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Partida, Anna Laura

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Barriers and Successes First-Generation Students Face in their Path to Higher Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Anna Laura Lozano-Partida

Committee in charge:

University of California, San Diego

Professor Amanda Datnow, Chair
Professor Sherice Clarke

California State University of California, San Marcos

Professor Ana Hernandez

2018
The Dissertation of Anna Lozano-Partida is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

California State University San Marcos

2018
DEDICATION

To my mother, Maria Elena.

For the endless support and commitment to my education, you believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself, you pushed me when I could push no more, this journey has been possible because of you, this accomplishment is for us.

To my husband, Mario.

For the endless patience, positive energy, and unconditional love even when I was at my worst. This process was challenging but never once did you lose faith in my ability or our love.

To my family, Lozano and Martinez

For loving me through this journey. For understanding that I could not attend all the events or all the celebrations. You scarified along with me but not once did you question my commitment to our family or my passion for education. I hope that is accomplishment inspires others to do the same. We can all achieve whatever we set our minds to.

To my friends, Jackie and Holly

There are no other people I would rather be on this journey with. We laughed, we cried and we survived. Thank you!
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VITA

Educational Degrees
2018 University of California, San Diego
   California State University San Marcos
   Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

2011 Chapman University
   Master of Arts in Educational Leadership and Administration

2009 California State University Bakersfield
   Multiple Subject Teaching Credential

2005 University of California, Los Angeles
   Bachelor of Science in Physiological Science

Credentials
2011 Preliminary Administrative Services Credential

2008 Multiple Subjects Teaching Credential

2012 Single Subject Teaching Credential (Biological Sciences)

Professional Experience
2016 Principal, Elementary Charter School

2013 Assistant Principal, Middle School

2012 English Language Learner Lead, Middle School

2011 Intervention Lead, Middle School

2007 Teacher, Middle School
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Barriers and Successes First-Generation Students Face in their Path to Higher Education

by

Anna Laura Lozano-Partida

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California, 2018
California State University, San Marcos, 2018

Professor Amanda Datnow, Chair

For first-generation college-going students, education is an opportunity to break out of their inherited socioeconomic status. Though this resource is available to first-generation college students, they are not accessing postsecondary opportunities as much as their non-first-generation counterparts. Prior research has shown that students with college educated parents have a greater advantage in accessing higher education over first-generation college students. Most first-generation college students and their parents have limited access to social networks and information, and this causes a reliance on the K-12 system for direct guidance in their quest to higher education.

This dissertation explores the challenges and successes first-generation college students face in accessing higher education. Interviews were conducted with fifteen first-year, first-generation college students from a mid-size public university. Data were analyzed and coded for themes and patterns. The goal was to gain insight into these students’ stories and the factors they identify as key in increasing their access to higher education. Findings show that first-generation
students find motivation through their families. Not all motivation comes from positive family experiences, but these students desire to attend college so they can have a “better life” with or without the support of their families. The K-12 system continues to provide procedural information and access to higher education, but the process seems to start too late for many students. Most students recall receiving college information in high school but not so much in elementary or middle school. Teachers, counselor and programs provide access to higher education but these supports vary from school to school. Though first-generation students are making it to college, they struggle to understand the financial aspects of higher education and therefore limit their selection to colleges that are affordable rather than their “dream schools.”

This study yields important implications that can assist aspiring first-generation college students. This research also has the potential to assist and guide educational systems in better supporting the needs of these students.

*Keywords:* First-generation college student, social capital, human capital
Chapter One: Introduction

One of the most powerful resources for social mobility for students of color and students of low socioeconomic backgrounds is higher education. Education is arguably the tool that allows students to move up within the socioeconomic system regardless of their family’s beginnings (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Sewell, Hauser, & Featherman, 1976). Unfortunately, students of color, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, tend to be the first in their families to attempt college. At times, this notion of being the first to navigate the educational system comes with challenges that make accessing higher education seem impossible.

Navigating a new path with limited information or limited resources can make the journey more challenging, regardless of one’s personal desires or aspirations. Most first-generation college students face multiple barriers that place them at a disadvantage in their quest of simply accessing higher education. While their families are encouraging and supportive, they are not familiar with the path to higher education. As a result, first-generation college students strongly rely on the K-12 system to properly prepare them for college.

Despite the intensity of the journey, first-generation college students are applying and getting accepted into higher education institutions. There is an increasing number of first-generation college students, but the rate of low-income students of color completing higher education has not kept pace with the population shifts. Looking into these students’ personal journeys and identifying key factors that have helped make the journey possible, or difficult, can be beneficial in supporting this grueling process for others.

Statement of the Problem
Benefits of an Education. Research has found that postsecondary education has multiple benefits including financial and social advantages for any student that attends and completes a degree (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). Adults in the 25 to 34 year-old age range with a college degree earn 40 percent more income than their peers that have not completed their degrees (U.S. Census Bureau Current Survey, 2002). This survey also found that adults within this age range earn about two-thirds more than their peers with only a high school degree. The data show that postsecondary education is one of the main pathways to a better financial outcome regardless of one's initial socioeconomic status. Higher education can open the door to many social opportunities, for example, connections that can lead to better jobs and other networks of emotional support (Wohn et al., 2013). Simply going through the college process allows young adults to build social networks that they previously did not possess. Postsecondary education has clear benefits for all students yet not everyone is attending. Not only are high school graduates not attending college, but the rates in which students are attending are disproportionate for those who will be the first to attend compared to those who are following their parents’ footsteps (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

The Educational Divide. A study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that students whose parents attended and completed college are at a greater advantage when enrolling, persisting, and completing higher education than their first-generation peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Students who have parents with a college degree are more readily continuing their parents’ path. These students are supported and guided by their parents as they prepare and apply to college. On the other hand, first-generation college students are struggling to simply access higher education because they do not have a path to follow similar to those with college-degree earning parents. These first-generation students are limited in social
capital, meaning that at home, they have limited access to people and resources with knowledge of higher education, and this makes their journey more challenging (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). The limited social capital creates a lack of information about higher education within the home.

Parents of first-generation college students do not have the first-hand knowledge of how to access post-secondary education, and they have limited human capital in regards to higher education. Even when they want to help, they often do not know how to guide their children. These students are left to find other sources of information and support outside of the home. This lack of human capital in first-generation students creates a dependency on the K-12 education system for information on the path to accessing higher education. First-generation college students look to their school-based social networks, which are made up of teacher, counselors, and other students, for guidance and access support. This access is often muddled by how impacted the K-12 schools are at any given time and by the knowledge of these individuals themselves.

Educators in K-12 schools are aware that they need to provide information regarding postsecondary education to students, but they face challenges in providing the information. Schools vary in resources and programs to increase access to post-secondary institutions. Some schools have school-wide initiatives, others focus on particular subgroups, and some provide one-on-one guidance for students. The programs being implemented and the adults providing the information -- teachers, counselors, and administrators -- vary from site to site creating different levels of support depending on the location of a school and the knowledge each individual (Choy, 2002). There has been research on the benefits of each type of support and the appropriate age range for each (Domina, 2009; Cates & Schaeffe 2011). Though all supports are
important, there needs to be an understanding of what first-generation students benefit from since they do not have the same level of information at home as other students.

It has been established that higher education has benefits for all students; however, for first-generation students from low socioeconomic households, this opportunity means a lot more. Higher education allows students of low socioeconomic backgrounds to break out of their cycle of poverty (Bowen et al., 2005; Sewell et al., 1976). Education allows students to breakout of their inherited socioeconomic situation. For first-generation students, students of color, and students of low socioeconomic households, education is the one factor that allows them to experience a different outcome in life (Gray, 2013). The problem is that actually attaining a college education is much more difficult than it sounds. This is especially true for students who will be the first in their family to embark on this journey.

Despite countless challenges and barriers, some first-generation students are traveling the difficult journey and they are successfully accessing higher education. It is important that we identify these students and learn about their experiences; both their successes and challenges. This research can assist in guiding the educational system in better supporting the needs of these students. In the section below, I describe the purpose of researching the experiences and insights of first-generation students.

**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The persistent gap between first-generation and non-first-generation students receiving an education beyond high school is a challenge that needs to be addressed. Students with educated parents should not have an advantage over those that do not. Moreover, those that do not have educated parents should have equitable access to basic social capital to help combat the lack of first-hand experience. Individuals are not able to control who they are born to or what
environment they grow up in. One's race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status should not dictate one’s access to success. Higher education is a safe path to success but students of color and those from low socioeconomic status continue to lag behind.

There is a dearth of research that focuses on first-generation college students that have successfully attained access to higher education. These students carry a wealth of first-hand knowledge that can help make the path of others easier. It would be useful to have information about what facilitated their process. As a first-generation college student myself, I experienced first-hand the challenges that can come with lack of basic information and basic lack of preparedness. When you have to work twice as hard as someone else to achieve the same outcome, you want to give up. When you look around and you are underrepresented, you feel out of place and overwhelmed. These are challenges that keep our students of color away from higher education opportunities. It is time we help find balance and support to allow equitable access for all.

The goal of this research was to interview first-year, first-generation college students in their first year of university in order to identify the factors that were helpful and factors that hindered their path to higher education. Therefore, the study sought to answer the following overarching research question: What factors do first-generation college students identify as significant contributors to their success in accessing higher education? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What role do family networks play in helping these students get to college?
2. How do school networks contribute to these students getting to college?
3. Are there additional factors that contribute to increasing access, for example social media/technology/peers?
4. What was most challenging aspect of the process for the student? What advice would they give to other first-generation students and the schools that support these students?

In this study, first-year, first-generation college students were asked about their experiences and the supports they received as they learned and explored the idea of higher education. As a result, I was able to look deeper into the impact of students’ families, schooling, and other factors that impacted their personal knowledge about college. I also gained insight into what factors impact students’ decisions to attend college.

Research Overview

This study used qualitative methods to help make sense of students’ first-hand experiences as first-generation college students. Qualitative research was selected because the qualitative approach allows researchers to explore meaning and gain a deeper understanding of each individual's experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In order to better understand the factors that have impacted first-year, first-generation college students, I conducted fifteen one-to-one interviews over a three-month period. Students participated in face-to-face interviews that ranged from thirty minutes to an hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data were then analyzed for themes and patterns.

Significance of the Study

Looking further into the experiences and stories of our first-generation college students is crucial in our society today. Currently, in the United States we are undergoing a demographic change in which our students of color are shifting from the minority group to the majority group. Latino and African-American students are currently considered the minority; however, these populations are becoming increasingly larger in the United States, especially the Latino
According to the United States Census Bureau, by 2023, more than half of the nation's children will be minorities (Broughton, 2008). Though these groups continue to rapidly grow, they continue to have low college enrollment rates and graduation rates. In order to meet the demands of the current changing population, it is crucial that we take a closer look into the challenges first-generation students of color face in accessing higher education and the reason that they are not applying to post-secondary institutions.

In examining the rates of college enrollment, first-generation and racial status cannot be viewed separately. First-generation students are less likely to enroll in college than their non-first-generation counterparts (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). A recent study of high school graduates found that only 59% of first-generation students enrolled in some type of college while 75% of students with parents with some college experience enrolled in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Second, first-generation students are more likely to be Latino and African-American (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). This causes a “double-whammy” for the students who aspire to go to college. This disproportionality is especially alarming because of the demographic changes the nation is currently undergoing.

In order to address the demographic change and increase the number of first-generation attending college we need to learn more about the students that are first-generation that have made it to college. We need to listen to their stories and gain additional insight into the struggles that challenge first-generation students and the factors that increase a first-generation students access higher education. Gaining insight can help inform the K-12 system and the higher education system to better support the needs of our first-generation students.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Introduction

The intent of this literature review is to identify and describe the multi-level barriers that many first-generation students and their parents face in their efforts to access higher education. Although education is highly regarded as an important component of one’s life, its accessibility is limited to many first-generation college-going students and presents an equity issue. In this review, the focus will be on three main areas of research that have been found to shape the experiences of first-generation college-going students in their path to higher education: social capital and human capital, basic access to college information, and parent participation/involvement. Understanding the current issues with access to social capital and the role parents play in the process of first-generation students accessing higher education is important in clarifying what can be done next. This information can assist the educational system in including better supports for students who will be the first in their family to embark on a new journey.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students have been studied and defined through empirical research since the early 1980’s. Though there are some variations in the definition, the one definition that is consistent is that first-generation students are those who are the first in their family to attend college with the goal of earning a degree (Gofen, 2009; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Research points to two more specific types of first-generation students. The first type of first-generation student is one whose parents did not complete a postsecondary degree, including those whose parents have a high school education or less. This means that neither one of their parents ever attended higher
education (Inkelas et al., 2007; Terenzini et al, 1996). The second type of first-generation student is one whose parents started higher education but did not earn the degree (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). For the purpose of this dissertation, a first-generation college-going student is defined as a student who will be in the first generation of the family to attend college with the aspiration of obtaining a degree. The student’s parent may or may not have attempted college but neither parent completed a degree. First-generation does not necessarily mean the first person in the family to attend college. First-generation college-going students could have older siblings that attended prior to them. These students, however, are in the first cohort of family members to seek out a college degree.

The Role of Social Capital and Human Capital

First-generation college students are at a disadvantage when it comes to basic information about college and how to apply (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These students have parents that did not themselves attend or complete college, therefore, their access to information about the college-going process is very limited. This lack of skills, knowledge, and information from parent to child is directly related to the framework of social capital and human capital, which will provide a theoretical grounding for this study. The theoretical frameworks of social capital and human capital were introduced in the late 1980’s by Bourdieu (1986) and was expanded upon by Coleman (1988). Social capital and human capital are often difficult to understand as they are less tangible as other forms of capital. Social capital comes from different networks but both social capital in the family and social capital in the community both play roles in the creation of human capital in new generations (Coleman, 1988). Below, I will describe each form of capital and its connection to higher education and its impact on first-generation college students.
Social Capital. Bourdieu (1986) described social capital as the existence of social relationships and the social obligations that come from those relationships. More specifically, social capital is the aggregate of the resources that are tied to membership in a specific group. The group itself provides these resources, and they serve as credentials, sources of leverage, status, or worth (Bourdieu, 1986). As resources are exchanged, relationships that exist become reinforced. Social capital has been more recently described by Fann, McClafferty Jarsky, and McDonough (2009) as, “a resource made up of social connections that are convertible” (p. 377). Coleman (1988) further explained that, “social capital, comes about through changes in relations among persons that facilitate actions” (p. 100). This means that access to information or resources and the ability to use these resources to help guide action. Therefore, information is limited to one’s networks and to one’s relationships to others. Since social capital is convertible, it can be passed on from one person to the next. The parents of first-generation college students often don’t possess the social networks or experiences needed to help their student prepare for college. This includes the knowledge on materials, information, and experiences that parents with a college degree possess (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988, Pascarella et al., 2004). However, social capital can be acquired in different ways.

