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An investigation of first-generation student experiences and their career development

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**AN INVESTIGATION OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND
THEIR CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

by

Desiree Saraceno

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
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At
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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Tyrone McCombs, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Desiree Saraceno
AN INVESTIGATION OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT EXPERIENCES
AND THEIR CAREER DEVELOPMENT
2018-2019

Dr. Tyrone McCombs, Ph.D.
Master of Arts in Higher Education

The goal of this study was to analyze the student experiences and career development of students who identify as first-generation and who are members of the Flying First Program (FFP) at Rowan University. The qualitative study included one focus group consisting of first-generation students who are involved with the FFP and a second focus group consisting of first-generation students who are not involved with FFP. The purpose of this thesis is to assess first-generation students' experiences, challenges, and resources related to their career development. Currently there has been limited utilization of qualitative data collected regarding students' perspectives and their experiences and challenges they face with their career development (Evans, 2016, Tate, Caperton, Kaiser, Pruitt, White, & Hall, 2015). As a result of the study the researcher will suggest recommendations from focus group results for the First-Generation Task Force Committee at Rowan to potentially help implement future career development programming for first-generation students.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Today first-generation students comprise about one third of college students but only 27% of first-generation students will receive their degree in four years (Davis, 2010, Whitney, Benson, & West, 2018). When first-generation students transition from high school to a university they seek support from educational professionals to facilitate their education and help prepare them for their post-graduation career. Little research has currently been conducted with the specific population of first-generation students related to their career development experiences (Evans, 2016; Tate et al., 2015). Unlike students who have parents who received a four-year degree, first-generation students need more guidance from their institution when it comes to career development opportunities. Several challenges with career development that first-generation students experience when they go to college are confidence in professional interactions, networking opportunities, internships, and a limited professional network (O'Connor, Perez, Jenkins, & Rothenberg, 2016).

Statement of Problem

Currently there have been alarming statistics showing the increased demand for campus community support to help first-generation students succeed throughout their education and be career ready upon graduation (Davis, 2010). More than 25% of first generation students leave college after their first year of attending (O'Connor et al., 2016). More institutions are realizing there are many factors that can affect why a first-

generation student decides not to persist with his/her education, such as lack of parental guidance with their education (McConnell, 2000), taking on multiple jobs (Chen, 2005), and lack of social support on campus (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Higher education institutions can help first-generation students with their education and career by providing social support programs on campus. The Flying First Program (FFP) at Rowan University currently provides first-generation students a connection on campus to discover essential campus resources to help them achieve their academic, career, and personal goals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze and compare the student experiences and career development of first-generation students at Rowan University who are involved with the FFP and students who are not currently involved with the program. To learn more about the FFP, the researcher met with co-founders, Penny McPherson, the Associate Vice President for Diversity and Organizational Effectiveness and Amy Ruymann, the Associate Director of University Advising Services. The co-founders noted that the program has only been implemented for about two years and they are working toward devising program outcomes and incorporating career service opportunities for first-generation students. The support program would like to improve on communication and marketing to better reach the first-generation targeted population.

The thesis assesses first-generation students' experiences, challenges, and resources related to their career development. The study aims to help provide further comprehensive qualitative data on students' perspectives regarding their experiences and

career development. Although there have been few studies currently done with focus groups (Evans, 2016, Tate et al., 2015) none have been performed for first-generation students and their career development at Rowan University. The literature review will provide the foundation and structure for the study and how it can be applied toward a qualitative study at Rowan University. Findings will then be evaluated using thematic analysis to help support further recommendations for the first-generation program committee to potentially implement career development resources and programming.

Flying First-Generation Program at Rowan University

The mission of Rowan University's FFP is to provide tools and opportunities for students to have a successful, personal, professional, academic, and social college experience. The goal of the program is to help first generation students feel engaged and appreciated by the broader Rowan University community as a means of improving persistence and personal growth ("Mission and Objectives", 2018). The Flying First program has been implemented for two years and has fifty-eight faculty members involved in coordinating eight specialized areas; special programming, professional development and training, logistics, marketing, student engagement, parent and alumni outreach, financial resources, and data resources. In addition to faculty, the FFP implemented a Student Engagement Committee (SEC) comprised of students to help provide feedback for future programming. The FFP currently provides first-generation students with professional development workshops, weekly support groups, orientation, an advisory board, and alumni engagement. When meeting with the co-founders of the program, it was explained that there are currently several needs that have not been met to

fulfill the program goals such as, communication, marketing, funding, staffing, and event promoting.

Tomas Varela, is the SEC Coordinator and helps facilitate emails, upcoming events, and meetings. The Student Engagement Committee (SEC) of FFP offers students three groups on campus in which they can be involved: Student Advisory Board, First Generation Ambassadors, and First Generation Advocates. The Student Advisory Board members attend first generation events, offer leadership to the Student Engagement Committee, and engage with administrators. The First Generation Ambassadors will attend 1) first generation events, 2) help with coordinating tabling at different Rowan University events, and 3) help the student advisory board plan and execute tasks. The First Generation advocates will attend first generation events and assist ambassadors and/or the Advisory Board members plan.

Office of Career Advancement

The Office of Career Advancement (OCA) at Rowan University's mission statement is to engage students in the development and implementation of meaningful educational and career goals consistent with their personal values, interests, and abilities (OCA, 2018). The OCA offers college students opportunities for development in resume building, professional networking, mock interviewing, career counseling, and FOCUS-2 career assessment. Career counselors also teach a Rowan-101 course, which is a 2-credit free elective offered to freshman students to help build upon their major and career planning, identity and diversity, and financial literacy. Although the OCA engages students both inside and outside of the classroom with opportunities in career

development, they do not offer programs specifically for first generation students. After speaking with the Director of the Office of Career Advancement, Bob Bullard, there is a strong interest with connecting FFP with OCA to better meet the needs and challenges first-generation students face with their career development.

