well as a targeted scholarship list. We also identify schools based on that student's preferences such as large or small, public or private, in or out of state, and the availability of major and specialized programs or experiences. Their college list is then organized in a manner that categorizes schools as a Choice, Target or Challenge. Their Choice school is a school where the student's test scores and GPA are well above the average; a

Target school is a school where the student's GPA and test scores are right on par with the average admitted student, and their Challenge section includes schools where the student's GPA and test scores are below the average admitted student. Schools in the Challenge section may also be a financial or cultural challenge; these schools may also be more selective thus lacking diversity among its accepted applicants.

With a strong foundation of college knowledge, study participants may have made a more informed college decision during the application and enrollment process, even as most seemed satisfied with their academic experiences at Hamilton. One participant shared that she regrets not asking more questions before enrolling in Hamilton because she felt it was now too late to transfer or start over. Before applying to colleges, I encourage the high school students I work with to apply to a minimum of three schools, including at least one in-state public school. Students also are required to submit their college applications during the early application deadline which increases their chances of being considered for institutional scholarships and grants. This method increases their chances of acceptance, merit scholarship awards, and assures they will have an affordable college option when making their final decision. These strategies that I teach my high school students would have been quite helpful to many of the participants in my study.

When study participants were asked about how they searched for colleges to apply to, it was evident from their responses that few had any systematic method to narrow their options. When making college choices, Pascarella et al. (2004) argue that first-generation college students are often at a disadvantage because they lack assistance in selecting a college, have limited knowledge about higher education, and are academically under-prepared for college. Participants shared they focused on location, whether the school was small or large, whether the school had

their major, or whether the school offered special opportunities such as study abroad. Brian shared that he only applied to one school (Hamilton), simply because an actor graduated from there, without consideration of whether he could afford to attend. Affordability was a factor for some, however, study participants seemed to have different interpretations of how a college was affordable. For some, affordable meant that they were offered several scholarships, or that they were able to “afford” college with student loans. I found this was both interesting and alarming. As a college access professional, I’ve come to learn that college often is touted as “good debt” and many families seek out universities that meet other desires without fully considering financial affordability. Finances aside, families also make college decisions based on certain affinities such as a college athletic team or a distant family history of college attendance at a particular school; this is sometimes true for Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

First generation college students are more likely to apply to and enroll in colleges and universities that are not a good fit academically or financially. However, for these study participants, Hamilton University was a great fit academically, just not the best financial fit for some. While some students had plans of applying to Hamilton before senior year, other study participants found Hamilton based on advertisements, emails, or word of mouth. Study participants shared that in addition to Hamilton, they had other universities on their college list like Hamilton that were also small, private, liberal arts schools with ‘charm.’ Participants described ‘charm’ as entailing unique traditions that were specific to the institution, the look of the campus environment (e.g., buildings aesthetics), and the feel of the surrounding community. Participants were looking for a place where they felt at home, and Hamilton does a great job with creating that environment.

Once students arrived on campus though, many low-income study participants seemed to lack navigation skills surrounding how to access information and resources, whereas participants who were of higher socioeconomic status didn't express the same challenge of finding information. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) found that the first-generation students who are lower-income struggle with navigating the "cultures and bureaucracies of higher education" due to the absence of practice and the foundational institutional knowledge held by their peers with higher income. In high school, students typically have easy access to school counselors and teachers, however, at college, it's harder to pinpoint a specific resource or staff for those random questions that might come up such as, when can a student take a W for a class. Lower-income students expressed the need for more targeted support.

While college is such a big decision that should also be a well-informed decision, I wasn't surprised at the lack of college knowledge exhibited by participants. Overall, participant's lack of college knowledge can be directly linked to one's access to social and financial capital, lack of college preparation, and overall guidance through the college application process. Participants, in many ways, chose a great institution. Hamilton is an amazing institution and because of its tightknit alumni network, students are more likely to land impressive opportunities following graduation which will likely yield productive professional careers. These opportunities will be much needed as many study participants reported taking on a huge financial responsibility to be a Hamilton student.