Currently, there is differential access to social capital based on race and socioeconomic status. Perna and Titus (2006) discuss the fact that parents of African American students and Latino students have less social capital to help support their students navigate the educational system. These students and families struggle to understand the selection, application, and financial processes of higher education (Choy, 2001). In order for students to access higher education, parents need to know how to navigate the educational system, but this is difficult for parents of first-generation college-going students. Their lack of personal experience places them
at a disadvantage (Fann, McClafferty Jarsky, & McDonough, 2009). Though social capital in regard to higher education is limited at home for first-generation students there are other resources and networks that these students depend on for access and guidance towards higher education. These can include the K-12 school systems, peer support and, more recently, social media as a means of information and access.

First-generation parents do not have the same level of social networks or connections to higher education as those parents that already completed the process themselves (Ceja, 2006, Pascarella et al., 2004). For example, parents who attended college feel more comfortable reaching out to postsecondary institutions for help in regards to application deadlines and admission questions. They might know people that directly work with the institution or they might simply walk in and ask for help. Since the parents of first-generation students did not attend post-secondary schools, they did not have the opportunity to build connections or enhance their resources in the process of accessing and applying to these schools. Though social capital is limited for the parents of first-generation students, these students can increase and expand their own knowledge through different networks that they have access to, especially school networks, peer networks, and more recently online networks.

**Social Capital within the Home.** Social capital derives from various groups or networks. The people within each network share norms, resources, and information with one another. Each individual gains knowledge that helps them advance in their own personal goals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Family networks are one source of social capital for all students. Parent-child interaction and communication are identified as home-based social capital (Pong, Hao, & Gardner, 2005).
Social capital within the home is limited to the information and resources that students can attain through their parents, siblings and any other family members. This form of social capital in affluent families tends to be high, when it comes to accessing higher education, and their children realize early on that they can attend college and that college is an option. For affluent students this predisposition happens earlier than for students of color and those from poor background because of their parental networks, experience, and resources (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). For first-generation students the social capital they have access to at home provides a different type of support.

For first-generation students the most significant component of home-based capital is encouragement and support from the parents and family. Students do not necessarily get direct information on the college going process but they are motivated to attain an education. Parental support is essential for building college aspirations in first-generation student but more direct guidance on the process is limited (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). However, encouragement and support are the most significant factors contributing to students’ desire to attend college, regardless of their parents’ level of education (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999; Terenzini et al., 1996). Even though home-based capital is limited, in terms of guiding student in the process of higher education itself, it plays a significant role in motivating first-generation students to want to attend post-secondary education ones they know more about it (McDonough, 2004; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

**Social Capital within Education.** As previously mentioned, direct guidance in the college process is limited for first-generation students. In this case, the primary source of direct college guidance needs to come from the school because of the lack of access to a college-going culture from first-generation families (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). School networks are the source
and connections that support first-generation college students. Social capital provided at school includes the network of teachers, counselors, and other staff members that share institutional resources with the students (Arriaza, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Since first-generation students have family networks that are limited in regards to higher education, first-generation students tend to lean on school networks a bit more for help in accessing higher education (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Farmer-Hinton looked further into school-based networks by conducting focus groups with four cohorts seniors. The school in the study was one that serviced low-income students where home-based social capital was limited. Findings showed that student from low-income households depended on their school to learn about college. The experiences provided and the relationships with the school made college a viable option for these students. The students also used the information learned to initiate conversations with their families of the college process. Lastly, the students reported that they wanted to attend college in order to achieve more than their families had previously attained. As found in this study, the social capital student access at school plays an important in making college a viable option for first-generation students.

**Social Capital Through Other Sources.** Social capital can also exists through peer networks and more recently online social networks. These have also been mentioned in the college process of first-generation college students. Peer social networks are also important for first-generation students, but some research has found them to be more influential once first-generation students get to college (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Once in college, students lean on their peers for the emotional support to get through the many stressors of life.

Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2016) looked deeper into peer networks and the influence peers can have on each other at the high school level. Stanton-Salazar and Spina found that peer
networks in low-socioeconomic predominantly Latino areas can be more than social friendships. The findings showed that students depended on each other for emotional support and these friendships provided and fostered strategies for resilience. Students mentioned supporting each other through the challenges they faced outside the school setting. Peer networks were also found to influence students in negative ways. For example, some peer networks led to drugs use, truancy, low effort, etc. Though we most often hear how peers can lead each other to risky behaviors, this research found that there are also positives to peer networks that can support the academic growth of high school students.

There is now an increased amount of information online as well. As a result, first-generation students are utilizing social media as an additional source of information to help guide them in their quest to higher education (Wohn et al., 2013). Julien (2015) describes the shift in the concept social capital due to online interactions, “because of the current ubiquitous accessibility of the internet, online interactions themselves contain and extend social capital” (p. 365). Julien believes that online interactions impact an “individual’s stock of social capital” (p. 365). Though both peer interactions and technology are available to first-generation students, there is currently limited research in these areas and on the impact on social capital and the shift that has occurred with the growth of the internet and social media.

**Human Capital.** While social capital exists within the relationships among people, human capital is defined as the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual. Human capital is created by changes in an individual that bring capabilities and skills that make the person able to act in new ways (Coleman, 1988). Parents of first-generation college students can have low human capital in terms of college knowledge and experience, but they can have high social capital in support and availability for education. Coleman (1988) describes this in the story of
Asian immigrant families that attended a public school in the United States. The families were responsible for purchasing the textbooks for their children. The school personnel was puzzled to see that these families purchased two set of books. They then found out that the families were using one set for the students to use and one for the mothers so they could study in order to help their children. In this case, the human capital in terms of education was low but the commitment and the family support were high. This is important in that human capital affects children but it may be irrelevant to a child’s outcome. Parents of first-generation college students may have low human capital in knowing how to maneuver the educational system but the social capital of the family, the relationship between the child and parent, can support the students in getting to college.

Ultimately, both social capital and human capital are needed to get to college. Knowing the information and having the relationship with the right people is what best prepares students to transition from high school to college. Human capital is the key component that the parents of first-generation students cannot provide and the reason why these students rely on interpersonal relationships, social capital within the school, to increase their personal human capital. Both social capital from the home and from school play important roles in the journey to higher education for first-generation students. They serve different roles, one in motivational support and the other in guidance and access. The main support that first-generation parents provide for their children is in the form of emotional and motivational support. Though these emotional supports are important, they are not enough and therefore K-12 schools become the primary source of college information.

Access to Higher Education
In the United States, K-12 public institutions are free to any child living in the country. Receiving a K-12 education is not only free, but it is required of all children within a certain age range. In the United States the Compulsory Education Law mandates that students receive an education up to a certain age, as decided upon by each state. Respectively, all people can access higher education once they complete high school, but these institutions are not free of cost and there is an application process that must be completed in order to attend. The issue with post-secondary education is that it involves a process; a process of selecting, applying, and funding one's education (Choy, 2001). Without knowledge or guidance with this process, college remains elusive for many.

Attending college is a process that requires multiple steps, many of which need to happen before high school. Choy (2001) described the series of steps as follows:

1. Making the choice to attend
2. Taking the right courses
3. Preparing and taking the entrance exams
4. Selecting and applying to a college
5. Getting accepted

These steps require a lot of preparatory work and knowledge of the educational system. Without the knowledge of what is required, students do not stand a chance at getting into a college, and least of all a four-year institution. Students whose parents have attended college have a network in which they can access the information more readily (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). First-generation students lack this direct access pathway.
The transition from high school to college has shown to be more difficult for first-generation college-going students. Previous research has demonstrated that this task of accessing higher education is even more difficult for first-generation college student than their peers with educated parents (Choy, 2002; Stephens et al., 2012). In 1992, the rates of first-generation compared to non-first-generation students attending college varied from 27% to 93% respectively (Choy, 2001). More specifically, 27% of students whose parents did not attend college went to college, 73% of the students whose parents had some college experience attended, and 93% of the students with at least one parent with a degree attended college. The first two statistics illustrate a significant difference in accessing higher education between student with parents with some college versus those with no college experience. Thus, access to higher education even differs with the first-generation student population. These numbers vary greatly even though access is available to all groups of students equally. Therefore, availability is not the issue for first-generation students. First-generation college students have the schools available to them but they do not have the same level of information and resources needed to attend as their non-first-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Recent studies continue to demonstrate that the disproportionately low rates of first-generation students applying, attending, and graduating from higher education are still a reality (Gray 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). A study by Cates and Schaefle (2011) examined qualitative and quantitative data from four districts with schools that participated in the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR-UP). The study examined 187 middle school participants and revealed that minority students from low socioeconomic status (SES) were applying to college at lower rates than white students even though academically, they were just as qualified to apply. In addition, other studies found that the desire to attend
college is similar for students of color as it is for their affluent white counterparts (McDonough, 2004; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2006). If qualification and desire are the same for both first-generation and non-first-generation students, then what else is holding first-generation students from applying to college? There must be more that adds to the discrepancies in college attendance rates for first-generation college students.

The reality is that first-generation college students lack information that comes naturally to those whose parents have gone through the process (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004). As noted earlier, their social capital in regards to higher education is limited and this creates barriers in access (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Wohn et al., 2013). This lack of procedural social capital from first-generation parents hinders first-generation students from successfully applying and making the transition to higher education. On the other hand, K-12 systems can contribute to providing information to first-generation students. As noted by Bui (2005), because parents of first-generation students do not have college experience, interventions need to be provided before high school in order to increase access for these students. Therefore, lack of access to college information at home tends to lead to a dependency from first-generation students and their families on the K-12 system for information and guidance to access higher education.

**Dependency on the Educational System.** First-generation college students and their parents depend on their school networks, or social capital from the school, for information on accessing higher education (Bui, 2005; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). This means that school counselors and teachers are main sources of information for first-generation students. Studies by Bui (2005), Domina (2009), Holcomb-McCoy (2010), Hubbard and Mehan (1999), and McKillip, Godfrey, and Rawls (2012) discuss the impact that teacher attitudes, counselor support
and knowledge, and pre-college outreach programs have on a student’s access to higher education. All three can have a positive or negative impact depending on the service provided and the time in which they are provided to the students. First-generation students and their parents value education but they don’t always know how to maneuver the system. This leaves students to depend on the school system to increase their own knowledge base about college. Key institutional agents, such as teachers and counselors, fill a critical void in building this knowledge base (Domina, 2009; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010).

Teachers are the first level of support for all students. They have direct contact with their students on a daily basis and they can impact students in many ways. First-generation students depend on their teachers for knowledge and guidance of the subject matter, but they also rely on them for other aspects like emotional and motivational supports. The study by Bui (2005) analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study which included data from students starting in eighth grade until many years after the students completed high school. The study looked into middle school variables to see which had an impact on first-generation students attending college. The study found a negative correlation between teacher absences and the students’ odds of attending college. Teacher presence created consistency and an increased value in the education process which had positive effects on students. McKillip, Godfrey, and Rawls (2012) also researched the impact teachers have on middle school students’ college trajectories. In their case study of South Bronx Preparatory School, a sixth through twelfth grade school, they found that creating a college going culture at the site while building strong relationships with the students increased the number of students attending college. Established relationships with their students helped increase the students’ college aspirations. In schools, teachers have a great impact on first-generation students and their desire to attend college. By
believing in them, being present and building positive relationships with the students, teachers can increase the students’ chances of accessing higher education.

Similarly, Holcomb-McCoy (2010) and Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, and Allen (2009) found that school counselors play an important role in providing first-generation students information that increases their chance of accessing higher education. Low-income students rely on school counselors to provide them with information on the different types of colleges, the prerequisites needed to apply, and financial aid opportunities (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Therefore, counselors also have a great impact on whether students are prepared to apply to college and where the students apply.

Although counselors are helpful to first-generation college students, they can also misguide these students. McDonough and Calderon (2004) found counselors advising low-income minority students to apply to community colleges because they thought that was all the students could afford. Counselors have their own personal judgments based on race and ability. These personal biases influence counselors to guide students into less challenging institutions, for example, two-year colleges versus four-year colleges (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, and Allen, 2009). Kimura-Walsh et al. (2009) found growth in the number of Latina students entering college, but most were entering two-year colleges. This is consistent with the fact that in recent years, there has been in increased number of first-generation students applying to college but more are attending two-year institutions (Karen, 2002; Kim & Schneider, 2005). Counselors are limited, especially in low-income schools, and this impacts Latino students’ ability to apply and meet college deadlines (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Deficit notions exist. Some believe that minority students are less capable than their counterparts and this can lead to less help from teachers, counselors, and the school (McDonough & Calderon, 2004; Choy,
Research shows that schools need to increase the number of counselor at the high schools (McDonough, 2004) and that more training is required for them (Choy, 2002). Due to the limited resources and limited cultural knowledge of some counselors, it is important that first-generation parents and students understand the higher education system and not depend solely on the school system.

Beyond the impact of teachers and counselors, schools use pre-college outreach programs to help increase the social capital of first-generation students. Studies by Domina (2009) and Cates and Schaefle (2011) examined different outreach programs aimed at preparing students for higher education. The study by Domina (2009) focused on Gear-up, Upward Bound, Quantum Opportunity Program, and Talent Search. He found that high school students who participated in these programs did better than peers in the control group. Some programs had greater gains in student populations that had expressed uncertainty about attending college, versus those that had already decided not to attend. Earlier access to these programs can serve as an early alert system before the students decide not to attend college. Cates and Schaefle (2011) found that the outreach components that exposed the students to information and familiarity in form of college visits, educational field trips, summer programs, and advising hours helped increase the student's social capital. Early college visits were more impactful if done before the eighth grade. Bui (2005) also found that tracking students by placing them in special programs, for example extra tutoring or targeted interventions, negatively impacted students. If the students are tracked, they feel less qualified than their peers and do not feel as capable of performing well in school.