Significance of the Study

From the moment first-generation students begin their freshman year until their senior year, there should be essential career development resources and professional experience opportunities to help prepare them for graduation and their professional career. The presence of a first-generation community on campus that incorporates career development into required programming can help students become better prepared for their professions after graduation. A social support program on campus that provides experiences connecting major with potential career choices can help first-generation students become more aware of important career related resources to assist them in reaching their academic, career, and personal goals.

Assumptions and Limitations

The thesis assumed that there are support services for first-generation students on campus that provide students with resources to help them toward their academic, career, and personal goals. Students involved in FFP and who decided to participate in this study consider themselves first-generation because they identify as the first in their family to attend college and plan on receiving their degree. The study also assumed that all probative areas discussed in the focus groups and questioned on the surveys were answered truthfully.

A limitation of the study could be the use of focus groups for the study as group discussions can lead to a misinformed representation of a larger population. To help guide the researcher for this study, a moderator's guide was used to help with the interpretation of questions and how one can introduce each question to help guide students' responses. The moderator's guide was adapted from previous qualitative first-generation studies in a higher educational setting (Evans, 2016; Stansberry & Burnett, 2014).

When using focus groups, a small sample size might not be an accurate representation of the larger first-generation population, which can include, commuters, international students, or students who might not even know they are first-generation. When collecting data during focus group discussions, it can be challenging to respond to all questions that could potentially lead to unnecessary discussion or loss of time. Participants of the study can also feel influenced to answer questions that are presented to them by the way the moderator is phrasing the questions.

Operational Definitions

1. First Generation Student Engagement Committee: a committee consisting of faculty, administrators, and students from Rowan University who are active members in helping first-generation students reach their academic, career, and personal goals.
2. First Generation Student: A college student who is the first in their immediate family to attend college and obtain a bachelor's degree.
3. Student Perception: When a student is aware of their surroundings and how

they perceive their faculty and institution (Tinto, 1993).

4. Career Development: The process of learning and improving one's own goals and objectives related to his or her career.

Research Questions

The study explored the following questions:

Research Question 1: How are first-generation students connecting their college experience with their career plans?

Research Question 2: What have first-generation students done, to date, to help prepare them to achieve their career goals?

Research Question 3: What challenges do first-generation students perceive as preventing them from achieving their personal, educational, and career goals?

Research Question 4: What advice would first-generation students like to receive to help with their career development?

Overview of the Report

Chapter II provides a review of literature related to the significance of this study. The literature review defines first generation students and the importance of career development in higher education. It also explains the different elements of involvement and student's perceptions.

Chapter III formulates the procedures and methodologies used in order to conduct this study. The chapter includes the survey instrument, population, and how the data were explored.

Chapter IV consists of the focus group findings of the students from attending

support groups and events at Rowan University. The data provided give a description and tables of the results.

Chapter V synthesizes the results and connects all the findings to help further research and provide helpful information for practice

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Recent research has shown completion rates for first-generation students are low. Alarming statistics of first-generation students include less than 25% of first-generation college students remain after their first year at college and only 11% receive their degrees in six years (Whitney et al., 2018). The statistics of first-generation students who are considered from low socioeconomic status and lack financial resources to pay for college are close to 52% (Chen, 2005). Higher education professionals are beginning to reshape specific programs to develop how first-generation students in finding support and services on their college campuses. Services that are being provided to best meet the demands of first-generation students include, mentoring programs, professional connections, parental education, and financial support (Garcia, 2010, Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2016, O'Connor et al., 2016).

With more first-generation students entering into colleges and universities across the country, by 2020 there will be 65% of jobs requiring a college education (Carnevale et al., 2013). The statistic shows a high increase in jobs requiring a college education and a demand for better career preparation for first-generation students. First-generation students have a disadvantage with their peers who have had parents who already completed college. It is important to note that first-generation students lack career development such as networking opportunities and confidence in professional

experiences, unlike their other peers (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004, O'Connor et al., 2016). Due to the growing demand of jobs, it is crucial for higher education leaders to provide access for first-generation students by implementing programs specifically to help students persist throughout their college, career, and personal journey.

Definition of First-Generation

The Education Amendment of 1980 by the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) established the term “first-generation.” The phrase was used to recognize minority students who come from a low socioeconomic status, are considered a racial minority, or grew up in a rural background who did not have the financial resources and the knowledge from their parents who did not complete a post-secondary degree (Whitney et al., 2018). After 1980 the term, “first-generation student” developed multiple definitions due to the increase of diversity in higher education. One definition of first-generation in the landscape analysis survey conducted by the Center for First-Generation of Student Success (2018) found first-generation students identified as, “Neither parent or guardian earned a four-year college degree” (p. 17).

In another study by Toutoushian et al., (2018) provided an example from an educational longitudinal study analyzing eight different definitions of first generation based on the parents of students' educational levels. A couple examples from his results found that first generation student identity can range from 22% of parents who had no college education to 25% having only one parent with some college education. The US Department of Education provides a research definition of first generation students but only considers students whose parents did not receive a postsecondary degree. The

definition does not consider parents who graduated with an associate degree or began a college education but did not finish (Whitney et al., 2018). Due to the different definitions of first-generation students, recent research institutions have been redefining how the definition should be used at their institution.

The US Department of Education, research, and institutions should consider the intersectionality of multiple identities when it comes to first-generation students to help best meet the growing needs and challenges of the population. It is important to note the intersectionality of identities associated with students who not only identify as first-generation but have other identities as well such as race, ethnicity, LGBTQ, international, and students with disabilities (Whitney et al., 2018). There are institutions that consider socioeconomic status and race when identifying students who are eligible for financial need, student support, and transition programs (NASPA, 2017). However, institutions that only rely on socioeconomic status and race are not considering other first-generation students who come from other identities such as ethnicity or students with disabilities.