Paying for College

Affording college expenses at a private university can be a challenge, especially for students with limited financial means. Lower-income students often rely on scholarships, institutional aid, and federal financial aid to help cover the costs of their college expenses. At

private colleges and universities, tuition can span from \$30,000 to upwards of about \$70,000 per academic year. Cost of attendance typically includes tuition and fees, on campus housing, a meal plan, and sometimes student health insurance. For the 2020-2021 academic year, Hamilton's tuition was a little over \$19,000 per semester, totaling to roughly \$39,000 per year; this doesn't include the cost of meals, additional student fees such as insurance, or housing. Tuition and fees are likely to have a small increase each academic school year.

Making a final college decision should also include incorporating one's financial aid award letter. High school students who I work with receive one to one financial guidance when making a final college decision. Once students have been admitted and issued an award letter (a statement issued by financial aid outlining scholarships, federal, and institutional aid awarded to the student), each award letter is analyzed to determine the amount of student loans the student may or may not have to use, whether the student will have an overage (the cost of attendance is covered by awards), or whether the student will have a gap (the cost of attendance not covered by awards). This information is provided to students and families so that each family can make the best academic and financial decision with all the facts and figures. Each student's award letter is different depending on the institution and family income and expected family contribution (EFC). In the end, even with all the information provided, and warnings against incurring a lot of student debt, some families make the decision to enroll their children into institutions where there's a large financial gap or the student is accruing large amounts of student loans, all so the student can attend the school of their dreams.

When study participants were asked about their finances, lower-income students spoke about student loan debt, working to cover their bills, and planning/budgeting to afford their college experiences such as internships or studying abroad. Of the study participants who chose

to disclose information about paying for college, six shared they were paying for their tuition with the help of student loans. Two participants shared that they had all student loans to cover their expenses. The difference between the two was that one participant had parents to help cover the debt, the other would be repaying the loans on her own. This participant was confused about the financial-aid language, differences between subsidized and unsubsidized loans, and felt that her grandparents wouldn't be able to help her understand how to make those financial decisions about student loans. The literature shows that students who are first generation and lower income are less likely to have financial literacy and be informed about student loans (Yes We Must Coalition Report, 2018). This lack of financial literacy can potentially have detrimental implications for lower-income students since, ideally, they are attending college to have a better financial future, however, if they're strapped with student loan debt following graduation, it can be hard to actualize their dreams.

When asked about applying for scholarships, one participant described her search as unsuccessful. In her search, she came across many local scholarships that she wasn't eligible for because the qualifications were catered to student athletes or students who were native to the area; this student relocated to the state at the beginning of high school. In my experience with helping my high school students develop their scholarship list, they are instructed to focus on local scholarships that are specific to the state, their city, their county, and their school. This method helps to decrease the amount of competition and increases their probability of acquiring scholarship funds. Typically, when the general population of students apply for scholarships, they focus on national scholarships (ex: Gates, Coca-Cola) that are open to the entire country, consist of large award amounts, but are highly competitive because there are more applicants. The average student is less likely to acquire these scholarships because the applicant pool is

extremely competitive with applicants who have high GPAs and impressive resumes displaying extensive service and leadership experience. This is true for many of the study participants who were either unsuccessful in their scholarship search or didn't know how to search for scholarships and didn't try. Most participants reported applying for the First Scholars program or for other institutional award competitions. All participants (except for the student athlete) were awarded some institutional aid, but not enough to cover the full cost of their expenses.

Working while attending school is a common experience for many college students. However, working to afford college expenses is more common for lower-income students. There were two study participants who reported working full time while in school to cover their expenses, while other participants had at least an on-campus job. One of these study participants also reported the negative impact of her work schedule on her physical and mental health. Pascarella et al. (2004) state that when compared to peers, first generation students worked more hours per week during college and their work responsibilities had a more negative impact on their growth. On the other hand, study participants with a higher income were more likely to report that their parents were covering the college expenses either through payments or student loans, but they did not have to work to help their parents pay for college.