The AVID program is another pre-college outreach program offered in many schools across the nation. The program was designed to support low-income and minority students prepare for college. Hubbard and Mehan (1999) describe the program as an educational reform
program designed to address the achievement gap between socioeconomic and ethnic groups. The AVID program places high school students in college preparatory classes and it supports students in learning about higher education institutions as well as supporting them as they apply to colleges. The program also places students in an elective class which focuses on developing study skills. The program serves more than 20,000 students in over 500 schools (Hubbard & Mehan, 1999). Mehan et al. (1996) found that in San Diego, California 48% of students who completed AVID for three years enrolled into a four-year college compared to the city’s 37% average. The data demonstrates the program’s success when implemented at a site. However, the number of students that the program is impacting is very low. The program serves less than 10% of a schools population in each high school where it is implemented (Hubbard & Mehan, 1999).

Even when pre-college outreach programs are implemented they are not always as successful as one would desire. Implementation of some programs require changes within the educational system and peoples’ personal beliefs. The study by Hubbard and Mehan (1999) described the implementation of the AVID program in Oakwook, North Carolina. The AVID program was implemented to address the achievement gap between White and Black students. Though the schools had high rates of four-year college enrollment, 84%, the percentage of African American students attending was minimal. The study found that though the program was implemented for the right reasons the program encountered resistance and it remained small, servicing less than 5% of the population in the schools. One reason for the program encountering resistance was, “the deep-seated belief about race and intelligence and teachers’ attempts to protect tracking systems” (p.224). This include the communities belief that Black students were intellectually inferior and the resistances from White educators to take minority
students into the advance and college preparatory classes (Hubbard & Mehan, 1999). Essentially, the program forced educators to change the way in which they educated students and they were not ready to embrace the change at a larger scale.

School-wide programs and school-wide college going culture increase knowledge not gained through social capital from the home, unfortunately, not all schools are embracing these concepts for all students. Funding also impacts a schools ability to offer programs and services that promote college. Research has shown that the type of program along with the timing of these outreach programs matters. The empirical studies mentioned above found more success when the entire school promoted higher achievement for all students. In other words, outreach programs that provided services for the school as a whole, and not a selected group of students, were more successful. All the research points to the importance of a school-wide belief in their students along with positive teacher and counselor support. In order to provide equitable access to first-generation students, K-12 schools need to provide the resources to the staff in order to increase students’ social capital.

**Parent Participation and Impact**

As noted earlier, parents play an important role in the educational attainment of their students (McCarron, & Inkelas, 2006). The parents of first-generation college students are less likely to participate in the college planning activities of their students (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents of first generation college-going students are typically from low-income homes and they tend to be African-American and Latino, whereas schools are based on Anglo-American norms and culture (Chen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Parents from diverse backgrounds often do not participate in school activities because they do not feel comfortable navigating a system that is different from their own (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). This
cultural disconnect leads to decreased participation by first-generation parents (Fann et al., 2009). Although parents are less involved at the school level, they still play a significant role at home in supporting their children on the path to higher education.

Parental encouragement and involvement are key factors in predicting students’ post-secondary aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999, Trusty, 1998). Though these supports are both important in a student’s path to higher education, encouragement and guidance are two different types of supports. Encouragement involves conversations that shape a student’s thoughts and aspirations to attend college (Hossler & Stage, 1992), while guidance requires direct parental involvement with the college planning process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). First-generation parents find it difficult to be involved and provide specific advice on the college process because they do not have the tools they need to be more involved (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Ceja, 2006; Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000). They do however, value their children's education and they encourage their children to attain more than they were able to (Fann et al., 2009). Therefore, the parents of first-generation students provide encouragement to their children but the guidance is left for the students to figure out elsewhere.

Sheldon (2002) found that parents who have access to larger social networks, in other words those with more social capital, are more likely to be involved in the education of their children. Educated parents, those that completed college, use their own social capital to help their student’s access higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). They are not only more involved in the education process, but they can also support their students in the selection, application, and financial aid process of post-secondary schools while first-generation parents are not able to provide these types of guidance for their children (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Perna and Titus (2006) found that enrollment in two- or four-year colleges increases with parent-
student discussions on education related topics. First-generation parents are less able to have these discussions because they may lack the specific information needed to guide their children.

The main barriers in first-generation parents accessing resources for their children include the lack of knowledge and unfamiliarity of the educational system (Torrez, 2004). Research by Sheldon (2002) found that parental involvement both in school and out of school plays a significant role in their students’ academic achievement. Parent involvement can also help increase the parents’ own understanding of higher education (Fann et al., 2009). Even though parent involvement can be beneficial to student outcomes, a large body of research shows that parents of first-generation college students depend on the school system to guide their students in the process of accessing higher education. Due to the lack of social resources, parents in low-income households rely on teachers and the school system to educate their children on how to navigate the higher education system (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). This dependency can lead to misinformation, or lack of information, depending on the programs and training available.

Besides social or human capital and access barriers, first-generation students also face cultural barriers that make higher education challenging. A study by Smith (2008) found that for African-American students, their families have an impact on where they attend college. Often times, African American parents encourage their children to get an education beyond what they were able to attain themselves. However, the parents’ lack of college knowledge leads them to send conflicting messages. Parents might think that they have to finance everything themselves, which can lead to misguidance on their students college choice. Latino parents function similarly in that they encourage their students to attend two-year institutions rather than four-year schools out of financial fear. The lack of social capital, or direct knowledge of the higher
education system, can affect students not only in attending college but also going to the wrong school.

Summary

Education is a powerful tool with financial and social benefits for all who attend (Wohn et al., 2013). This opportunity should be equitable for all students despite their humble beginnings. Social capital and human capital are not equal for all students, and this places first-generation students at a significant disadvantage. These disadvantages can be balanced with a strong school-based network. The process to accessing higher education is a multilevel process that needs to start in elementary school. First-generation college students and their parents could benefit from increased knowledge on the path to higher education. Armed with knowledge they can have a fair chance at attending college and achieving their desired outcomes.

Accessing higher education is a challenge for any student, but when other factors are added such as low social capital, lack of knowledge, and an unknown path, higher education becomes almost impossible. For first-generation college students, who tend to be students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, this is their reality. Studies continuously show that there are disproportionate rates of students attending college, in particular four-year universities (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). We have seen an increased level of minority students applying to college with the support of teachers, counselors, and outreach programs.

Schools and parents play very distinct, but equally as important, roles in helping first-generation students access post-secondary education. The parents of first-generation students cannot provide the direct guidance but they play a role in motivating and encouraging the students to aspire to want to attend some form of postsecondary education. Teachers,
counselors, and all other staff members play a significant role in directly guiding first-generation students on the path to college. School networks provide direct guidance, meaning information on the selection, application, and financial aspect of the process to higher education. There are many studies that focus on school wide programs and their outcomes for example GEAR-Up, AVID, etc. There are other studies that focus on targeted programs and their outcomes. Few studies ask the students themselves what helped them gain access to college.

Though research examined in this chapter provides insight into programs and systems that increase access to higher education for first-generation students, there is a need to understand what students themselves find most valuable and helpful and that which was not helpful as well. There is a need for further research that focuses on the stories and experience of first generation college students. Studies that focus on first generation students who have successfully attained their goals of attending higher education, are very limited. Much can be learned from the experiences, challenges, and successes these student face. By asking first generation college students what they view as the most significant piece in getting them to college the better we can support early education schools in creating programs or support systems to help more students gain access to college. This study helps address these gaps.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The goal of this phenomenological study was to conduct interviews with first generation college freshmen to better understand what they identify as key elements or activities that allowed them to access college. By looking at the population that has already made it to college as first-generations students, we can gain new insights that have not been identified in previous research studies. To recap, the overarching research question guiding this study is, what factors do first-generation college students identify as significant contributors to their success in accessing higher education? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What role do family networks play in helping these students get to college?
2. How do school networks contribute to these students getting to college?
3. Are there additional factors that contribute to increasing access, for example social media/technology/peers?
4. What was most challenging aspect of the process for the students? What advice would they give to other first-generation students and the schools that support these students?

Research Design

A useful inquiry approach for research on first-generation college students and the factors that assisted them in getting to college is a phenomenological study. This approach was chosen because it was most appropriate for examining (1) the phenomenon of students being the first in their families to attend college, (2) the need to develop a deeper understanding about the phenomenon, (3) and the need to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013) a phenomenological study has both a system and a structure. This type of study consists of the shared experience among the participants,
which in this case was attending a higher education institution. Next, is the phenomenon itself, which in this study was the notion of being the first in their families to access and attend these higher education institutions. Lastly, the data collection was the final portion of the study. In this study, the data came from interviews using a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions. The questions for the study were related to the experience of the phenomenon and context influencing those experiences (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were semi-structured to allow students to share their individual stories and to allow them to go deeper into areas that they identified as helpful or challenging.

This study aimed to identify the factors that have been most impactful in getting first-generation students into higher education. The ultimate goal was to understand the students’ lived experiences in order to give voice to participants’ experiences and what they identify as key factors that promoted access to higher education. The aim was to understand different students’ stories, to provide their experiences to help motivate others to do the same and to inspire primary educational programs to support these students in their journey. Furthermore, if primary educational systems are already utilizing programs and activities that students identify as successful in motivating and providing access to first-generation college students then this study can shed light on evidence regarding these programs/activities.

Identifying key factors that students found crucial in increasing their access to information and knowledge of college is important in providing equitable access to higher education institutions. As discussed earlier, education is available to all students but not all students have equal social capital, which creates a social justice dilemma. In order to combat this social justice issue, we need to identify programs or actions that are effective in moving
students into higher education institutions so educational programs can create better systems of support or continue utilizing successful activities.

**Research Methods**

**Site and Participants.** This study included fifteen interviews with first-generation college students who were enrolled as freshmen at a public, four-year institution. To focus the study, all participants were from one institution which was selected due to their high rate of first generation college students admitted and graduating every year. About 50% of the students attending this institution are the first in their families to earn a bachelor's degree.

Participants of the study were all in their first year, first semester, of college at the time of the interview. The study focused on students who had recently graduated high school and had transitioned straight into the four-year institution. Transfer students were not considered first year college students as they had been at a different institution prior to entering this particular four-year public institution. The study only involved first generation freshmen because they just experienced the process of applying to higher education institutions. The event of applying and learning about the college application process was a recent memory for this population of students.

**Recruitment Process.** The study began by working with the TRIO Students Support Services and the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) offices for support in identifying first-generation students who qualified for the study. These programs support first-generation college students once they are in college. The student population these programs serve aligned with the student population I was seeking for the study. This population being first-generation college attenders include those for whom no parent(s) has attended or graduated from a four-year university or college (but may have attended or graduate from a 2-year college or certification
program). I learned about these programs through a contact at the institution who recommended these programs as a recruitment method. Therefore, I emailed and asked the programs for their assistance in recruiting students for the study (see Appendix A).

The EOP and TRIO offices sent out an email invitation, directly to the students in their program, on my behalf, requesting that interested students contact me if they wished to participate in the study (see Appendix B). There was no request of personal contact information, and the recruitment letter was sent directly from the programs offices to the students. The email communication simply invited students interested in participating to email or call me directly. The hope was that over fifteen students would respond to the email invitation and then a random selection process would identify the fifteen participants. The initial intent was to have a participant sample that was representative of the university’s ethnic composition and to have a sample size that had equal representation of males and females. This was difficult to achieve due to the lack of interest from all ethnic groups and all genders. I only received eight emails through this recruitment effort. All eight interested students were female students who qualified for the study. I contacted the eight interested participants and ensured that each student met the study criteria of being a first year, first-generation college student over the age of 18. I also followed up to ensure that each participant met the definition of first-generation college student as those whom no parent(s) had attended or graduated from a four-year university or college (but may have attended or graduate from a 2-year college or certification program). The next method of recruiting and finding participants for the study was through a “snowball” sampling approach. When I interviewed the eight initial participants, I asked if they knew anyone or if they could suggest another person whom they knew, who was also a first-generation first year college student. A few participants shared my contact information with their peers and the new
interested participants emailed me directly. This snowball approach was successful in finding the last seven participants for the study. The last seven participants went through the same process of receiving the invitation to participate, the consent form prior to the interview and selecting the location for the interview.

All participating students then received an additional email that included the consent to act as a research subject form (see Appendix C) and the audio recording release consent form (see Appendix D). All participants signed the consent forms for participation prior to the interview process. All participants received the forms ahead of time but all fifteen of the final participants signed the forms in front of the researcher prior to the interview process.

All students who participated in the study received a $25 gift card to compensate them for the time it took to conduct the interview. The gift cards were given to the participants at the end of the interview process. All participants were informed that they did not need to complete the interview to receive the gift card. All participants had the right to stop the interview at any point during the process. None of the participants stopped the interviews before full completion.

Participants

Ultimately, a total of fifteen college students participated in a thirty to sixty minute face-to-face interview. Thirteen of these participants were female and two were male. All participants were eighteen years of age or older. One of the fifteen students was from out of state and all others lived in California before attending the public university. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants of the study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to allow for anonymity of all information provided during the interview and throughout the reporting process.
Table 1. *Interview Participants*

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</table>

**Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to learn from the shared experience of a group of people (Creswell, 2013). First-generation students share some similarities but they are all very different as well; each student has a different path to higher education. To better understand each student's path and their story, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were
essential. The personal interviews allowed me to understand each student's experience while identifying themes and similarities among the stories.

**Individual interviews.** Interviews were conducted over a three-month period at the beginning of the 2017-18 academic school year; the time frame was from the end of September to early December. All students were in their first semester at the selected institution. It was important that the interviews and the data collection occurred early on so the process would not interfere with midterms or final exams. Participants were deemed more likely to participate early in the semester than later in the term when they were preparing for major exams.

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview process guided by the questions in Appendix E. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and took place at a location on campus or at a location of the participant’s choosing near the campus. The participant selected a location that worked for them and their class schedule. The goal of the interviews is to understand the participants’ point of view and to find meaning in their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In order to allow upon expansion of a question, the interviews were semi-structured. This allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions as needed. All interviews were electronically recorded using a cell phone, professionally transcribed using Rev.com.