First-Generation Student Success Center

In 2017 the Center for First-Generation Student Success was created by NASPA and The Suder Foundation to proactively help provide professional development, evidence-based research, and innovative services to help students succeed throughout their educational career. The Center has been collaborating with Entangled Solutions, an education consultant organization, to conduct interviews and surveys with current first-generation students to help better understand how needs assessments have been benefiting administration, stakeholders, and students on their campus. The landscape

analysis incorporated two phases. The first phase consisted of qualitative interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders and the second phase consisted of a national survey consisting of themes from interviews and focus groups to help analyze first-generation programs (Whitney et al., 2018).

The current First-Generation Student Success report provides insightful findings for educational leaders to help apply new programs and approaches to their first-generation program on their college campus culture. Several focus areas of the report included brief narratives of first-generation students' needs, practitioners' experiences with their current program on campus, approaches, and student outcomes (Whitney et al., 2018). Important key findings related to career development of first-generation students showed students need more opportunities with professional connections for jobs, internships, confidence in professional interactions, and career development initiatives. The report also provided first-generation faculty and administrators an "implementation toolkit" for career development that includes guided group job shadow, first-year professional development bootcamp, partnerships for professional attire, and a dedicated alumni network and mentor program (O'Connor et al., 2016). The first-generation committee at Rowan University can utilize effective career development toolkits that NASPA offers to help first-generation students develop their professional connections. The toolkits can also provide a wealth of knowledge needed to help first-generation students succeed during their undergraduate education and toward their professional career.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) explains that an individual's knowledge is obtained through observations of other people in social interactions, experiences, and outside sources. Using Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, Lent, Brown, & Hackett, (1994) expanded on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and further analyzed the theory toward Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) consisting of three aspects of career development; a) career interests, b) academic and career choice options, and c) performance and persistence in educational and occupational activity. Based on the three aspects of career development, SCCT explains how children and young adults in their social class, family, and friend groups collect a variety of experiences that help further the development of self-efficacy related to their career and expectations of various outcome expectations. Individuals who show an increase in self-efficacy and outcome expectations are then able to pursue goals towards their career that relate to their values, interests, environment, family and cultural expectations (Lent, Brown, D, & Hackett, 2000).

Lent et al., (1994) also discussed four learning experience sources that shape self-efficacy such as performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, and physiological arousal. Examples of performance accomplishments include academic or career activities. Examples of verbal persuasion include receiving either encouraging or non-supportive feedback when pursuing a career activity. Examples of vicarious learning include an individual observing engagement or non-engagement of a career activity. The last learning experience, physiological arousal examples include an

individual's feelings that they may be experienced while trying to complete an academic or career activity. Lent et al., (1994) then further explains outcome expectations in SCCT are an individual's expectations when they decide to follow an opportunity. Throughout this study, questions will be asked of first-generation students about their learning experiences in career development with a goal of understanding their outcome expectations.

The SCCT model analyzes the individual self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and goals linking it to how he or she connects both internally and externally with other individuals, support systems, and experiential/learning factors (Lent et al., 1994). Currently there has been limited research connected with first generation students and their career development (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004, Joslyn, 2015). Tate et al., (2015) used the SCCT model to investigate first-generation student experiences and their internal and external influences about their career development. The qualitative study results found external influences such as family and support programs had a positive influence on career development. First-generation students also explained how building a professional network was important to them and having a lack of a professional network makes pursuing their career goals even more challenging. Analyzing particular variables, such as self-efficacy and how first-generation students are currently achieving their outcome expectations related to their career development, can help higher education facilitators with future assessment and programming. Vuolo et al., (2011) using SCCT, found there is a relationship between an individual's vocational goals and motivation towards not only school performance, but also towards achieving their educational goals.

The intended goal of the research paper is to help expand on further limited empirical data with career development experiences of first-generation students by utilizing focus groups to help provide more qualitative findings of first-generation students.

Challenges of First-Generation Students

The current research on first-generation students explains how they face many challenges such as access to resources, information on finances, and steps toward degree completion (Olson, 2014, Sampson, 2016, Woosley & Shepler, 2011). The research of first-generation students includes parental education levels of attainment as an essential factor toward their success and completion toward a degree (Choy, 2001). Parental education structure and their experiences have been linked to first generation students' process of career development (Whiston & Keller, 2004). When first-generation students attend college for the first time, they face the challenge of navigating their institution on their own because their family members have not experienced a college education. Challenges related to career development that first generation students experience include building confidence with professional communication, networking, and internships (O'Connor et al., 2016). What institutions can do is collaborate with other departments, such as career services to help with challenges related to career development. One effective way higher education institutions have been helping first-generation students is through alumni-mentoring programs. Alumni-mentoring programs connect career services with first generation support programs to help students reach the learning outcomes of their career development. Institutions who have been implementing an alumni-mentoring program include the University of Southern Carolina (USC), Harvard

University (HU), and Massachusetts Institution of Technology (MIT).

Best Practices of Career Development at Four-Year Institutions

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) is comprised of professional college career employers and Human Resources staffing professionals to help students with career readiness. NACE (2018) defines career readiness as, “the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace.” (para. 3). After conducting research with employers in different areas of career professions NACE came up with eight competencies related to career readiness: critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency (NACE, 2018). NACE currently provides some recommendations for higher education professionals, such as career counselors, to apply towards helping first-generation students. Recommendations include providing professional networking activities such as mock dinners and internships abroad. First-generation students also appreciate applicable workshops such as budgeting, salary negotiations, and understanding debt (Overton, 2010).