Lower-income participants reflected upon the unpredictability of financial aid. Each year, tuition typically increases by a certain percentage. Student aid, however, doesn't often reflect that. The Yes We Must Coalition Report (2018) supports that many first generation college students "wished their financial aid could've been more predictable so that they didn't have to find ways to address unanticipated increases in tuition, fees, or other college related expenses." Jonna shared that, when tuition increased, she called financial aid to ask for additional help because her aid didn't adjust to meet the needs of the increase, so she was forced to take out

more student loans. Additionally, she shared that her interactions with financial aid office were often unpleasant and unhelpful; she often felt as if she were bothering them by asking questions for clarification to better understand her bill.

A Sense of Belonging

Transitioning to college can be a challenge for any student. However, middle to low-income students transitioning to an affluent private college or university can face even more of a challenge if students aren't accustomed to affluent culture and norms. Abraham-Jack (2019) defines the Doubly Disadvantaged students as those who are both poor and unfamiliar with affluent culture. Entering an affluent or predominantly white college campus, students often begin college at a disadvantage because not only do they have to adjust to a new environment, they also have to learn a new set of typically unspoken rules. Affluence is displayed by materials, and for many lower-income study participants who didn't have access to these "things," it was difficult for them to feel like they belonged. Aries and Seider (2005) describe how the affluent display their economic capital in the ways they spend their money on trips, meals off campus, and in their possessions. Alternatively, the lower-income students in my study reported avoiding going out to dinners and visits to the coffee shop because they simply couldn't afford it and did not want to feel obligated to explain their finances; being a racial minority can lead to even more financial challenges when transitioning to college. Like Abraham-Jack, McCoy (2014) argues that students of color are more likely to experience further challenges that include "but are not limited to the absence of mentors and role models during the admissions process, a lack of familiarity with higher education, and a disconnect between their culture" and the culture of their college or university community (p. 156).

Further, McCoy (2014) states that when you combine challenges related to finances and coming from a minority group with being a first-generation college student, finding your place on a predominantly white college campus can be and feel like a daunting task. However, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) found that first-generation white students who were from higher income families had an easier transition and felt an instant sense of belonging because some of them “possess the cultural capital of the dominant group.” Nevertheless, most researchers agree that first-generation college students need healthy peer connections to support a strong sense of belonging, but these connections may be difficult for them given their cultural differences from their non-first generation peers. One African American female participant, Mia, found her connection through an African American RA and through an African American female professor. Other students of color found their connection to the university through participation in various affinity groups associated with religion, culture, or identity. These links and visual examples of representation help students to feel a sense of belonging and create a safe space for students of color and marginalized populations.

How do Non-Cohorted First-Generation College Students Leverage Resources, Including Academic and Social Support on Campus?

Through my third and final secondary research question, I explored the ways in which non-cohorted first-generation college students leveraged resources on their college campus. In my experience, the non-cohorted first-generation students with whom I’ve worked were reluctant to ask for help or utilize on-campus resources until they absolutely needed to. In my study, I was interested to find out what resources non-cohorted first generation students took advantage of, how often those resources were used, or alternatively, why students failed to access available campus resources.

“Doing it on my Own”

Throughout participant responses, there was a recurring theme of self-reliance. Repeatedly, participants shared statements such as “I had to figure it out on my own,” or “I just did it myself.” Before engaging in this research study, I didn’t recognize that leveraging resources can be viewed as a privilege and having time or the confidence to access those resources is also a privilege. For students who must work, accessing professors’ office hours during the school day or utilizing a librarian during resource hours can be challenging. Utilizing resources before an emergency is a behavior that many first-generation students must learn. In my work with working-class families and students, these families have been more reactive than proactive, meaning, the use of resources took place when there was an issue and not as a preventative measure. As a result, student’s I’ve worked with often didn’t utilize me as a resource until the issue had become an emergency. I found that students in my study often were similarly reactive, waiting longer than they needed to or should in order to ask for help.