The interviews started with a quick review of the process and overall goal of the study. I began with general background questions to help the participants feel comfortable and to allow them to adjust emotionally and physically to the recording device. The recording started a few minutes into the discussion but all participants were informed of when the recording process started. No students asked to stop the interview or recording process prior to the full completion of the interview process.
Data Analysis

Interview data was hand-coded through cycles of reading and re-reading. All interview transcriptions were read and reviewed a minimum of three times. The topic was very close to my personal experience as a first-generation college student, so the first reading involved reading for what was present and not for preconceived notions. The first review was done to get an overview of each participant and it served as an initial assessment of the how the responses connected to the research questions and the sub-questions. Therefore, the process started with a set of basic priori codes that arose from the research questions and from the literature review. These key codes were identified as: family, school, peers, and technology. Supports and challenges were also coded for. The second read incorporated the combination of in vivo and descriptive coding to organize and group the data at a basic level (Saldaña, 2009). I used pattern coding as a third cycle coding method to identify key themes relating to the research questions and the sub-questions. Themes, patterns, and findings were compared to identify commonalities or differences.

Data analysis was a systematic process that took arranging, understanding, and coding of the information collected. This process required arranging data into manageable units, synthesizing the data, finding and examining patterns to identify what is important and what needs to be learned so I could determine what is worth sharing with others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In order to aid in the process of data analysis, themes were arranged into a chart and excerpts of data were organized within the chart. The themes I started with were: background and family, K-12 schools, peers and technology, and advice. During the second read of the transcripts, I made a column for each interview and I would select quotes or phrases that addressed each of the categories/themes listed above. As I went through the third review, I
realized that I also needed to add a row for selection since many of the students discussed the different factors that impacted their selection process. This allowed me to identify quotes and patterns around my research questions.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted with permission from the participants and in full compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines at UCSD and CSUSM. All electronic data created and collected was saved on a password protected laptop computer and all data used pseudonyms for participant names to maintain confidentiality. As a researcher, I acknowledge my responsibility to ensure the safety and security of each participant of the study. All candidates had the option to participate in the study and all had the option to withdraw from the study at any point during the process. All participants were given and signed a consent form, consent to act as a research subject form, which includes all information regarding the study and any possible risks involved (Appendix C).

**Limitations and Positionality**

As with any study there are limitations to be considered through this research process. The first limitation is the sample. All the participants of this study were from the same university. Though this might be a limitation, it still provided a variety of perspectives and experiences. The students did not all come from the same backgrounds or hometowns, therefore their stories and experiences may be representative of a more general first-generation population. However, most came from the same state.

Lastly, when coding qualitative data, human perspective and interpretations can be a limitation. As researchers we try to interpret the data from what is provided but we are still interpreting from our understanding of what is gathered. We cannot remove ourselves from the
process so human interference is always a possibility. For example, I myself am a first-generation college student. I know what I identify as key challenges and key factors that I faced on my path to higher education but I can’t look for support for my ideas. To combat this, I coded the data multiple times to ensure that the themes and patterns arise from the data not my own ideas. I used my questions to guide me in identifying initial codes. Knowing that this topic is personal to me is one step in combating my own biases. Knowing my own connection to the topic and recognizing what I would identify as key factors will help me check myself throughout the coding process.
Chapter Four: Results

To recap, the overarching question for the study was: what factors do first-generation college students identify as significant contributors to their success in accessing higher education? Within this overarching focus, there were four additional areas of inquiry: (1) What role do family network play in helping these students get to college? (2) How do school networks contribute to these students getting to college? (3) Are there additional factors that contribute to increasing access, for example social media/technology/peers? (4) What was most challenging aspect of the process for the student? What advice would they give to other first-generation students and the schools that support these students?

Being a first-generation college student is a shared experience that many students live through and many more will continue experiencing over the years. According to the United States Census Bureau, by 2023 more than half of the nation's children will be minorities (Broughton, 2008). These minorities continue to make up a large portion of the first-generation population. Furthermore, first-generation students are less likely to enroll in college than their non-first-generation counterparts (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Though we think of first-generation students as one group, each student is different. Each story is different and equally as important in better understanding this populations journey while simultaneously learning how to support these students best as they launch into the world of higher learning.

Through this research, I was able to learn the stories of fifteen first-year first-generation college students. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the themes that developed from the combined interviews. The combined interviews allowed for better understanding of the first-generation college student population as a group but each individual interviewed allowed for understanding of the variety of stories.
Some students’ journeys were more difficult than others, but in the end, each of students had made it to college, and each one has a start in higher education. The goal of this study is to share these student’s stories to help future first-generation college students as well as inform the K-12 system on the challenges and successes of these students’ stories. Before delving into the themes across the student’s experiences, I will first provide a glimpse into three particular students’ stories.

Understanding Each Story

Laura’s Story. “My path to college has been personal… ‘cause it’s been only me and my mom, it has always just been me and her. From fifth grade to midway freshman year I was homeless… I wasn’t even focused on college.”

Laura was born near Los Angeles, California but moved to Victorville during first grade. She is grateful for the move as it allowed her to join the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program and eventually enter college. AVID is a global nonprofit organization whose mission is to close the achievement gap by preparing students for college and other postsecondary options (AVID, 2018). AVID trains teachers on strategies, methodologies, and curriculum to support students in being successful at school and in college. The program helps students by developing their study skills as well as providing them with information and guidance on higher education.

I got to join the AVID program in high school, so that’s when I started finding out about college, about scholarships, and that helped me succeed in getting into college, unlike my cousins over in LA (Los Angeles), which is really sad. Because the AVID program is honestly what brought me here.

Laura, like many other students, mentioned AVID as the program that gave her access to higher education. AVID exposed Laura to colleges and to the process of applying. Laura gave credit to her AVID teacher and even saw her as a “second mom.” Though Laura has made it to
college, she shared that she felt a lot of pressure, “I’m holding a lot on my shoulders, trying to make sure, everything is okay. All right, I have to do this.”

Laura heard about the AVID program in middle school but was unable to participate as she had to move around a lot due to her lack of housing. Finally, in eighth grade she decided to apply to the program in hopes that she would get in her freshman year of high school, a school that she walked two miles to get to everyday. She interviewed and was accepted into AVID. I asked Laura what allowed her to push forward and make it to college, she mentioned getting comfort in knowing she was not alone: “Seeing I wasn’t the only one going through the journey. Seeing I wasn’t the only one that comes from a family that doesn’t know anything about it, and that I’ve succeeded.”

Laura’s mom and her family were very supportive of her plans to go to college. They motivated her and they would help by constantly asking her, “You’re going to go, right?” and following up to make sure she had submitted all the documents needed. Laura recalled her mom trying to support her but couldn’t due to her limited knowledge of the process. Laura’s school provided her with information, but she remembers there was limit resources for her mom. She explained, “It was more of a white community. So they didn’t have resources for my mom as someone who only speaks Spanish.” Despite the lack of parental resources, Laura tried to coach her mom as she completed her college application.

Laura hope to have her cousins follow in her footsteps. She does not want to be the only one in her family to get to college. Laura advises school leaders to take into account their students personal lives, “because sometimes they, the students, believe that because of their personal life, going to a four-year school isn’t possible.”
Gabriela’s Story. “Because Hawaii is such a small town and we don’t have a university on my island, I was forced to leave no matter what, if I wanted to go to a real university. We only have community colleges, and I wasn’t about to go. It wasn’t my decision.”

Gabriela is from Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. She is the youngest of four children, all who joined the military, Gabriela is the only one to attend college. Gabriela’s family did not have much money as she was growing up, “we fished a lot, and that’s how we ate.” Both her parents currently work two jobs to help her pay for her college education. Though Gabriela is adjusting to university, it was really her only option. “It’s the cheapest [public California university] to go to. That’s why I’m here.” She currently receives a Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE) program scholarship that reduced the cost of her tuition since she has to pay out-of-state fees, which are “really expensive.”

Many others from Gabriela’s high school in Hawaii attend the same university. Like her, some of them did not have the opportunity to tour the school before attending. Gabriela herself showed up after getting accepted without ever seeing the school: “It was the first time living anywhere other than Hawaii, and I was terrified.” She recalled getting a lot of information from her counselor about the university, but she was not familiar with the actual campus until she arrived.

Gabriela was also in the AVID program during her high school years. “I started planning my life out really early. Then in high school I was in AVID and they made us plan out our life.” Gabriela mentioned that AVID gave her the basis of what she needed to do and prepare but her counselor was her main support. “My counselor is the one that told me about this school and the whole reason I’m in college.” Gabriela met with her counselor every day. He helped her complete her application.
Though her counselor was a huge help, Gabriela’s mom was also involved in the application process. She and her mom did a lot of research on their own, “we were Googling it together. She was figuring it out with me.” They looked for scholarships and they completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form together. Gabriela remembers her mom being mad when she initially asked her for her tax information during her sophomore year of high school. Gabriela’s mom did not understand why she needed to provide such personal information and that was upsetting to her. Gabriela had to open a FAFSA account early on and submit all her parents’ information as a class assignment but the process was a bit scary for her mom at the beginning.

Though her parents are very supportive, Gabriela feels stress about being in college. “I have so much weight on my shoulders because I can’t let them down because they are paying for it, they are supporting me.” Regardless of the stress she feels she recommends that other first-generation students “go for it because you never know where life’s going to take you. You’ll find out if it’s right for you or not once you’re there.”

Molly’s Story. “Okay, I’m here, I’m in college, now what do I do?” Molly’s story is a little bit different than Laura’s and Gabriela’s. Unlike the first two, Molly did not have the support of her parents as she embarked on her journey to higher education. “My senior year, I realized that I did not have the support of my parents, financially, to go to a [four-year university]. They just wanted me to go to a community college, which wasn’t in my plans.”

Molly grew up with her mother, father, and younger brother until the age of nine. At nine, her parents divorced, and Molly stayed with her mother and brother. In 2012, her father got arrested for the second time and was therefore absent from her life throughout middle school and most of her high school years. Molly believes that her family did not think she was ready for
a university: “I think just because they don’t have the knowledge or they don’t put in the time to understand what I’m doing, really, they look down on what I’m doing, and they don’t think I’m capable of doing it.” Molly has taken her family’s negative energy and transformed it into her motivation. She explained that their words motivate her “to do better.”

Molly joined the AVID program during her sophomore year of high school. “I was in AVID because I wanted to go to college, I just didn’t know how to.” Molly did hit a point where things were too much, she wanted to quit the AVID program but her teacher did not let her drop the class. Though Molly joined the AVID program during her second year of high school, the AVID coordinator at her school ignited her desire to attend college in her freshmen year of school: “She would always talk about college and about her experience, and I just wanted to be successful… But she was happy. And you could just tell.”

Molly found motivation from seeing members of her family struggle. She knows that her mom would let her have money if she asked for it, but she also sees how tired her mom is: “That’s why I’m going to college, to do better for myself.” Molly advises schools to bring in guest speakers to share their actual experiences with students that might be the first to attend college. This helped her and she thinks it will help others. She also reminds future first-generation college students to “not give up… I always hear that not to give up, but I don’t really know the meaning until you actually go through it.”

**All Stories Matter.** These three stories allow us to note the different journey that the same population of first-generation college students can have, even having experienced the same college access program. Each story reminds us of how unique and personal each path can be. Though there are many similarities within the data analysis of first-generation college students, particularly the experience with the programmatic support of AVID, it is also important to note
the differences. AVID played a huge role in these students stories, and it also helped support
many others, we will see more later but it is important to highlight the individual events and
family circumstances that lead to each of the above students ending up in the same place. In the
sections that follow, I will discuss the themes in several major areas that correspond to the
research questions about the role of family, schools, peers, technology and other factors that
students shared during their personal interviews.

Family Role and Impact

It is easy to understand that experiencing an event gives a person access to information
on the process of the event. If you attended college you obtain first-hand experience on how to
apply, how to get information, and knowledge on how to access information you might know.
First-generation college parents have not experienced the college going process, and therefore
they do not have the same level of social networks or connections to higher education as those
parents that already completed the process themselves (Ceja, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). This
lack of network or limited social capital prevents parents from providing direct procedural
support to their children. However, as I will explain, this did not impact the amount of emotional
and motivational support they were able to provide to their children. The theme that was not
evident prior to the data analysis was the lack of support that siblings were able to provide for
their younger siblings once they made it to college. If an older sibling makes it to college they
are not necessarily able to support their younger siblings in their process.

Motivation. Each student had a different background, from single parent households, to
growing up in poverty, to being homeless. Regardless of the different backgrounds, it became
evident through the data analysis that parents and family members served as “emotional
supports” and “motivators” for these students. Motivation came in different forms. For some
students their parent(s) were very positive and emotionally supportive and that served as motivation to get to college. For others the lack of support or seeing failure within their family gave them the motivation they needed to persevere through their journey. Twelve out of fifteen participants mentioned their parents serving as “emotional support” or “motivators.” Out of those twelve, eight of them specifically mentioned their mothers as the motivator or emotional support.

Some participants mentioned positive motivation from their family and also a desire to achieve more than what their parents or family members had attained. For Maria, the support from her mother was positive and unconditional. Her mom could not support her financially or academically, but she pushed Maria to achieve more than she was able to.

My mother, she would help me, she motivated me. She told me how she was, she cleans houses so obviously she didn’t want me to do that type of job. She wanted me to go higher than that. Since she only speaks Spanish, it was harder for her to understand school work and stuff like that but she would always motivate me and she was always supportive.

Jose remembers his parents never being home due to their work schedules but that served as his motivation, “my parents, sometimes they struggled so in a way I just want to pull them out. I don’t want to struggle.” Hannah’s mom did more that motivate her as she signed her up for programs that would give her the resources she knew she couldn’t.

My mother, she has worked in factories and fields, and in restaurants and I see how much she suffers though it because she barely makes enough money to pay the rent… Growing up I saw that living a lifestyle like that was really hard and really emotionally draining. I knew I wanted something better and also my mother knew she wanted something better for me.

Lastly, Cindy recalls being pushed “heavily” by her mother to apply to college. She received positive encouragement and motivation for her mom but what influenced her the most was her
living situation: “I never liked where I lived, and I never was encouraged to do anything with my life, except for education.” Her desire to leave her hometown led her to aspire to attend college.

James, on the other hand, was inspired by his older brother. James was going down the wrong path when he saw his brother graduate from high school and get accepted at another public state university: “My parents were really proud of him... I need to do the same thing.” He recalls his parents telling him, “your brother did it, you can do it too.” They also supported him not by comparing him to his brother but by reminding him that he could get to college as well.