There also have been evidence-based research studies to show how first-generation student programs can improve their success during their educational journey. One study explains how first-generation students want mentoring from their peers and educational leaders at their college campus (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). In another study by Kruegar (2016) conducted an evaluation of the Young Scholars Program, a

scholarship program for first-generation students, and found an increase with student engagement that helped them develop relationships with peers and program faculty on campus. Higher education professionals can learn from different research studies conducted at other institutions to compare and contrast how they can help best meet their students with their education and career development at their own institution. With first generation students' wanting services from their institutions such as mentoring, peer support, and relationships, O'Connor et al., (2016) provides some practical toolkits higher education professionals can use to apply toward their own first-generation student programs.

O'Connor et al., (2016) provides career development guidelines along with an implementation toolkit for higher education professionals to develop programs to help first-generation students. The implementation toolkit includes four different sections that consists of 1) helping students navigate their transition to an institution, 2) highlighting positive identity based messaging, 3) student involvement approaches, and 4) resources to help first generation students with their career development. The first section provides resources to help students navigate their transition to an institution such as finding comparable peers and normalizing experiences. The second section helps students feel a sense of belonging on campus by using positive messages to help them become involved on campus. Resources such as a first-generation online portal and a shared experience video campaign are suggested to help students build a community. The third section provides helpful resources on student involvement approaches such as a recognition program and an involvement incentive to get first-generation students to participate on

and off campus. Finally, the fourth section includes resources to help first generation students with their career development such as helping them with their self-confidence, networking opportunities, and professional experiences and strategies to help institutions tackle them (O'Connor et al., 2016).

Summary

Overall educational professionals in higher education are conducting more evidence-based research to get a better understanding of how to meet the growing demands of first-generation students across college campuses everywhere. Students are making their voices heard on challenges such as career development, limited professional connections, higher education language, need for mentoring, and social struggles they face throughout their education (Huang & Chang, 2004). Conducting a research study on first-generation career development experiences at Rowan University involved in the FFP and who are not involved with the program currently could provide beneficial insight for current administrators, faculty, and students to help improve their outcomes from focus group data and assessments.

Chapter III

Methodology

Context of Study

The study was performed during the Spring 2019 semester at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ. Rowan Fast Facts (2018-2019) provides information about how Rowan University is a public state research four-year university and is ranked 6th in the nation's fastest growing research university among public doctoral institutions. During the 2018-2019 year, the student population consist of 16,120 undergraduate, 2,228 graduate, and 1,117 professional/medical and academic programs consisting of 80 bachelor's, 44 master's, 2 professional's, and 6 doctoral degree programs (Rowan Fast Facts, 2018). The first-generation student population at Rowan University is approximately 4,000 students, which is about a third of the universities population of students (Hopper, 2017). The enrollment by race/ethnicity is 70.8% Caucasian, 9% African American, 9.3% Hispanic/Latino, and less than 1% Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaskan Native (Forbes, 2015).

The study evaluated and compared the career development experiences of first-generation student members in the FFP program and those who are not involved currently with the program at Rowan University. There has been limited research and utilization of qualitative data collection with first-generation students and their perspectives of their career development experiences (Evans, 2016, Tate et al., 2015). For this particular study,

two focus groups were conducted with one group consisting of first-generation students involved with SEC through the FFP and the second group consisting of first generation students not involved with the FFP. The findings of this thesis will help the FFP committee and the OCA with future decisions about implementing programs to help students reach their career goals.

Population and Sampling

The Student Engagement Committee (SEC) consists of three groups with which first-generation students on campus can be involved: First-Generation Advisory Board, First-Generation Ambassadors, and First-Generation Advocates. The First-Generation Advisory Board consists of thirty-one students who are responsible for first generation events and offer leadership for the student engagement committee. The First-Generation Ambassadors consist of fifteen students who are responsible for attending first-generation events, student program recruitment, and assisting with advisory board planning and executing tasks. The First-Generation Advocates consist of eleven students who are responsible for attending first-generation events and assisting ambassadors and/or advisory board members with planning and executing events. The target populations being studied were first generation students in the FFP on SEC consisting of student members from freshman to senior year and majoring in different areas. The other target population in the second focus group included students who are currently not involved on the FFP at Rowan University but identify as a first-generation student.

The study used non-random convenience sampling to select students from email databases from the FFP, ASCEND, and the OCA. Flyers were also placed around campus

to recruit students on campus who identify as first-generation. The sample included a total of 11 students with three first-generation students participating in the first focus group held on February 28th, 2019 from 5:00pm to 6:00pm and eight first-generation students participating in the second focus group held on March 5th from 5:00pm-6:00pm. First-generation students who identified as current members on the SEC were a total of five and there were a total of six non-members. The first focus group had one sophomore, one freshman, and a senior student. The second focus group had two sophomores, five juniors, and one senior who identified as first-generation.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

A qualitative data analysis was conducted using focus groups analyzing students who identify as first-generation at Rowan University. First-generation students completed individual consent forms before participating in focus groups. The instrument used in the study was a First-Generation Focus Group Questionnaire and Protocol (see Appendix A) in order to evaluate the career development experiences of first-generation students at Rowan University. Due to limited focus group questionnaires on first-generation students and their career development experiences, a first-generation questionnaire and protocol was implemented for the specific culture and FGSS program at Rowan University. Dr. Penny McPherson-Myers, the Associate of Vice President for Diversity and Organizational Effectiveness, Amy Ruymann, the Associate Director of University Advising Services, and Dr. Alicia Monroe, Assistant Director of the Office of Career Advancement were asked to evaluate the First-Generation Focus Group Questionnaire and Protocol. Demographic questions were also asked from the students and included

gender, race/ethnicity, age, employment status, current GPA, involvement with extracurricular activities, current college majoring in, academic year, mother/father occupation, Financial Aid status, and living location.