In terms of types of support, participants expressed the importance of having a person (First-Gen Support Staff) they could rely on to support them. Stanton-Salazar (2011) explains the importance of an institutional agent. An institutional agent can be understood as an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status and authority. Schelbe et al. (2019) maintain that the presence of designated First-Generation staff in partnership with other administrators is vital in creating a strong sense of support and advocacy for students when they encounter financial struggles or challenges during college. Each low-income study participant shared their connection with the First-Gen Support Staff person and how grateful they were to have someone designated for them. Study participants from middle or higher income didn’t express the need to utilize this support person or resources.

Alternatively, negative experiences with university administration may lead to a general lack of trust. One negative experience with school administration can lead to a reluctance to reach out to anyone for help. For example, Jonna shared her negative experience with the school's office of financial aid when she was seeking guidance around student loans and she felt as if her questions were bothersome, and she didn't want to reach out again. While her experience is only one example, it highlights the idea shared by the Yes We Must Coalition (2018) that campus resources that are student-facing, such as financial aid, should receive additional training to be "more knowledgeable, student-oriented, and more professional" when working with marginalized student populations (p. 4). Longwell-Grice (2008) adds that cultivating relationships with school administrators impacts the persistence of first-generation college students and helps students navigate the unwritten rules on campus, thus equipping students with the necessary capital for college. Unfortunately, as a result of negative experiences, intimidation, or lack of capital, first generation students are less likely to cultivate those relationships.

Stuber (2011) writes that within the education setting, social capital "functions as an invisible resource - in the form of knowledge about school culture - that selects and conditions some students for success while marking others as poorly suited to academic or social distinction" (p. 119). For example, study participants expressed the feelings of not knowing how to engage with professors regarding research opportunities, lacking a level of comfort or confidence around communicating with administrators, and simply feeling lost. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) found these feelings of disconnect in their study, showing that first-generation students are more likely to feel a "cultural dislocation" and further "marginalization" when struggling to navigate campus culture. The cultural capital that first-generation students need

includes normalizing behaviors such as asking for help, seeking guidance from faculty and staff, using those individuals as resources, and taking advantage of on campus resource centers.

When asked about using resources on campus, most study participants admitted to not utilizing campus resources such as the Writing Center, or offices dedicated to celebrating race and ethnicity. Students were more likely to utilize their Resident Assistants (RA's) in their residential communities, older peers, or their professors. Students were more comfortable with acquiring help from peers or from an individual they trusted. Schelbe et al. (2019) argued that representation matters in university staff, finding that first-generation students were more likely to reach out to a faculty or staff member they'd established a rapport with before visiting a university resource center. For example, representation helped study participant Mia connect with her African American RA, and for other participants to connect with other faculty and staff who proudly added the "I am First Gen" logo to their office doors and email signatures. Creating a visible network of 'people like me' provides safe spaces for first generation students to establish a sense of belonging and connection to their predominantly white and affluent university.

Limitations

In this study, I explored how non-cohorted first-generation college students experienced college both socially and academically. My goal was to gain insight into students' lived experiences with hopes of informing programming and support for first-generation college students at private universities looking to start or improve their support efforts. While the participant narratives yielded valuable information for Hamilton University and First-Generation practitioners, there were three main limitations to this study: a lack of university connection with

non-cohorted students, sample size, and the impact of the Covid-19 global health pandemic. These limitations had a significant impact on my overall study.

First, this study focused on the experiences of non-cohorted first-generation students, meaning these students were not connected to any university-led scholarship or fellowship program that provided ongoing support or a group-like connection between other students. Solicitation for volunteers for this study was done in partnership with the newly established First Generation Support office. Using an email list provided by admissions, the First-Generation Staff sent study information to non-cohorted students on my behalf. Likely due to the newness of the support office, lack of familiarity with the First-Generation staff, and lack of relationship with this office, few students responded initially to participate in this study. Students who responded to the research study request were more likely to be students who'd already connected with the First-Generation Support Staff or were students who were friends of the First Scholars program and familiar with the support center. In my experience, students are more likely to participate when they are already in relationship or connected to the department or office that is requesting their participation.