Motivation took a different form for a few participants. For this groups of students, the motivation provided by their parents came from negative interactions and a lack of support. Allison’s was motivation and supported by her mother, but her father was “hurtful.” Her father “was not very motivating” and even offered to purchase her a car if she attended a community college over a four-year university. As mentioned earlier, Molly was another student motivated by the lack of parental support. Her parents did not believe she was capable of going to college, she mentioned being fueled by it, “it’s motivation for me to do better.” Molly also mentioned that seeing her “family members fail in life” is what pushed her to go to college.

Motivation came from different situations and people for these first-generation college students. But motivation and support can be too much at times. Lisa, remembers her parents believing in her and pushing her to figure out the college going process:

They knew my potential so they’re like, ‘I don’t know how to do this, I don’t know how to help you, but you need to do it, you need to figure it out. You need to go to college’ … At school I could escape them from pressuring me.

Lisa remembers feeling relief when at school because when she was at home her parents would not stop asking her about her college application process. The support was positive but it was starting to become overwhelming as she was trying to figure the process out.
Motivation and support took on different forms for these first-generation college students. Regardless of the form, each student used their experiences and family members as a way to propel their desire to figure out the college going process.

**College Going Siblings.** First-generation college students are the first group in a family to go to college. This does not necessarily mean the first person in a family to get accepted or attend college. All participants in the study had parents with no college experience but five of these participants were also not the first ones to apply or attend college. Five out of the fifteen participants had older siblings who are currently in college or had been in college recently. These five students provided valuable information that helps address the research questions in this study.

Though these five students had someone already in college, none of them received direct support in the application process from their older sibling. This lack of support was not due to lack of desire, it was more so due to the siblings not knowing the process well enough themselves. They themselves were “figuring it out” so that left them with limited time to support their younger siblings. The college going siblings had figured out the application process but they were on to the next step which was figure out college itself. Hannah recalls, “she was able to graduate from high school and go to college, but she wasn’t always home and she never really told me about her college experience.” Similarly, Lucy mentioned that her two older sibling “were in the process of learning college themselves… They weren’t really that helpful.” For James, his brother encouraged him to join the International Baccalaureate program at his high school but did not support him directly beyond that. Cindy and Mary both mentioned receiving no help on the process of accessing higher education from their siblings because they were “already gone” when they were applying.
Though the college going siblings did not provide direct support they did have an impact on setting the idea of attending college in the participant’s mind. Hannah mentioned that she had more knowledge about college because her sister had applied first, “I kind of always had in mind the concept of college or what college was.” The fact that someone had gone before them also set an expectation for the parents and the students. As Lucy explained, “my sibling went to college, so I felt like I should too” and “coming to school was a necessity.” Lastly Cindy stated, “I can definitely say I knew I wanted to go to college.” Though one might think that having a sibling experience the college going journey first would facilitate the process for younger siblings, this was not true for these five students.

**School Role and Impact**

As discussed in Chapter 2, first-generation college students tend to depend on the K-12 educational system for direct support on college access -- from learning about different institutions, to learning how to apply, and even figuring out how to finance their journey. The data analysis from this study supports this idea, but it also allowed for the identification of key activities, programs and people that facilitated these students access to information on access to higher education.

**Locational Differences.** It is important to note that not all public schools provide the same type of access. Three students noted a difference in the college going culture and higher education conversations from one city to another. These students moved or were exposed to different public education systems, and they noted significant differences. Maria started in Oceanside and then moved to San Marcos:
In Oceanside, I was raised more like gangsters and stuff like that. No one had that mentality of going to college and that support. When I moved to San Marcos, it was a different mentality. People were more like, they actually had a pathway to college.

Leah grew up in Moreno Valley:

Nobody really talked about college because we’re pretty far from any of them. But I feel like as soon as I went to Riverside it was like everyone played a sport, and all they talked about was, my brother goes here…

In Laura’s story we also found that she was “grateful” for her move from Los Angeles to Victorville as she was able to join AVID and learn about college unlike her cousins. Mary summaries this finding by saying, “I think a big influence whether or not someone goes to college is where they go to school, because at least at my school, everyone around me had the expectation of going to college.”

**Minimal College Exposure in Elementary School.** Limited access to knowledge about college limits the possibility of completing the requirements to qualify for certain four year institutions. Therefore, without the proper access to information the path to college becomes unclear for first generation college students. Unfortunately, college information varies from school to school and from individual to individual.

As the participants reflected on their exposure to college, there seemed to be a consensus that minimal exposure to college occurred during elementary school. Three out of the fifteen participants recalled learning about careers and the need for college throughout their elementary experience but there was no recollection of actual information on the process or what it really was. In late elementary, particularly fifth grade, careers were a topic of discussion. The careers where then tied to college which allowed the idea to enter some of these first-generation college
student’s vocabulary. Statements like “I would say that is when I became familiar with the word college” and being asked, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” were mentioned in a few of the interviews.

**College Exposure in Middle School.** Middle school is when college became more than an idea for some students. Eleven participants recalled having more visuals about college at school and an increase in the college going culture in the school setting. They did not receive specifics on how to apply or the requirements for each institution but they saw banners, heard stories, and even visited some schools. Three participants mentioned their middle school having AVID; none of them participated in the program, but they remember learning about the program during this time. Three students were exposed to colleges through school organized visits and tours. “The guided tour in middle school were a big factor because it helped me to realize this what it looked like,” explained Maria. Others simply recalled hearing stories of their teachers’ experiences. As Jose said, “teachers would have their little banners and they sometimes talked about it.” Mary mentioned her class selecting a university for the year and actually visiting the college. James recalled learning about school and visiting campuses through an Encuentros Program.

Encuentros Leadership is a nonprofit educational group that started in San Marcos, California, to address the high dropout rates of Latino boys. An article in the San Diego Union Tribune stated:

> Latinos are the youngest, largest and fastest growing ethnic population in America, yet 53% of Latino boys in California do not finish high school. This alarming statistic is but one indicator of how the changing demographics of Hispanics in our society will impact the global economy (Maio, 2018).
The program’s goal is to expose Latino boys to character-building, history and English lessons to encourage students to attend college and combat the dropout rate issue. Encuentros is offered in some middle and high schools in San Diego and Orange Counties. No research was found on the program itself, it was mentioned by James who was one out of three males interviewed.

**College Exposure in High School.** High school is essential in determining a student’s path to college. This is when classes and grades matter for fulfilling the requirements of four year institutions. Though high school is crucial in determining one’s path, most students didn’t receive the college information they needed until they were already in high school. All participants recalled actually learning about college, how to apply, and the difference between the different type of colleges once already in high school. This information came through programs, counselors and teachers. By far, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program was the one support that stood out the most throughout the data. One student even stated, “the AVID program is honestly what brought me here.” Teachers and counselors were also mentioned as “main supports” and “main reasons” for the students getting to college but some of these teachers and counselor where tied to the program itself. There were a few other programs mentioned along with a sports coach.

**Programs and Extra Curricular Supports.** Some schools utilize specific programs to enhance a student’s college understanding while others adopt the idea of college going school-wide. There are a few schools that do both, and they simply expect all students to think about college. The latter is not as common. Below I discuss the programs that the participants of the study identified as helpful in increasing their college knowledge.

When asked what helped get these first-generation students get to college the responses were pretty consistent, AVID. Twelve out of the fifteen participants of the study identified the
AVID program as a positive support in their college learning journey. A few even credited the program for them making it to university. One participant had the program available to her in high school, but she was not a part of the program. Ten out of the twelve students specifically stated that the program “guided” them through the college application process. All comments regarding the program were positive in nature. Here are a few consistent statements that came up during the interviews:

- “Being in AVID helped me, it guided me… AVID taught me through the whole process. It was a big part of me”
- “The AVID program, that’s when I started finding out about college, about scholarships, and it helped me be succeed in getting into college”
- “AVID really helped me out a lot… It made me more confident”
- “AVID helped me learn about college, it gets you prepared for college.”
- AVID, that’s when I started finding out about college, about scholarships, and it helped me be succeed in getting into college”
- “AVID helped me understand the concept of college”
- “I was lucky, we had AVID”

For these ten students, AVID became their main support in accessing college information and application support. The help was so valued and important that Lucy even stated, “AVID definitely helped me out because there was so much I didn’t know. It’s shocking to see that some people could do it without a program like that because AVID exposed me to new things.” For Lucy, the program was instrumental in understanding how to get to college that it does not seem feasible that others can make it without the information and resources provided by the program.
Only three students recalled their entire school having a visible college going culture. Two of the three schools also had the AVID program available to their students but the college going culture went beyond the students in the program. Julia was a part of AVID but her exposure to college went beyond her AVID class. “My school was very focused on sending their students to college.” She mentioned her school being small, and this allowed for “one-on-one help.” Every senior at her school had a class dedicated to applying to college. Leah also had the AVID program at her school but she was not a part of it. At her school, “everything we did felt like college.” From freshman year, she recalls constantly knowing the requirements for entrance to a California State University (CSU). “Everyone basically took the courses to get to a CSU at least… it was weird if somebody wasn’t doing those classes for a CSU… You didn’t even see what the bare minimum was.” Unlike, Julia and Leah, Lisa’s school did not have the AVID program but she remembers everyone being “on top of her” to complete her application. She also had a class dedicated to filling out college applications and, “there was no excuse for not filling out your application.” The school provided her with “non-stop support” since her sophomore year.

There were few variances from the AVID program and school-wide college going culture, and these are important to note as well. Hannah was a part of the AVID program but she did not mention its support as much as other students. For her, an outside program called Reality Changers is want made all the difference for her. Reality Changers is program based in San Diego that provides students from disadvantaged backgrounds with academic support, financial assistance, and leadership training. The program requires its participants to attend regular events and meetings. Hannah’s mom placed her in the program early on and they had “mentors and advisors that have applied to college and graduate.” She attended the program regularly and that
helped her learn about college. She also credits her involvement on the soccer team for helping her “express herself” and be less shy. Lastly, Mary mentioned a bit of a school-wide college going culture at her school, but she identified athletics as her main college going support. Her coach was her “main motivator.” She looked up to him, and he supported her in her process.

**Counselor and Teacher Impact.** High school teachers and counselors played a significant role in helping first-generation college students into get to college. Support came from counselors or teachers that supported the AVID program, but for others they came from English teachers. Regardless, each student seemed to have a school adult or two who they would lean on as they learned about college and they completed the process of getting accepted to college. The majority leaned on the school staff for procedural process support but there were a few that also sought emotional support from these individuals.

Counselors seemed to provide more of the procedural application support. For example, “they came around to our classes and helped us with the FAFSA” and “telling me what classes to take.” Counselors were also brought up as individuals that provide “scholarship opportunities” and information on college preparatory course requirements. Only one student mentioned that their counselor “helped create a list of safe and reach colleges.” Two students mentioned having very minimal to no support from their counselors. However, almost every student mentioned that it depended on which counselor they sought out for help, “I feel like two or three out of all the counselors actually took their time. There was one counselor that never believed in me.” One student mentioned getting a lot of support from her counselor and feeling more comfortable with her because she was also Hispanic and undocumented, and she assisted her with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) information. Overall, some counselors seemed to support with
basic procedural information while others were more involved and actually took on an active role in helping students figure out the application process.

Teachers were also brought up throughout the interviews. Thirteen of the fifteen students interviewed mentioned receiving support from their teachers in one way or another. Teachers were brought up as providing: “essay writing support”, “motivation”, “interest in the student’s process”, or “inspiration.” For three students their teachers inspired them to attend college by sharing their personal stories, such as “every day in the morning he would inspire us… he was good at it.” Jose remembered his teacher talking about his alma mater (UC Santa Cruz) and their mascot, the banana slugs. Another student recalls feeling a sense of hope from knowing her teachers finished college and they looked like her, “because my teachers were Hispanic and that made me feel more welcomed like I had an opportunity.” Clearly, teachers have the capability of being extremely involved in a student’s college path or minimally involved. As mentioned in the Laura’s story for her AVID teacher became like a “second mom” but just as with counselors, each teacher is different and they each have the capability of impacting students in a different manner.

Other Influences

Family and school systems were discussed as beneficial supports to first-generation college students. Not all people within these systems provided a positive interaction with the students, but they did provide motivation and/or procedural support in some way. However, as part of the study it was also important to note the influence peers and technology had in a student’s decision and process of going to college. In the past the only connection student had with a college was through physical visits, prior to attending, or through connections and people who had attended the school. Technology now allows people to virtually visits campuses as well
as experience a wealth of knowledge without having to physically attend the school or without needing to know someone that already attended the school. Peers have also long known to be important in students’ academic trajectories, as discussed below.

**Peer Influences.** Peers are a large influence in teenagers’ lives. One would assume that peers would influence each other in attending or not attending college and/or possibly the college a student selects to go to. All interviewees were asked what role their peers played in their college going experience. All students said their peers had no influence in their decision to attend college and in their selection of institution. The participants mentioned discussing college with peers and supporting each other through the process but no influence was noted directly. However, some of the data seems to point to peer influence, but the students themselves do not note it as influence.

For example, Mary stated, “I think a big thing that influences whether or not someone goes to college is where they go to school… If everyone around you is expected to go you go as well.” James also mentioned, “It’s just because of, I guess, that program I saw my friends that… I’ve basically learned from them… They were really smart, there was nothing shameful about being smart.” This student in particular was trying to change his ways and make better choices in school. Seeing people in his program work towards college also allowed him to see it as a positive. Molly also reaffirmed this notion, “The friends I had, their parents went to college. So, it was like kind of required of them to go, so it kind of pushed me to say, ‘oh, if I want to do that, I’m going to have to go.’” When asked if their peers influence their college process they all said no, but their reflections allow us to see that peers did somehow play a role.

Peer influence may not be as obvious as one might think. It is easy to follow a group without noticing they are influencing one’s decisions. For these students in particular, their peers
had a positive influence when it came to higher education. But this may not always be the case. As discussed earlier in this chapter, different cities and different schools have significant disparities in college discussions and expectations. Maria, Leah and Mary noticed these difference in college conversations and expectations first hand. Would they be in college if they would have stayed in their hometown? Would they have followed a different path or a different set of friends?

Technology and Social Media. Every college has a website with resource and information. Sites are used by students currently enrolled in the institution, but there are also portions of the website that serve as resources for potential future students. In addition, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and so many other forms of social media are used by higher education institutions to promote their schools and to keep people informed. Thus, it was important to examine whether first-generation college students were using these resources to increase their knowledge on the college going process.