Data Procedure

Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rowan University approved the research study, first-generation students were contacted via email. The email included the First-Generation Student Experiences Invitation Email (see Appendix D). The Student Engagement Chair of FFP, Tomas Varela was asked to obtain the first-generation student listserv along with Dr. Dawn Singleton, the Director of ASCEND for EOF and RISE programs, and the career counselor staff and faculty in the OCA office. Focus group flyers were also approved by IRB and posted around bulletin boards on campus with the researcher's contact information. As an incentive to get first-generation students to participate in the focus group a drawing was held after the event that included gift cards and prizes. Students that reached out to the researcher prior to the focus group dates were sent an email reminder two days before the focus group event along with information regarding an Informed Focus Group Consent Form (see Appendix C) and what to expect from the focus group.

At the beginning of each focus group session, the researcher had a sign in form and followed the Focus Group Moderator's Guide (see Appendix B) to provide a brief overview to participants about the focus group. Students were given a First Generation Student Experience Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C) and a Rowan IRB Audio/Videotape Addendum to Consent Form (see Appendix E) to sign and if any

questions were raised the moderator helped clarify the process of the study. All students agreed in each focus group following a discussion of the group guidelines, to create a comfortable and understanding environment for students to describe their experiences being first-generation. Students began the focus group by going around in a circle and introducing themselves along with sharing their favorite memory at Rowan University so far. After an introduction, students were asked to answer the following research questions and complete the Participant Demographic Survey (see Appendix F). As an incentive to get first-generation students to participate in the focus group, a drawing was held after each focus group. Two prizes were given to two students from each focus group who participated that consisted of \$10.00 gift cards.

After data was collected from students in both focus groups, pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality of all participants of the study during documentation. Data was collected and manually entered using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to be analyzed. Simple frequency distributions were generated to represent student descriptive statistics

Chapter IV

Findings

Profile of Study

Subjects in the study were students who identified as first-generation at Rowan University. Students were recruited through emails sent through the FFP and ASCEND listserv, and flyers posted around campus. All recruitment methods were first approved through IRB before selecting participants and conducting in the study. Table 1.1 represents first-generation student demographics of the study. Thematic Analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data collected from focus groups. Braun and Clarke (2013) explain how there are six phases used in a qualitative study when analyzing data that include familiarization, generating the initial codes, creating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining theme names, and developing the final report. Focus group transcripts were first evaluated using familiarization and then initial codes were generated through organization of common specific phrases stated by first-generation students in focus groups. Common themes that were found for research question one, “How are first-generation students connecting their college experience with their career plans?” included work related experiences on campus, academic advisement support, and career exploration challenges. Question two is, “What have first-generation students done, to date, to help prepare them to achieve their career goals?” themes included mentorship, professional networking, and receiving lack of preparation linking career qualifications.

The third research question “What challenges do first-generation students perceive as preventing them from achieving their personal, educational, and career goals?” and common themes that were identified, which included family and personal life and financial responsibility. Intergroup differences were also discussed amongst transfer students and one international student who was present in the second focus group. Finally, the fourth research question explores, “What advice would first-generation students like to receive to help with their career development?” The common themes that were identified were defining the first-generation student experience and professional opportunities and connections.

The total of 11 participants who completed the study consisted of majority female (72.7%) followed by male (27.3%). Majority of first-generation students were typical traditional students at the age of 19 (27.3%) and 22 (27.3%). The highest percentage for race/ethnicity was Hispanic/Latino (45.5%) followed by White at (27.4%) and African American (18.2%). No students identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Multicultural. The majority of first-generation students work less than 20 hours per week (54.5%) and (36.4%) not employed. First-generation students responded to having a majority GPA tied at 3.7-3.4 (A-) and a 3.3-3.1(B+), at a (27.3. %) with the lowest GPA between 2.7-2.5 (B-) and a 2.4-2/1 (C+), at a (9.1%). A majority of first-generation students are also involved with extracurricular activities (72.7%). The colleges at Rowan University represented by students who attended the focus groups were, starting with the highest percentage, Henry M. Rowan College of Engineering (27.3%), College of Education, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of

Science and Mathematics at (18.2%) and at (9.1%) the School of Earth and Environment and College of Communication and Creative Arts. The majority of first-generation students were in their junior academic year at (45.5%) and the least amount of students (9.1%) were freshman. Students who receive financial aid were (72.7%) following (27.3%), who do not receive financial aid. The final demographic asked students if they lived on or off of campus. One hundred percent of first-generation students who participated in the study lived on campus. No commuters attended the focus group study.

Table 1.1

First-generation student demographics (N=11)

Topics	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	3	27.3
Female	8	72.7
Age		
19	3	27.3
20	2	18.2
21	2	18.2
22	3	27.3
24	1	9.1
24	1	9.1

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Race/Ethnicity

African American	2	18.2
American Indian/Alaskan Native		
Asain/Pacific Islander		
Table 1.1 (Continued)	5	45.5
Hispanic/Latino		
Multicultural		
White	3	27.3
Other		

Employment

Not Employed	4	36.4
<20 hours per week	6	54.5
>20 hours per week	1	9.1

GPA

4.0-3.8 (A)	1	9.1
3.7-3.4 (A-)	3	27.3
3.3-3.1 (B+)	3	27.3
3.0-2.8 (B)	2	18.2
2.7-2.5 (B-)	1	9.1
2.4-2.1 (C+)	1	9.1
2.0-1.8 (C)		

Table 1.1 (Continued)

1.7-1.4 (C-)

1.3 or below (D+ to F)