Second, the sample size for this study was much smaller than I anticipated and involved mostly first and second year students. Initially, my hope was to interview over 20 participants who were first year through seniors, which would be more representative of the student population. While I initially had well over 20 volunteers who completed the pre-survey, the majority of students who completed the survey were participants in other cohort programs. Keeping in mind that the invitation to join the study was sent out early in the semester, the other problem was that students would schedule, forget, and then reschedule and forget their appointment again. This pattern continued throughout the semester until students began to stop

rescheduling. Ultimately, I was able to recruit and interview thirteen participants with varied backgrounds and experiences.

Finally, this study took place during a global pandemic due to the Corona Virus. This pandemic forced universities to pivot from in person, on campus instruction to a completely virtual platform. Students were forced to either remain on campus and continue remote learning or return home and complete remote learning. For over a year, students were either completely remote while some universities slowly transitioned to a hybrid model, offering some courses online and others with limited in person gatherings based on CDC guidelines. While most students lived on campus at Hamilton while I conducted the study, they were isolated based on campus restrictions and online courses.

As students adjusted to online learning, they began to experience what higher education professionals have been calling “virtual fatigue.” In addition to classes, all communication shifted to a virtual platform; this included professors’ office hours, student organization meetings, etc. Additionally, students were isolated from their friends and families for long periods of time. If students contracted the virus while on campus, they were quarantined on campus in a residence hall with no outside contact for two weeks. To date, there have been over 600,000 deaths due to Covid-19 (CDC) in the United States, and while students attempted to focus on classes, some were impacted with family members contracting the virus, death of loved ones as a result of the virus, and some were dealing with contracting the virus themselves.

During data collection, there was a strong initial response for study participation. However, as the pandemic and isolation continued, study participation and response slowed. I experienced a slump in email responses, missed appointments for interviews, and an overall lack of interest in participation. While I’d hoped for more participation in the study to get a broader

scope of student experiences, I made the choice to not bother students for participation for a few months until the semester ended. At the conclusion of the semester, I followed up with students who'd signed up to participate but had yet to interview. I asked if they were still interested in participating and if no, asked why they no longer wanted to participate. Most students simply stated that they were overwhelmed. What is known about completing research with student participants is that there are always uncontrollable variables that researchers are unable to prepare for, and while I anticipated a struggle to recruit participants, I could not have prepared for the impact of Covid-19.

Implications

In this study, I describe some of the lived experiences of thirteen first generation college students who were not part of a cohort program at Hamilton University. Their experiences provide insight into the likely experiences of other first generation college students at the University who aren't connected to a community of support. While each student's experiences are uniquely their own, they all shared some commonalities that researchers have found are often experienced by other first-generation college students. As the university continues to recruit students from marginalized communities and advertise that it is a first-generation student serving institution, it is my hope that information shared in this study will help lead to further inquiry at the university and add to the larger body of research for practitioners aiming to establish or build support systems around this student population. In this section, I present implications for further research and practice. Student narratives about their lived experiences are vital to the ways in which colleges and universities develop initiatives of practice. Participants in this study represent a small percentage of non-cohorted first-generation college students at Hamilton University. While many university administrators create spaces for students to be involved in programmatic

decisions, this study allowed me to think deeply about the ways in which non-cohorted first generation students can be supported by being involved in the curation of programmatic efforts aimed to support them.

Recommendations for Practice

Participants shared several suggestions for ways in which colleges and universities could better serve first-generation college students. These suggestions can be implemented on a smaller programmatic level or can be utilized by administrators toward university policy changes. Colleges and universities must first acknowledge and validate the experiences of students on their campus. Students gave several examples and suggestions of ways practitioners are currently moving in the right direction in terms of providing support, but change should be on-going. As I have previously discussed, the University has established a First-Generation Student Support Office. This office is staffed with one professional staff person and one graduate student. Together they provide a monthly informative newsletter, weekly events, social media engagement and a space for students to study. Additionally, professional staff provides opportunities for non-cohorted students to schedule meetings to talk about challenges, resources, course selection, or to simply provide support when students are in need. The First-Gen office is currently exploring possibilities of establishing a freshman seminar course and living learning community to give students an opportunity to connect with other students who closely identify with being a first-generation college student. One of the most important elements of practice is this office places non-cohorted students at the center of their own decision making and programming. Students are often at the forefront of engagement, program planning, and development. As a new office, these programmatic efforts are examples of strategies that other

colleges and universities can adapt as they hope to build first-generation student support on their campus.