Out of all the participants in the study, only one mentioned using technology to go on a virtual tour of the campus. Eleven students mentioned using websites to do prior research on the schools they applied to, to get information on various aspects of the school: dorms, tuition cost, majors, deadlines, etc. Only three students mentioned other forms of social media, twitter and Facebook, to look up school events and application deadlines. The majority of the students mentioned the use of technology to apply to the school and to apply for financial aid, since these are digital for most schools. There is no longer the option of a paper-based application as there was in the past. Though technology was used by the majority of the student’s the level of use was not significant. It seems as though most of the information came from the K-12 schools and the people within them.
Challenges and Advice

Along with looking into the key factors that students identify as helpful in obtaining college access, it was also imperative to look into any challenges these first-generation college students could identify. Though a few challenges came up during the interview, in analyzing the data, it became apparent that finances were a struggle for most participants. Most students did not feel that they were well prepared in the process of understanding financial aid or how to finance their education. The other main challenge was adapting to college once there.

The Challenge of Financing Higher Education. Financing college is a large part of the college going process. Learning about college, taking the right courses, and applying are the first steps into accessing higher education. Unfortunately, the process does not stop there. Students also need to know and figure out how they will be financing their education. Though most student received help in completing their FAFSA form, many seemed not to understand the deeper concept of financial aid and how to maneuver around the system. Many of the students interviewed also mentioned that cost and finances played a huge role in the selection of the state university they attended over their “dream school.”

Ten out of fifteen students specifically mentioned selecting to attend the university because of cost. Eight out of the ten students actually said they would have attended another school if money had not been a concern. Allison got accepted into her “dream school” in San Jose but it was too expensive. She stated, “if money was not an issue I would’ve gone to San Jose.” She also mentioned that “money wise this was the best option.” She felt, “like a lot of first years also get scared about the facts, about like money.”

Maria discussed how finances were her biggest challenge. She also, “wanted to go to a UC but I wasn't able to afford it.” Similarly, Lucy imagined herself at another school, a school
up north: “My mom couldn't do that for money reasons.” For Mary, the selection was limited by her parents due to money:

The only thing they cared about was how much it would cost, they put limit on me that I couldn’t go to anything outside of California and I couldn’t go to a big university. I had to go to [a state university].

Lisa also got accepted into multiple schools. She was between UC Riverside and a less expensive state university. She ended up deciding on the less expensive one: “what it came down to was, personally, the money.” She also mentioned, “I wasn’t super into it at first.” She is now happy but many others mentioned the same feeling of not being excited at first about their college selection. Thankfully, all students that stated they were not excited at first have adjusted and seem to enjoy the “environment” at the university they chose. Many of these students had options, including more selective public universities in the state, but they found that attending this university was more affordable for them and their families. It has become a comfortable place for these students but what if they had not been limited? Is limiting ones’ choices really due to money or simply lack of resources and additional support?

It is important to look into the questions above because some of the students mentioned that knowing how to finance their education was the most difficult part of their journey. Lisa mentioned, “it was hard to learn about it financially, because I feel like there was so much. I feel like, even when I got here, there was so much that wasn’t touched upon.” Even though she attended college financial aid workshops and meetings she did not feel as if it was enough.

Similarly, Hannah also stated that she was a part of many programs that helped her learn about college and about financing college but the information was new and it was challenging to capture everything: “sometimes they would only tell me something once and for me, I need things to be repeated.” Both Julia and Cindy stated that hardest thing for them in getting to
higher education was the financial piece. Cindy stated, “not having resources and knowledge about financial aid was really hard for me.”

Lucy summarized her experience by sharing: “I feel like they (high school) teach you how to get there and how to manage your time… They don’t teach you the real issues like money of financial aid.” Financing higher education is an important piece of the college going experience for all students but it seems as first-generation college students are not getting enough support in this area, which has led to settling for the affordable school rather than the “dream school.”

**The Challenge of Adapting.** Though students were asked to describe challenges they face in trying to access college a few of them discussed their challenge once they arrived. From adapting to the change of not living at home, to learning how to maneuver the student portal, to learning how to “crash a class.” Though these are not related to process of accessing college they are important to note as it will provide insight as to what first-generation college students might need once they start college.

Six students mentioned missing home, feeling guilty about leaving, or not wanting to leave at all when it was time to start college. Jose, Hannah and Lucy all missed home during the first few weeks of school. Gabriela mentioned that “it was really scary” being away from home for the first time. Becky, on the other hand, realized the impact her departure would have on her family: “I really cannot help them out. I did feel bad, and I just felt like I after I left my dad would be the one doing most of the stuff.” Allison went from being excited to leave home to not wanting to attend college:

I didn’t want to leave and be alone. I’ve always wanted to be independent, which is a funny thing I’ve always talked about going to college, I was so happy…I think everybody has that in their heads, but yeah Saturday I didn’t want to leave.
Allison even mentioned that she considered dropping out: “the first two weeks I actually thought about dropping out.” She adjusted during the third week with the help of one of her classes. This was a class for first-year students to assist them in sharpening their skills and support their college success. In this class Allison started making friends and meeting other first-generation college students and that helped her “feel comfortable.”

For other students the process of figuring out college became an “obstacle”. Molly recalls being frustrated and disappointed: “I’m here, I’m in college, now what do I do?” For her, learning how to navigate college was challenging. She became really frustrated when trying to sign up for classes. She remembers trying to “crash classes” unsuccessfully. “I hear of the phrase ‘crashing’ all the time, but didn’t know what it was.” Lisa also mentioned having a rough transition, “it was very difficult. I anticipated it to be challenging but I didn’t think it would be like this hard. I think the change for high school environment to college was so… it was just drastic for me.” Leah expressed the stress she felt in regards to her major. She wanted to be in nursing but later learned that she should have started earlier: “if I did nursing, nursing starts from first semester, you have to do all the classes.” Cindy was more specific and she discussed the challenge of maneuvering the college system:

Even the [course registration] system was really difficult for me because I didn’t know how to navigate through it and nobody sits there and teaches you how to do these things. You have to figure these things out on your own.

Transitioning to college can be challenging for any student. First-generation college students are no different. They miss home, get cold feet, and they get overwhelmed in trying to maneuver within a new system. The university’s class for first-year students, which is designed to assist in sharpening their skills and to help them be more successful, seems to help in transitioning students to college. The university website states, “Students who complete [this
are more likely to stay in college!” However, the class did not seem to address the emotional challenges that come from leaving home and being alone during the first weeks of the home to college transition.

Advice for Future First-Generation College Students. As I concluded my interviews, it was import for me to ask the participants to provide advice to other first-generation college students and to schools that support these students. The participant seemed to agree that schools should provide more parent supports as well as providing earlier exposure to higher education. As for the advice to the actual students all the messages were positive and motivational.

One main topic that was recommended many times was parent training. Nine of the fifteen students felt that the parents do not know enough and are not receiving enough information. They also provided creative ways of offering the information. Allison recommended somehow making mandatory workshops for parents that impact grades or provide extra credit for the students. She believes that sometime parents do not understand the importance of the information until after they participate in a workshop. She herself remembers attending mandatory meetings that she was not excited about at first but then walked away with new learned knowledge. “I’ve done it before I go into a workshop with a mentality that, whatever I just need to so it as a requirement. But I get out with a lot of information.”

Jose also believes that parent information is needed but he understands that they have to work. He suggested creating online course or workshops through apps for parents, “have it like homework for the syllabus so they (parents) can get involved.” James’ advice was to not only provide information on the process but also the reason for college. He stated, “I feel like some parents are still kind of closed minded about education.” He would like to see K-12 systems “prepare them (parents) in the sense they know what college can do for the children.”
Cindy believes that parents need to know the importance of college exposure: “Let parents know that they should expose their children to college campuses and help them research things about college.” These first-generation college students would like to see more parent trainings and parent sessions to help increase college exposure.

In terms of supports for first-generation student themselves, the participants of this study advise that schools provide more school-wide supports and that the exposure start earlier in education. Becky recommends that all students get college information. She sees value in a school-wide culture versus one class of support: “make sure you everyone is included. To make sure that everyone knows about it, gets information, not like just a certain group.” She also suggests having a college elective for all students in high school as that really helped her. Lucy also suggests that K-12 systems teach student about college early on. She states, “if you teach children that they want to go to college, then they’ll accept it more.” Lisa also touched on the importance of helping students understand why college: “really help them understand why.” The participants also mentioned the value of bringing in guest speakers and mentors and just sharing stories form those that have already gone through the process. They also mentioned more college tours and college activities throughout elementary and middle school.

All students in the study encourage other first-generation students to attend college. Here are some of the pieces of advice they would give to future first-generation college students:

- “It really is a great experience to be here or anywhere on a college campus and it really helps you to learn a lot more about the world.”
- “Do it for you”
- “There’s going to be people that look up to you”
- “The journey was long, yes but now I’m here so it’s all worth it”
• “Don’t give up”
• “Try your best”
• “Don’t feel discouraged by ethnicity or family problems”
• “Surround yourself with people who are aiming for the same goal as well, because that motivates you to continue your path”

First-generation college students see the value in their own experience. They want to continue supporting other first-generation college students as they themselves discover their journey.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of first-generation college students who are in their first semester of university. For first-generation students, students of color, and students of low socioeconomic households, education is the one factor that allows them to experience a different outcome in life (Gray, 2013). However, the rate in first-generation students are attending college is not proportional to those who are not first-generation. The intent of this study was to look into what systems or supports first-year, first-generation college students identify as key factors in their path to accessing higher education. By looking into these students’ stories we can gain insight into how to support these student best.

Summary of Key Findings

1. What role does family network play in helping these students get to college?

An analysis of the data showed that families play a role in motivating first-generation college students in their desire to access higher education. The motivation did not always come from positive interactions or support. For some students, their family was very supportive and they motivated the students to achieve more than what the family had attained previously. On the other hand, some students did not have positive support from their family and the lack of support and belief in themselves motivated them to get to college. Twelve out of the fifteen participants specifically mentioned their family members are “emotional support” and “motivators.” The main person in the family that came up as the motivator or emotional support for these students was their mother. Eight out of the twelve students mentioned their mothers as being that emotional and motivational support as they ventured into the world of higher education.
Another interesting finding was that though all students were first-generation, not all were the first in their families to attempt college. Five participants had older siblings that had attended college prior to them. Though they had a connection to someone in college, the older siblings were not able to help the students as they launched into their own journey. All five participants mentioned receiving no direct help from their older siblings. The siblings had all recently left for college and they were themselves “figuring it out.” Though the older siblings had figures out how to get to college they now embarked on a new process, they now had to figure out how to maneuver in the world of higher education which left them with limited time to support their younger siblings. Though there was no direct support in the process of applying to college the fact that the older siblings had gone first did positively impact the participants. The participant had an increase desire to attend because their siblings had already gone for some it was even an expectation because of their siblings.

2. How do school networks contribute to these students getting to college?

The K-12 system plays a significant role in first-generation college students and their chances of accessing higher education. The data analysis of my study continued to support this notion but I was also able to identify the difference in supports from elementary to middle and high school. Only three out of fifteen students recall hearing about college in elementary school. The conversations were around, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” and connections to needing college for some careers but no specifics on college or how to access it. In middle school, the college going culture became more visible with eleven out of the fifteen participants recalling seeing more college visuals and only three students actually attending college tours. High school is when all students recall actually getting information on the process and procedure of accessing higher education.
In high school, the information came from different sources: programs and extracurricular supports, counselors, and teachers. By far the most significant college going support came for the AVID program. Twelve out of fifteen students participated in the program in high school. Ten of the twelve expressed the program “guided” them and it serves as a main procedural support on the college going process. The AVID program aims to expose students to the different higher education paths and it helps prepare the students for college and careers. The program provided the students with the information and direct support needed to they could apply to college. Only three students mentioned their school setting college as an expectation for all students. They recall counselors and teachers making college a priority to the point that every student had a college application class.

Counselors and teachers were also mentioned as a support for some the first-generation college students. Counselors were mentioned mostly as procedural supports with FAFSA, college entrance requirements, scholarships and class selection. But not all counselors were the same, the participants made it clear that some counselors were more involved than others. Teachers were also mentioned as procedural help but they also served as inspiration for some of the participants. Teachers sharing their personal stories seemed to help the students see college as an attainable goal.

Another finding that arose from the data was that not all schools provide the same level of information. Three participants themselves were able to note the difference in college exposure and conversations from one city to another. These students noticed that when they moved from one area to another: form Oceanside to San Marcos, Los Angeles to Victorville, and Moreno Valley to Riverside the exposure to the college going culture increased.
3. Are there additional factors that contribute to increasing access, for example social media/technology/peers?

Technology has changed drastically over the past few years, and college applications are now digital. I was interested in learning how first-generation college students used technology, if at all, to increase their understanding of the college going process. Technology was used by all students to apply to institutions and most of the students visited the school’s website for information, but there was minimal use for virtual tours or as a resource for direct help. Students did not communicate with the institutions or members of the institution to learn more about the school or the application process. Students seemed to depend heavily on high school staff for the direct support.

As for peer influence, the results were somewhat conflicting. When asked if their peers influenced them in going to college or the college selected, the students said no. However, there were a few responses that demonstrated that peers did have a positive influence on the students. Peers seemed to set an example and an expectation that college was a goal, but the students themselves did not identify the influence directly; rather, the data demonstrated the positive peer influence for a few of the participants.

4. What was most challenging aspect of the process for the students? What advice would they give to other first-generation students and the schools that support these students?

Data analysis revealed that financing college was the biggest challenge for these fifteen first-generation college students. Each student received help in completing their initial FAFSA form but they did not get enough information on understanding the financial piece of college. Many of the students even mentioned making their decision to attend this particular university
solely because of the financial piece. Some of the students got accepted to their “dream school” but decide to attend their chosen university because it was more affordable.

The participants of the study also identified adapting to college as a challenge. The students felt prepared to apply to college but once there, things became overwhelming. A few students mentioned wanting to drop out or becoming frustrated with trying to understand how to maneuver the higher education system. Crashing classes and the student portal were college processes the students did not understand. With time, the students adjusted, but they recall being overwhelmed with all the college processes they did not know about. Some participants did mention taking an introductory class that helped them adjust and make friends. One student even called it, “an AVID like class.”