Extracurricular

Yes	8	72.7
No	3	27.3

College

College of Education	2	18.2
Rohrer College of Business		
Henry M. Rowan College of Engineering	3	27.3
College of Humanities and Social Sciences	2	18.2
College of Performing Arts		
College of Science and Mathematics	2	18.2
School of Earth and Environment	1	9.1
College of Communication and Creative Arts	1	9.1

Other

Academic Year

Freshman	1	9.1
Sophomore	3	27.3
Junior	5	45.5
Senior	2	18.2

Financial Aid

Yes	8	72.7
No	3	27.3

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Residency

On	11	100
Off		

Analysis of the Data

The first focus group was held at Rowan University in James Hall in room 2097 and consisted of three students who were all members of the FFP. There was one freshman, one sophomore, and one senior student who have been attending Rowan University since their freshman year. The second focus group was held at Rowan University in James Hall in room 3091B. The second focus group consisted of eight students with six students being nonmembers of the FFP and two members of the FFP. Academic years of students included two sophomores, five juniors, and one senior. Overall there was a total of eleven students who participated. Intergroup differences included four transfer students in the second focus group and one international student.

There are a few factors that could have affected the number of participants. The second focus group had a higher number than the first focus group potentially due to timing and day the focus group was held. There were also seven students who were confirmed to attend the first focus group but only three students showed up. After conducting the two focus groups, common themes emerged from the transcripts. Themes

were grouped based on categorical analysis of research questions presented. The first research question explored, “How are first-generation students connecting their college experience with their career plans?” The common themes that were identified included:

Work related experiences on campus. Participants in both groups emphasized how having work related positions on campus helped them with learning opportunities related to their career and access to more resources on campus. Having a position on campus allows first-generation students to develop knowledge and awareness of resources offered on campus related to their career, such as the OCA. One participant noted,

I have a job as a Rowan Ambassador, as an ambassador I have to be knowledgeable about resources such as the Office of Career Advancement for me that is the best way I can learn on campus.

Positions on campus also introduced first-generation students to a connection with the OCA and informed them of career development opportunities they have through the office such as resume writing and professional attire. In the words of one of the focus group attendees,

Being a Resident Assistant and being trained on providing those resources for the rest of the community and for residents. Just walking in there, this was the first semester where I walked in there and I got professional attire they were giving out. I know I’ve heard of other people that have gone in there and had their resumes looked over and just being in RA life introduced that to me.

Academic Advisement Support. Students in both focus groups explained how their academic advisor played a role in providing different options for first-generation students related to their major and how that would impact their future career. Conversations that students have with their advisor can help with their decision-making skills and determine which direction a student goes with their career choices. One student commented,

I came in as just a law and justice major and my advisor encouraged me to try the 4 plus 1 program. She suggested maybe I should consider double majoring in disaster preparedness, or getting an internship here, talk to this one, talk to that one, it helped me to make a decision to do a double major and applied for the 4+1 program. It definitely is going to influence my career because I never thought about getting a master's degree but since she brought it up to me and showed me the pros and cons.

Academic advisors also provide help in the classroom where Rowan University offers an exploratory studies course to help students in their first year to help engage with their community and help to plan out major and career choices. Advisors have more engagement with students in and outside of the classroom where they are able to better understand their learning styles and how to better help their students with their academic and career choices. One student commented,

My Rowan 101 professor was the biggest help because, it's not like I was afraid; I just didn't know how to handle all this information thrown at me, I'm not a huge visual person, I'm more of kinesthetic (learning) I like to do it, so she gave me this whole thing to process with, I was not only able to say it but make it my own, ok so I see the steps, I know how to do this.

Career exploration challenges. First-generation students in both focus groups were not aware of all resources that OCA offers with their career development. OCA offers walk in career counseling during the week that students can take advantage of but there is a disconnect with follow up career services. As one student said,

So someone mentioned where you can get individual career counseling at OCA. I didn't know that was a thing until right now. I mean I have gone to the career advancement to get my resume and cover letter looked at but never to talk about career advice.

Students also face some challenges going to the career fair where jobs and internships they are looking for are not necessary offered or related to their major of study. Several

students also showed a lack of awareness of all of the career options they have related to their major. As one student stated,

I went to the career fair this semester; it was kind of interesting because I felt it would be easier to find a job for my major. Ok I am a science major I would like to find a job. But when I went over there they were just looking for engineers and tend to overlook Physics majors. But the thing with Physics you can also look at Engineer jobs. But they were like no sorry, just tend to overlook that major.

The second research question explored, “What have first-generation students done, to date, to help prepare them to achieve their career goals?” The common themes that were identified included:

Mentorship and professional networking. Students strongly emphasized relationships with faculty and that their experiences through professional conversations have helped them to think about which academic and career pathway options are there to pursue. When students meet professionals in career related fields that are connected with their similar interests it provides them with important knowledge that can have an impact on their future. A student in the focus group stated,

My coach, in freshman year inspired me to become a gym teacher. And even now in college you learn you're not just only going to be a teacher, especially since I'm going to be a gym teacher. I can be more, my coach was like a mentor, I was like yea I want to do that, I don't want to just be a gym teacher, I want to help inspire students.

Students in both groups stressed that having opportunities and connections with professionals related to their major can help provide an additional perspective with education and career advice. Students who also are connected with professionals who

they can relate with such as race/ethnicity or gender can help provide additional support with their career development. One student in the focus group explained,

My one professor has actually done the work I want to do such as international projects and humanitarian projects. Recently for our engineering week we had a speaker come and my professor connected me with him and he has been a really great resource of introducing me to a master's program that I really never...I mean after this I don't know if I see myself going back to school (laughs) but I see it as an option and an opportunity. I don't think I would have if it weren't for him and also just the support of just knowing that there are other Hispanics in the field which is really nice.