Private, affluent colleges and universities should be more intentional about the resources provided to all of their students. It is well-known among student affairs professionals that colleges and universities typically front load support, resources, communication, and outreach toward first-year students. Outreach to transfer and upperclassmen looks differently at each school, however, the support is not as aggressive in comparison to first-year student support. This gap is important because study participants who were upper-class students expressed feeling a disconnect between university support efforts. However, during their first year they could count on the university to reach out to them, but junior to senior year students recognized a drastic difference in outreach efforts.

As the university continues to grow and attract more students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students, it's imperative that students are included in the decisions surrounding support efforts for these student populations. These efforts might include student leaders on task forces, gleaned experiences from student surveys and polls, or simply engaging with students to ask their opinion about their needs and interventions that may help practitioners pay sustained attention to student experiences. Reflecting upon study participant comments, I think students simply wanted to feel seen, heard, and supported by university faculty and staff. This was particularly true for those students who aren't as outgoing or confident as others. Smaller universities make it easier to cultivate relationships with faculty and staff. However, individuals on the administrative side may need additional professional development on methods on how to better serve and support marginalized populations.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study aimed to fill a gap in current research on first-generation college students, specifically those attending affluent, predominately white colleges and universities and who are not part of cohort-like programs. While there is a growing body of literature on first generation student experiences, this research is often not conducted on private and elite or elite-aspiring institutions. However, findings from this study cannot be generalized for all non-cohorted first generation college students nor should these findings be generalized for all private affluent colleges and universities. This study also aimed to inform the practices and research of universities who seek to establish or grow their support efforts surrounding this specific student population. While the experiences of first-generation college students cannot be generalized to fit an entire category of students, this study does provide important insights to help practitioners begin to understand the complexities and nuance of student experiences at affluent white colleges and universities. Many first-generation students may share similar experiences, however, each student's story and journey will be inherently different. These experiences may also differ based on the college or university students attend. Therefore, findings from this study, methodological approach, and limitations can serve as a launch point to guide future research.

Findings from this study can be used to inform further research both at Hamilton University and within the broader context of first-generation college student research. However, for future researchers, studying the experiences of first-generation students at one snapshot in time will only yield a limited amount of data. Instead, scholars should consider implementing longitudinal studies at specific universities to examine experiences of students over time. Practitioners should consider using a case study approach toward examining the academic and social experiences of first-generation college students who are non-cohorted at universities

across the country as well as the impact of first generation student support efforts. This approach will not only provide insight on non-cohorted first generation student experiences, but also incorporate other factors such as university culture, funding, resources, and financial and staff support. These are all elements that contribute to the overall college experiences of non-cohorted first generation college students.

Another important prospective research area might be examining the administrative process and procedures that might further marginalize students from marginalized populations. For example, examining student experiences with Admissions, Financial Services, campus police and Faculty members could provide insights into how these offices could best serve all students well. Students and families interact with these individuals on a daily basis; gaining a better understanding of how those interactions impact students could have significant implications to student success and retention. Lastly, if colleges and universities are implementing new first generation support programming or models, for cohorted or non-cohorted students, practitioners could track the impact of programming. Understanding the impact of resources on student engagement, sense of belonging, academics, retention, and attrition are all vital data metrics that will inform the success or expose challenges of the newly established programming. While talking with first-generation college students helped me to understand the ways in which they struggle, it would be useful to know if their struggles are significantly different than other students on campus, and whether they are retained and graduate at the same rates as other students at Hamilton. This would require tracking cohorts of students over time.