Lastly, the data analysis provides advice to first-generation future student and the schools that support them. Many participants identified parent training and information as an area of need. They would like to see more workshops and more creative ways to inform families that have to work. The other major recommendation is starting with college exposure earlier in the K-12 schooling, and increasing students’ exposure to college through school-wide initiatives not selected programs only. Lastly, all the participants encourage other first-generation students to pursue the path of higher education and to seek out resources in any way possible.

**Connection to the Literature and Theory**

As mentioned earlier, there is a drastic need for better understanding and increased support for students who will be the first generation to attend college. Many first-generation students are qualified to attend college, and they have the desire to attend but they need additional help in accessing the procedural information (McDonough & Calderon, 2004). By providing information in schools or through additional resources these students can increase their
social capital and their human capital in order to obtain a change at higher education. Schools need to be the primary source of information on the pathway to college because first-generation students depend on it (Bui, 2005). This study can provide insight to schools with low rates of first generation students attending college. It can possibly help these institutions provide more support for their first-generation population. This study can also help inform students who will be first-generation college students themselves. Below, I connect past research to my findings with the aim to add clarity to this larger issue.

**Social Capital and Human Capital.** Theories of social capital and human capital provide the theoretical framework for this study. Bourdieu’s (1986) initial concept of social capital was described as an accumulation of the resources that are tied to membership in a specific group. The concept of social capital was initially tied to economics and it was limited to a selective group and it kept social capital limited to affluent populations. It is important to understand that social capital now be attained in many ways, and it differs in different settings. School, home, and online interactions can all provide a different types of access to social capital which can then impact one’s own human capital.

Human capital can be increased by ones networks and ones relationships. Therefore, social capital has in impact on the creation of human capital (Coleman, 1988). For first-generation college students the social capital obtained at school allows them to figure out how to apply to college. The social capital obtained at home motivates the students to want to get to higher education. Due to the lack of first-hand knowledge first-generation college students depend on social capital within the school setting to support the procedural part of accessing higher education. As discussed in Chapter 2, social capital and human capital are two different things. Social capital is based on the networks and connections one has while human capital is
the knowledge and skills we possess. Both of these play a role in the journey of first-generation college students. Social capital within the home and within the school setting have different roles in the college going process. Below are the findings and the connections to previous research and the impact of social capital in the human capital of these first-generation students.

**Access and Dependency.** Due to the lack of social resources, parents of low-income households rely on teachers and the school system to educate their children on how to navigate the higher education system (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Not all first-generation families are low-income but the majority of them do fall in this category. Whether or not the fifteen participants of the study were low-income, they all supported this notion of dependency during the interviews. The families of the fifteen students interviewed relied heavily on the K-12 school system to provide first-generation students with the procedural support of applying and accessing higher education. As discussed by Choy (2001), post-secondary education involves a process; a process of selecting, applying, and funding one's education. Some of the parents of the students interviewed were involved, and they learned the process along with their children while others looked for additional resources to support their children. For Gabriela, her mom was figuring out the process with her, while Hannah’s mom looked for programs to place her in for additional support. Regardless, the fifteen students interviewed relied heavily on the school system for the access to higher education. The social capital within the school was crucial in providing access to higher education.

**School programs.** Schools provide the resources to higher education in various ways. Cates and Schaefle (2011) found that the outreach components that exposed the students to information and familiarity in form of college visits, educational field trips, summer programs, and advising hours helped increase the student's social capital. Early college visits were more
impactful if done before the eighth grade. During the interviews students mentioned attending college trips but most of these happened in high school. Unfortunately, previous studies have found that early exposure to tours and fieldtrips can have a greater impact on students. It seems as if college information is more readily available once the students are already in high school and this might be a bit too late for some students.

McKillip, Godfrey, and Rawls (2012) found that building a college going culture at the school site while building strong relationships with the students increased the number of students attending college. Established relationships with their students helped increase the students’ college aspirations. This was also mentioned throughout the interviews. As for building a college going culture, only three participants noted this being school-wide. The majority of the participants mentioned a college going culture through the AVID program.

Though the AVID program was not for all students it did have a great impact on the twelve students that participated in the program, much like the students in Hubbard and Mehan’s (1999) study. Some of the students even attribute their acceptance to college to the program and the teachers of the AVID program. The AVID program provided students with the basic information they needed. It exposed them to the different types of schools as well as the process of applying to each school. The students mentioned that AVID was instrumental in helping them understand the college going process. AVID as other targeted programs do support students in building their knowledge on the process of higher education. This program provides the basic knowledge that first-generation college students might not have access to at home or from the family.

**Teachers and Counselors.** Studies by Bui (2005), Domina (2009), Holcomb-McCoy (2010), and McKillip, Godfrey, and Rawls (2012) discuss the impact that teacher attitudes,
counselor support and knowledge have on a student’s access to higher education. All can have a positive or negative impact depending on the service provided and the time in which they are provided to the students. Bui (2005) found a negative correlation between teacher absences and the student’s odds of attending college. Teacher presence created consistency and an increased value in the education process which had positive effects on students. This was also consistent throughout the interviews in this study. Students relied on their teachers and counselors not only for procedural support but also for motivation and inspirations. The students developed close relationships with the school staff and that helped them stay focused as they looked into accessing higher education. A few students even mentioned wanting to drop out of the AVID program, and they were not allowed to by the teacher. In most cases, the students had a positive association with their teachers and that supported their path to college.

Though the teacher interactions were positive, counselor support seemed more variable. Some students mentioned having great counselors and other mentioned seeing a variance in support depending on the counselor they were talking to. McDonough and Calderon (2004) found that counselors were advising low-income minority students to apply to community colleges because they thought that was all the students could afford. Though this did not come up during my interviews it was clear that not all counselors had the same amount of human capital to appropriately advice the students. Counselors have their own human and social capital and depending on their knowledge and resources they can have a positive or negative impact of first-generation college students.
**Family Support.** Though families of first-generation college students might have limited human capital in regards to higher education, it does not prevent them from providing immense support and social capital in the form of emotional and motivational support. As discussed in the earlier chapters, parental encouragement and involvement are key factors in predicting students’ post-secondary aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999; Trusty, 1998). The students in the interviews confirmed that their families, in particular their mothers, served as motivator and emotional supports as the students tried to figure out the college application and selection process. The families provided the emotional support the students needed to reach higher education. The families also motivated their children to obtain more than what they could. Both of these findings were consistent with the findings of previous research.

One aspect that arose from the interviews was that motivation was not always manifest from positive family interactions. This was not found in the literature review but in a few of the interviews the students shared wanting to achieve due to the lack of belief from the family. These students found motivation to achieve not through emotional support but more so through the lack of emotional support. Allison mentioned the hurt she felt from her father’s lack of support. Molly also mentioned her parents not believe she was capable of going to college, so it motivated her to do better. This is an areas that would benefit from further research to see if there is an impact of the persistence of these students to get to higher education and to keep going once they are there.

**Peers and Technology.** Peer social networks have been important for first-generation students, but research has found them to be more influential once first-generation students get to college (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2016) found that students depended on each other for emotional support and these friendships fostered strategies
for resilience. Students mentioned supporting each other through the challenges they faced outside the school setting. Peer networks were not noted as important in the college going process during my interviews, but it seems that they might be more important than acknowledged by each individual. Peers had a positive unnoted influence in accessing higher education. The students mentioned following the steps of their peers but when asked if they influenced their decision to attend college or where to go the answers were consistently no. Students do not seem to notice the influence their peers have on them. This could be one of the reasons why it has not been found to influence students while in high school. Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2016) also found the impact of negative influences from peers early on. This did not come up during the interviews. What did come up was the idea that three students could have ended up in a different paths had they not moved cities and schools.

Wohn et al. (2013) found that first-generation students are utilizing social media as an additional source of information to help guide them in their quest to higher education. Julien (2015) describes changes in the concept of social capital. He describes that social capital initially was seen as class goods that were used as an element of exclusion and conserving resources. Now it has shifted to a form of public goods. In which people who invest themselves online have a stock of social capital that exists and is exchanged online. Essentially, online interactions affect an individual’s stock of social capital. This notion of “digital social capital” has limited research in the college access literature, and the idea was not evident in the interviews. Though students did use the technology to apply to schools and to obtain information on different colleges, no one mentioned reaching out to people that supported their application or selection process of higher education.
Recommendations for Future Research

Research on first-generation college students exists but there is still so much more to understand. There are many factors that impact these students and their access to higher education. Teachers and counselors are one of the factors that play an important role in the success and/or failures of potential first-generation college students. Because these individuals can have a positive or negative impact on first-generations students, who tend to be low-income students of color, more research on how schools train these staff members is imperative. There is little research on the ways in which different public schools prepare staff to support college and career readiness for all students. As mentioned in Chapter 2, every school provides different supports depending on funding. Looking further into the types of training provided to staff members might help us understand areas of need.

Programs such as AVID require training for the staff involved in the implementation. As discovered by Hubbard and Mehan (1999) sometimes the programs require a shift in the educational system as a whole. Some schools might involve all teachers in the training of AVID practices while others might only train those providing the elective classes. It would be beneficial to see what training is provided in schools that have college and career programs. It would also be beneficial to research teacher credentialing programs to learn what is being done to prepare future teachers to support the needs of all students in accessing higher education.

College and career preparedness programs are important but we also need to look into the attitudes and beliefs of the adults that work in schools. Without the belief that all children can learn, programs will not receive their due diligence and ultimately suffer. As mentioned in the literature review, Mehan et. al (1996) studied implementation of the AVID program and found that racist attitudes and practices continued to impede the implementation of the program. It
would be useful to interview teachers and counselors to see if they realize the impact their beliefs and relationships have on the students they serve. Studies have shown the power teachers and counselors can have on the success of a student (McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009). We now need to interview and survey teachers and counselors to see if they feel prepared to provide the support needed by these students.

Similarly, it is important understand what drives teachers and other staff members to support first generation students (or not). Why are some teachers making a difference while others are not? What allows one teacher to connect to their students more than another? We need to identify if it is a training or program that makes the difference in a staff member. Research on educators and their stories might help identify what drives some people to motivate and inspire students versus those that may not believe that all children can learn. Leaders can play an important role in shifting teachers’ belief systems as well. Identifying professional development needs and allowing time for teacher to coach each other can create great impact.

It would also benefit potential first-generation college students if we looked into the collaboration between higher education institutions and the K-12 system. Knowing what higher education institutions are doing to collaborate and to support the K-12 system would be helpful in identify area that might need more attention. Since the K-12 system is so different than the higher education system, it would advantageous to look into the initiatives taken on by these institutions to see if they are supporting the transition from one institution to the next. Research on the collaboration between the two systems would also allow us to see if the initiatives align to the needs identified by first-generation college students. It might also support in recognizing if we are maximizing both systems to support all students.
Lastly, it might be of benefit to follow first-generation college students in a longitudinal study. The goal of getting first-generations students to college is so that they can eventually graduate. It is not enough that we get them there. If first-generation college students are followed for a longer period of time we can further understand where we might be failing these students who will be the first to attempt college. Perhaps when first-generation college students arrive to college they would benefit from a mentor, a veteran college student that can help these new students maneuver the system so they don’t become frustrated or overwhelmed with their new life in college. Would it make a difference in graduation rates? As seen in this study, many students selected a college due to financial reasons, does this impact graduation rate? All of these questions are important and need further research.

**Implications for Practice**

This study has significant implications for future first-generation college students. There is a wealth of research on first-generation students and the disadvantages they face in getting to college, but there is little research on the actual experience of the students that do make it to college. Furthermore, there is little research on what these students identify as key factors that made their college path a reality. If students understand what resources to seek, they might want to attempt the path to college. They might also gain confidence in knowing that others have gone down the same path and they can gain from the stories. Learning and gaining knowledge from first-generation students could impact future students and the supports provided to them.

Understanding what factors have helped first-generation students can assist K-12 and higher education institutions on creating or implementing programs to facilitate the college path for first-generation students. Specific guidance is provided below.
**K-12 School Systems.** K-12 systems tend to provide the main access to higher education for first-generation college students. Unfortunately, these resources start too late in the educational career of these students. If increasing college conversations and college exposure increases a student’s chances of getting to college, why are we waiting until high school to provide the information? It is important to have different levels of college information and exposure in elementary, middle and high school. Simply increasing the conversations about college will support students in believing that they can attend higher education.

Just like we have educational standards and end-of-year exams to identify an educational programs success, educational leaders need to develop a system to assess college and career readiness. Schools need to identify what pieces are important at each level: elementary, middle, and high school. For example, college language and exposure are important at the elementary level, understanding the different types of institutions and fieldtrips would be useful middle school, and teaching students about the application process and financial education are critical in high school. There needs to be larger scale change; we can’t leave college preparation to each school or district. We need a broader system to support consistency and accountability at all schools, regardless of the location of the school.

Schools would also benefit from reviewing the impact that relationships and connections have on first-generation students’ self-efficacy and motivation. Teachers and counselors can have a significant impact on first-generation college students but they might not know this. If they don’t know their importance, they might not know how to connect and share their knowledge and resources with these students. Article reviews and information on the impact they can have on first-generation college students might be a great help to all educators.
School staff plays a crucial role in a first-generation students access to social capital. Having positive connections with the students and sharing personal experiences help students see college as an attainable goal. Unfortunately, not all teachers or counselors are equally equipped to support and guide first-generation college students. School systems and school leaders need to set the platform for all educators to receive professional development and opportunities to grow in these areas. Often times, we blame educators for not caring enough or for not doing enough, but the reality is that they might not know how.

One way of supporting school staff is by building time during the school day to engage in professional development and for meaningful collaborative discussions. Master schedules need to match the intent of the vision. This also means that leaders must invest time in coaching their staff during this time. Spending time on positive relationship building strategies such as restorative practices and strategies to foster a culture of care across a school will create consistency and increase student support, with the ultimate goal of college going. Many schools and districts have adopted this notion of professional learning communities (PLC) but not many guide the process. PLC’s are meant to allow a team to have time to work together and collaborate to achieve a goal. However, without a focus or coaching, PLC time can become free unused time. If schools build in a time for PLCs, this time should be structure and guided for it to make a difference across a school. A consistent system of guided collaboration will lead to common language and common practices such as development of a college-going culture.