Lack of preparation linking career qualifications. Both groups expressed frustrations with having an understanding of all of the requirements needed to complete qualifications for a particular job. Some students had an awareness of educational requirements but then when it came down to thinking about what their career qualifications would look like after graduation, they could not really depict a laid out plan of what their steps looked like. A student explained how she was feeling about career qualifications and emphasized,

I feel like I don't know all the qualifications of being a gym teacher. I know I need to take the first praxis and then the second praxis test along with a teacher's certification but I don't know the full breakdown.

Other students expressed frustrations of selecting a major they are currently in and having limited knowledge of what qualifications would look like for potential careers. Professors in the field provide first-generation students with potential career opportunities they could pursue. One student explained how his professors have helped him and stated,

I am still up in the air with exactly what I want to do when I graduate with Community and Environmental planning. But I know for a fact I don't want to be an engineer but they do work directly with engineers, architects, and politics

and everything. But having my RA and my professors, couple GIS professors or geography professors definitely helped me see my options, because I am still not sure what I want to do but I have more options.

The third research question explored, “What challenges do first-generation students perceive as preventing them from achieving their personal, educational, and career goals?” The common themes that were identified included;

Family and personal life. The majority of students in both focus groups related to each other how hard it can be when parents do not understand them and their struggles with balancing their education with their personal life. A few challenges that were mentioned related to students’ personal lives included language barriers, establishing a sense of self, and balancing family obligations. A student in the focus group provided a glimpse of her challenges she experienced and stated,

I feel like a challenge for me is that both of my parents are Hispanic. So they don’t really know English, they don’t know college and staying at school because I live an hour and fifteen minutes. So they were like, “Oh my gosh you are staying away by yourself!” My mom was really worried. And for EOF, during the summer you stay here for six weeks, and so they didn’t really understand you stay here and take a class over the summer but then on the weekend when you go home, they are like, “Why are you doing this?”

There were intergroup differences that also came up regarding the personal lives of transfer students that is important to note. One student had made the statement below about being a transfer student in his second semester and feeling alone and having no connections. After the student shared his feelings other transfer students nodded their heads in agreement because they also expressed similar feelings of having a challenging first semester transitioning from one institution to the next and not receiving the support on campus they need. Students who were non-transfers felt more connected on campus.

Everyone here has similar things; I am kind of envious but I'm kind of on my own overall. So I am trying to find my place and going about everything and it's just really difficult. Because there is no starting point for me.

Financial responsibility. Students in both groups expressed feeling stressed with not only their own financial responsibilities but also having to take care of other members of their family while finding a balance with their education. Students were sharing their experiences with some scholarship opportunities they are aware of, such as the foundation scholarship and state funded grants, but many said it was not enough to cover their tuition costs and personal costs. One student stated how he has had to make some personal sacrifices in order to not only provide for himself but to provide for his family and stated,

I agree with that with the whole break period with not being at home and not helping out, that's one of my biggest struggles because you know I am the oldest and I work and most of my money goes to my mom or my money goes to my oldest brother to help them get some food. Still trying to get what I want out of my college experience but still trying to help back at home and send a little bit of money I am making over there to help.

There were intergroup differences that also came up regarding students' financial responsibilities. One interesting finding was the lack of financial support for international students on campus. International students also have a harder time finding jobs on and off campus because they have to go through specific paperwork through the International Student Center to get the proper identification to work. Other first-generation students in both groups experience financial frustrations but had more opportunities than international students. The international first generation student in the focus group stated,

For me, one of my challenges has been financial. Being an international student and coming from Nepal where the economic conditions are really poor. I did not

get financial aid and so making sure I have the money and not having to ask for money from my parents has been extremely difficult. It's really hard because we did not have much money to start with. It's harder to find scholarships, as international students aren't eligible for most of them.

Another important point to mention is the lack of knowledge from faculty regarding international students in providing them with resourceful information related to not only scholarships but with career opportunities related to their major. OCA can collaborate with the International Center to provide more career opportunities such as job and internship searches related to international students. The international student in the group also noted,

The department keeps sending us emails for opportunities, scholarships and internships but almost 95% of the time they have requirement of US Citizens or Permanent Residents and I am neither. I appreciate the effort but it's really frustrating at times for international students like me. You keep getting those emails but they don't apply to you and you are trying your best to get an internship or a job, there's just not many resources. I also have approached different offices on campus but a lot of them say they don't have any resources for international students and I find it very helpless and discouraging.

The fourth research question explored, "What advice would first-generation students like to receive to help with their career development?" The common themes that were identified included:

Freshman year first-generation student experience. Students from both groups expressed how they wished there was more of a freshman year experience or workshop offered through the FFP to not only provide them with resources on campus but to develop a connection with other students and faculty in the program who can relate to them. Students also felt having a freshman year series of workshops or a seminar during their

first year would have provided them with developing more friendships at the beginning of their education. Students reflected on their freshman year experience with one student mentioning,

I think that for the first generation program they should make themselves more well known to freshman coming in. I feel like, I know it's a relatively new program and when I was coming in as a freshman it was still in the works and I didn't know about it. I feel like, not make it mandatory, but kind of, make a night where all first-generation students need to come to it, at least do an introduction of Rowan in general and resources Rowan has and be like look at all these other people who are in my major or in my class who are first gen students. I think they should just make themselves more about them like from the gecko.

Due to focus groups consisting of different academic levels of students who participated, another area where first-generations students felt they would like to get a better understanding on is defining what a first-generation student looks like from freshman year up until their senior year and what events could be tailored to help meet their needs. One senior in the focus group reflected on her feelings since her freshman year and stated,

I feel like I am a senior and I still don't know what a first-generation student is. Obviously, I know it involves me, but like since it wasn't around when I was a freshman having workshops of what do they do to help you, because like I am a senior so what can they do to help me being that I have been here already for four years. Of course I want to be involved but I would like to know how?