Closing Reflection and Conclusions

This study grew out of my own personal experience as a first-generation college student and from my professional experience with supporting first-generation college students in higher

education. As an advocate for this population of students, I often reflect on my own academic and social challenges with transitioning from high school to a large, predominantly white university. I specifically remember my academic struggles and not knowing how to study, but I saw this as a reflection of my own academic inability, not considering the lack of college preparation in my high school. My academic confidence was low and I consistently questioned whether I belonged in college. I began this research with the hope of giving a voice to the lived experiences of non-cohorted students at Hamilton University that would inform the larger body of literature on first-generation college students. It's so easy to assume that all first-generation students have the same general college experiences, but I wanted to view their experience from their vantage points.

Being an employee at Hamilton was my first time experiencing a small liberal arts affluent private school and I will admit to having assumptions surrounding the types of student experiences that took place. As a reminder, in my position, I worked closely with the local public school system and high school students who were participants in our college access program; I had limited interaction with Hamilton students. My preconceived notions motivated me to learn about how students at Hamilton truly experienced academics and college life.

Throughout this project, I found myself inspired by several participant stories. I was moved by students like Erin, Corrine, and Mia who impressed me with their resilience, drive, and savvy to navigate college. This study further exposed the need for first-generations students to understand how to leverage their college experiences to maximize their potential for after graduation. For students like Corrine who had to work to pay her way through college, they often sacrifice those very co-curricular experiences that have the potential to lead to new opportunities.

In addition, for first-generation college students (particularly those with less financial and social capital), these additional wrap around supports would be helpful:

1. Designated Staff/Peer mentor support (on-going)
2. Financial support to participate in co-curricular opportunities such as study abroad and internships
3. Targeted Career Planning
4. Representation in school Faculty & Staff

In retrospect, if I were to do this study again, I would look closer at these four areas of support to learn about whether or not first generation college students utilize these resources. Ultimately, if colleges and universities truly want to be of service to this student population, then staff, resources, and finances need to be provided to help students be more successful in college to yield more success after college graduation.

Thinking back on my own journey from college to this point in my career, this study reminded me of the influential individuals who've supported me, gave me an opportunity, or took the time to simply see me and my potential. I will be forever grateful to these people and I now have a better understanding about how not everyone has these kind of influential people in their lives. I have always been passionate about supporting first generation college students and this study reminded me that at the very root of student support is the student. As long as institutions center their work around student needs and outcomes, they will continue to move the needle forward on creating better educational opportunities for all students. I'm committed to supporting first-generation students and it is my hope that my research will land in a room of advocates or administrators that seek to level the playing field for first generation students. Until

then, student voices will remain at the center of my practice because every student deserves to be first.

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APPENDIX A: PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Are you a first-generation college student? (neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree)
2. How would you describe your family's income level?
3. What is your school classification (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior)?
4. How many years have you been a student at Hamilton University?
5. Are you part of the First Fam program?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me a little about yourself?
2. Talk a little about your family and your upbringing?
3. What was your high school experience like?
4. 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?
5. Were you part of any form of college access program?
6. Talk about your understanding of what it means to be a first-generation college student.
To what extent is this a salient identity for you?
7. How did you decide to attend Hamilton University?
8. Are you familiar with the First Fam program? Did you consider joining the program?
Why didn't you join this program?
9. What other programs, clubs, groups are you a part of on campus?
10. How has your participation or affiliation in these groups impacted your college experience?
11. Describe your first-year experience at Hamilton.
 - a. Academics
 - b. Social
12. What resources or offices do you or utilize for academic and other forms of support on campus (e.g., academic, social, emotional, financial)?
13. What challenges have you experienced here at Hamilton?

14. Do you feel your college experiences have differed from other students who aren't first-generation college students here at Hamilton? Who aren't part of the First Scholars program?
15. In what ways do you feel this school supports you as a first-generation college student?
16. As a first-generation college student, what did/do you need that you didn't/have not received as a first-generation college student?
17. Can you describe how it feels to be a first-generation college student at Hamilton?
18. To you, what does it mean to be a first-generation college student at Hamilton?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your experience as a first-generation college student at Hamilton?