**Family Support.** As noted above families also play a significant role in motivation and emotionally supporting first-generation college students. Parental encouragement and involvement are key factors in predicting students’ post-secondary aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999, Trusty, 1998). A simple conversation on college can go a long way. Parents of first-
generation college students do not always know how to support and they might also not understand the power they have in their students journey.

Parents from diverse backgrounds often do not participate in school activities because they do not feel comfortable navigating a system that is different from their own (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Parents need to receive information on how to support their students. But how do they get this if they are not attending parent meetings? The school principal can play a critical role in helping school staff support the school’s work with families in new and creative ways. Parent involvement should not be left to the parents to fix, it should be a priority for the principal and leadership team of a school. Schools need to get creative, with smart phones and technology maybe parents would benefit from receiving digital tips in their language. Schools can do this by creating videos and digital assignments for parents and families. The tasks can be as simple as having a discussion on possible career interests over dinner. Tips and simple tasks might increase the higher education conversations happening in our first-generation households.

Another key idea that would support parent involvement is having staff visit the families rather than always asking them to attend school events. First-generation families might be intimidated to go to a school event. If they don’t know the language or they don’t understand the school system they can shy away from it. Rather than holding another school event, educators could undertake home visits. Having teachers meet the families in their space makes a huge difference. Schools should also be encouraged to hold some events in the community rather than at the school site. Having the staff and the families meet in a community space allows both parties to be neutral.

Families of first-generation college students may be limited in knowledge on the process of higher education, but leaders and other educators in the K-12 system can address this issue.
Schools can support parents by strengthening the involvement and the communication, therefore leading to a stronger network of resources and therefore more comfort in the process to higher education.

**Higher Education Institutions.** K-12 systems seem to be carrying much of the responsibility of getting first-generation students to college. It might be time that higher education and the K-12 systems work together in supporting these students. Higher education institutions should visit elementary, middle, and high schools. These institutions should provide professional development to staff, parents and students. The ultimate goal is the same for K-12 systems and for higher education. Unfortunately, there is not as much collaboration across systems.

Ten students in my study mentioned selected their school because of money. Could they have gone to a more selective public university or a private school with more support and more information? There is significant research on the concept of undermatching, when students go to colleges that are below their capacity and academic skills (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2008). These studies show increase dropout rates for students that attend a college that is too easy for them. Higher education institutions can do a better job of supporting K-12 systems to help students understand the financial piece. Many students mentioned getting to college but not understanding the financial process.

**Conclusion**

The disproportionate number of first-generation students attending college and the ever growing minority population in the United States is an ongoing issue that deserves further attention. First-generation college students continue to face challenges, such as lack procedural support, financial hardships, and lack of knowledge on the unfamiliar paths to higher education.
Furthermore, these students lack the social and human capital that their non-first-generation counterparts grew up with. These factors compound the ever growing issue.

Research indicates that education regarding the process of accessing college and the development of a strong college going culture can combat the low rates of first-generation students attending higher education institutions. We must introduce and emphasize college at an earlier age particularly for our first-generation college students. Additionally, K-12 institutions must implement pre-college outreach programs that promote and support the process of attending higher education. Programs such as AVID program, need to continue growing and strengthening to support the needs of these students. Training is another key factor in ensure that these first-generation students are prepared to venture into the journey of higher education. Counselors, teachers, and staff need to understand the impact and power they hold in supporting all students in getting to college. There is also value in developing programs or systems that empower parents of potential first-generation college students to understand the process of higher education and what they can do to help. We not only need to support these students with college access programs, but we also need to work on the relationships and beliefs we hold for these students. Providing role models and developing strong relationships with potential first-generation college students can led to increased number of students applying and attending college. Though we have a long way to go, there is power in knowing more about first-generation college students and the challenges and success they face as they access higher education.
Appendix A

Email Outreach to University

Dear [Name of Institution] TRIO and EOP Offices,

My name is Anna Lozano-Partida, and I am a graduate student in the Joint Doctoral Program (JDP) in Educational Leadership with UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos. I am also the Principal of Epiphany Prep Charter School in Escondido. For my dissertation, I am going to study the successes and challenges that first-generation college students face in accessing higher education. Specifically, the research question for this study is: “What factors do first-generation college students identify as significant contributors to their success in accessing higher education?” In particular, I would like to examine the roles that family, school, peers and technology play in a first-generation students path to higher education.

In order for this research study to be conducted, I am seeking your assistance in contacting first-year, freshman students at [name of institution] who are first-generation college students over the age of 18. If possible, I am asking whether your office might be willing to use your listserv or another email communication form to send out the enclosed invitation to participate in an interview to students who fit these criteria and are part of your program(s). For purposes of this research study, first-generation college students are defined as students who will be the first in their families to attend and graduate from a four-year college. More specifically, first-generation college attenders include those whom no parent(s) has attended or graduated from a four-year university or college (but may have attended or graduated from a 2-year college or certification program). All data collected through the study would be completely confidential and secured in a password protected computer.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance in furthering this study. Please let me know if this is feasible and if any other requirements are needed.

Many thanks for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Anna Lozano-Partida
Escondido Campus Principal
Epiphany Prep Charter School
725 N. Escondido Blvd.
Escondido, CA 92025
Doctoral Student, Educational Leadership:
UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos
(323)877-9724
lozan01@cougars.csusm.edu
alozano@epiphanyprep.org
Appendix B
Email Invitation to Participate

Dear (NAME),

I am a student in the Joint Doctoral Program (JDP) in Educational Leadership with UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos, and also the Principal of Epiphany Prep Charter School in Escondido. For my dissertation, I am to study the successes and challenges that first-generation college students face in accessing higher education. Specifically, the research question guiding this study is: what factors do first-generation college students identify as significant contributors to their success in accessing higher education? In particular, I would like to examine what role family, school, peers and technology play in a first-generation student’s path to higher education.

For this study, first-generation college students are defined as students who will be the first in their families to attend and graduate from a four-year college. More specifically, first-generation college attenders include those whom no parent(s) has attended or graduated from a four-year university or college (but may have attended or graduated from a 2-year college or certification program). You must to be a first-generation college student and over 18 to participate in this study.

You are being contacted because your university has identified you as being a first-year, first-generation college student over the age of 18. Hence, I want to ask if you might be interested and available for an individual interview to last approximately 60 minutes. You may choose to have the interview take place at a location near you, or on the campus, and it would of course be at your convenience. During the interview you will be asked to describe your experience as a first-generation college student. With your permission, the interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. If you do decide to participate you will receive a $25 gift card to Starbucks at the end of the interview process. Participants do not need to complete the entire interview to receive the gift card.

Your confidentiality will be respected throughout this process. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcribed interview and eliminate any comments or references you feel may be identifiable or have negative connotations. Your responses will not be linked to your name or address.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you and hope that you will choose to participate in the study. I hope to begin interviews for the study in late September 2017. Please email me at lozan01@cougars.csusm.edu if you would like to participate in the study. Please let me know if you have any questions; I can be reached at the phone.

Sincerely,
Anna Lozano-Partida
Doctoral Student, Educational Leadership
UC San Diego and CSU San Marcos
(323)877-9724
lozan01@cougars.csusm.edu
Appendix C

University of California, San Diego
Consent to Act as a Research Subject

First-Generation College Student Study

Who is conducting the study, why you have been asked to participate, how you were selected, and what is the approximate number of participants in the study?

Anna Lozano-Partida, under the supervision of Dr. Amanda Datnow, Professor, Dept. of Education Studies, UC San Diego, is conducting a research study to investigate the challenges and supporting factors that first-generation college students face in their path to accessing higher education. This research is being conducted for a doctoral dissertation that Anna Lozano-Partida is completing as part of the Joint Doctoral Program (JDP) in Educational Leadership with UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos.

You have been selected to participate in this research study because you are a freshman, first generation college student at CSUSM and are over the age of 18. For this study, first-generation college students are defined as students who will be the first in their families to attend and graduate from a four-year college. More specifically, first-generation college attenders include those for whom no parent(s) has attended or graduated from a four-year university or college (but may have attended or graduated from a 2-year college or certification program).

There will be approximately fifteen to twenty participants in this study.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this study is to find out what factors first-generation college students identify as significant contributors to their success in accessing higher education. You will be asked about how family, peers, technology, and your own actions played a role in your path to college.

What will happen to you in this study and which procedures are standard of care and which are experimental?
If you agree to be in this study, the following will happen to you: You will be asked to participate in a 60-minute individual interview about your experience accessing higher education. Interviews will be audiotaped and the researcher will take notes. The audio recordings will be used for transcription purposes only, and once the audio recordings are transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. You can still participate in the study if you do not agree to be audiotaped.

How much time will each study procedure take, what is your total time commitment, and how long will the study last?
Your participation in the study will last one hour. That is your total time commitment. The study will be completed by the end of the 2017-18 school year.
What risks are associated with this study?
Participation in this study may involve some added risks or discomforts. These include the following:

1. There is a possibility of loss of confidentiality. The only people that will have access to the study’s information will be the primary researcher and the supervisor of the study. The information will be kept in locked files and password protected computers, and will be kept under the confidential study ID number, not your name. Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. In addition to the researchers listed above, the UCSD Institutional Review Board may review records. Research records will be destroyed after the dissertation is published and completed.

2. A potential risk of emotional discomfort. The interviewer will ask questions about your experience accessing higher education. There is the possibility that this may lead some participants to feel some mild emotional discomfort or embarrassment. Please be advised that you will be under no obligation to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable, and you may choose not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and still remain in the study. There is also the potential risk of boredom or fatigue during the interview.

Under California law, we must report information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If I have or am given such information, I may be required to report such information to the appropriate authorities.

Because this is a research study, there may also be some unknown risks that are currently unforeseeable. You will be informed of any significant new findings.

What are the alternatives to participating in this study?
The alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

What benefits can be reasonably expected?
There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from participating this study. The investigator, however, may learn more about college access for first generation students and society may benefit from this knowledge.

Can you choose to not participate or withdraw from the study without penalty or loss of benefits?
Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw or refuse to answer specific questions in an interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide that you no longer wish to continue in this study, you will be required to notify the PI verbally or through email.

You will be told if any important new information is found during the course of this study that may affect your wanting to continue.

Can you be withdrawn from the study without your consent?
The PI may remove you from the study without your consent if the PI feels it is in your best interest or the best interest of the study. You may also be withdrawn from the study if you do not follow the instructions given you by the study personnel.

**Will you be compensated for participating in this study?**

In compensation for your time and travel, you will receive a $25 Starbucks gift card for participating in this research. Participants do not need to complete the entire interview to receive the gift card.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

There will be no cost to you for participating in this study.

**Who can you call if you have questions?**

Anna Lozano-Partida has explained this study to you and answered your questions. If you have questions about the study you may direct those questions to the researcher, Anna Lozano-Partida (lozan01@cougars.csusm.edu or (323) 877-9724) or to Dr. Amanda Datnow, Dissertation Supervisor (adatnow@ucsd.edu).

You may call the Human Research Protections Program Office at 858-246-HRPP (858-246-4777) to inquire about your rights as a research subject or to report research-related problems.

**Your Signature and Consent**

You have received a copy of this consent document.

You agree to participate.

___________________________________________  ______________________
Subject’s signature             Date
Appendix D

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO
AUDIO RECORDING RELEASE CONSENT FORM

As part of this project, an audio recording will be made of your interview during your participation in this research project. This is completely voluntary and up to you. In any use of the audio recording, your name will not be identified. You may request to stop the recording at any time or to erase any portion of your recording. By signing below, you consent to allow the audio recording to be studied by the research team for use in the research project.

You have read the above description and give your consent for the use of audio recording as indicated above.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                      Date

__________________________________________  __________________________
Witness                                       Date
Appendix E

Student Interview Protocol

[Introduction: Begin with a few minutes of explaining the study, who you are, and the purpose of the study. Explain that while the interview will be taped, their responses are strictly confidential. Let them know if there is something they would like to say off tape, they can inform you and the recorder will be shut off for their comment. Inform them that they may choose to not answer any question they like and that they can stop the interview at any time. Also, let them know the approximate length of the interview and ask if they have any specific questions before beginning.]

Background

- Tell me a little bit about yourself?
- How old are you?
- Where you were born?
- How do you like college so far?

College Application Process

- Which colleges did you apply to and why?
- How familiar were you with each campus before applying? Did you visit campuses before choosing where to apply? If so who took you on the campus visits?
- Tell me about your path to college. What helped you get here, what challenges and successes did you face along the way?
- What would you say influenced you the most in your decision to apply to college?

Academic Background

- When did you learn about college? When did you know you wanted to attend college?
- How did your elementary school prepare you for the college process of selecting, applying and financing higher education? Did they offer any programs that helped you learn about college?
- How did your middle school prepare you for the college process of selecting, applying and financing higher education? Did they offer any programs that help access college?
- How did your high school prepare you for the college process of selecting, applying and financing higher education? Did they offer any programs that helped you learn about and access college?
- Did extracurricular activities influence your desire to attend college?
Counselors and teachers

- How big or small of a role did counselors/teachers/school staff play in your application process?
- Who offered you the most guidance in your preparation of applying to college?
- Did you get assistance from sources outside of school staff (e.g. youth organization)?
- Do you feel you were properly advised? Why or why not?

Parent and Family Influence

- In what ways were your parents or caregivers involved in the college going process, if at all? Were they more or less involved than you would have liked?
- Did you play a role in helping your parents or caregivers understand the college application process?
- Do you have older siblings or other family members who have been involved in the college going process? How did that impact your decision to attend?
- Do you have particular responsibilities in your family (i.e., caring for a relative, earning money) that you consider in making a college choice?
- How did your choice to attend college affect your family?

Peers

- Did peers or significant others influence your decisions to attend college? If so how?
- Did you receive any particularly helpful or even incorrect information from peers?
- How did your high school peers perceive your desire to attend college? Did that matter?
- Did you talk to any peers who attended or who were currently attending the college while you were thinking about college?

Technology or Other Supports

- Did you do any research on the college going process on your own? If so what did you do?
- Did you use social media to learn about the college application process?
- Besides school, family and peers, was there any other person or source that helped you learn about college?

Closing

- If you were to give other first-generation college students advice to help make their journey easier, what would you say to them?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know about your college experiences?
REFERENCES


Gray, S. S. (2013). Framing “at risk” students: Struggles at the boundaries of access to higher education. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*(8), 1245–1251.