Professional opportunities and connections. Another piece of advice that both focus groups mentioned was taking advantage of professional networking opportunities and how they can help not only develop your soft skills but create more doorways of opportunities related to their education and career. One student explained her experiences with networking at Rowan University and stated,

The best thing you can do is talk to anyone you can, networking, connections, people will remember you and you will be more personable and all around it makes you realize that, at the end of the day it will make you know you will have the resources at hand and you are not going to just sit there and make excuses as to why you can't do something.

Several students mentioned networking opportunities they experienced were through their professors, advisors, and faculty members. This particular piece of advice they felt was very beneficial for them to not only establish a relationship with their professor but also link them with a professional connection that would be related to a future position one day related to their potential career choice. A student in the focus group explained her exciting story about how it was through professional networking her and her boyfriend were able to meet the CEO of GOOGLE and stated,

I think just connecting with your professors, literally can't hurt you for example my boyfriend is an electrical engineer, he started talking to one of his professors after class the one day, and they got really close and asked hey you are a professional in the field do you have any connections to GOOGLE, actually my wife knows the CEO in Boston would you want to go? So him and five of his friends including me, got to go up to Boston, meet the CEO and tour GOOGLE. How would I have known that unless he had spoken to his professors? They want to be able to help and the more passion you show in the subject the more they want to be able to help you.

The overall findings of both focus groups provided important information on first generation student experiences at Rowan University and their career development. First- generation students that participated in the study lived on campus with four being transfer students and one international student. After students provided their experiences and transcripts were evaluated using thematic analysis, students were emailed their responses to confirm any differences and to validate what they stated during the focus groups. The next section will look at

connecting the current findings from the research into what further recommendations the FFP and the OCA can use to better meet first-generation student demands.

Chapter V

Discussion and Implications

This section will discuss the findings of first-generation students shared about their experiences at Rowan University and their career development and provide implications for future programming. Before going into the discussion of the findings, it is important to note the limitations of the study. The first limitation was timing of when the emails and flyers were sent out to recruit the students. Due to delayed IRB approval, emails and flyers were sent out one week before focus group dates. This could explain why there were only three students in the first focus group and eight students in the second group. Another limitation for the second focus group was the timing of the questions. With eight students in the group it went over the one hour causing three students to rush their answers for the final question. This could have affected their natural response to the question being asked. Another limitation was there were no commuter students who participated in this study; all students were living on campus at the time. This could have limited the study because commuter first-generation students have different challenges than students who live on campus. There was only one student who was in his/her freshman academic year. Despite only having one student who was in their freshman year, other students in the study who were juniors and seniors provided insight to the first-year first-generation student experience that showed to be very resourceful. Current findings of the qualitative data collected shed light on some potential

current and future programming to best support first-generation students in the FFP and in collaboration with the OCA at Rowan University. First-generation students at Rowan University shared how their work related experiences on campus were an essential aspect of finding out about career related resources on campus due to learning about resources offered on campus through their job training. Currently the OCA offers student worker positions to allow students to develop their skill-set towards their potential career choice and to develop their resume. The FFP currently does not have student workers but does have the SEC where students can volunteer their time to educate other students and the university on upcoming events. Implications for work related experiences can include the FFP having positions such as paid student worker positions to conduct workshops or attend tabling events across campus. Especially, as the program continues to expand it will be beneficial for the program to have student employees to help develop future programming and engage with other students on campus.

First-generation students also said how having a strong connection with academic advisement support provided them with beneficial information not only related with their major but in what directions they could go with for their career. Academic and career advisors who are utilized in a classroom setting such as ROWAN 101 also seemed to be very helpful with first-generation students decision-making skills. Implications for academic advisement can include having academic and career advisors collaborating with career development workshops. First-generation students also expressed frustrations with their career exploration challenges that included being unaware of all the resources that are offered for career development at the OCA. Although the OCA offers one-on-one

career counseling services, many students in both focus groups were not aware of those services offered. Students also felt when they attended large career fairs on campus, although there are many employers attending the fair, their specific career options they are looking for are not there. Implications can include having smaller more focused career fairs based on college and major.

Students in both groups mentioned how important mentorship and professional networking was throughout their educational experiences. Professional opportunities and connections also strongly came up again in the final question regarding advice for other first-generation students. When there are opportunities on campus that allow first-generation students to connect with current professionals in a related field it helps them gain more knowledge and deeper relationships such as mentorship. Implications can include having professional guest speakers come into the classroom in potential fields students would be interested in pursuing for their career. The FFP can send out a survey to see what professional employers they would like to see visit first and then reach out to the OCA. The FFP can collaborate with the OCA to use a current employers' list and have employers come out for a networking event for first-generation students.

An alumni-mentorship program could also be incorporated to help connect current first-generation students with alumni first-generation who not only understand the culture of the university, but can provide additional career help. One example of a successful alumni-mentorship program is at Harvard University (HU). HU currently has a mentoring program for undergraduate students starting at the beginning of freshman year. HU matches alumni with students based on commonalities with academic and career

interests and location closeness. The First-Generation Harvard Alumni Mentor Program (2018) was first initiated in 2012 consisting of 17 mentors and has greatly expanded with more than 100 alumni matched with 110 freshmen the recent two years. Mentors are expected to contact their mentees at least once a month for two hours, attend fall orientation meetings, educate themselves on guides for mentors and mentees and complete an end of the year program evaluation.

Another frustration first-generation students felt was their lack of preparation linking career qualifications. Students had a general understanding of what educational steps they needed to take but then when words such as “career plan” were mentioned. What they viewed as steps needed for their career plan all revolved back around specific educational requirements such as tests or degree requirements. There were also a few students, even though they were in a particular major such as Education or Community and Environmental Planning, that possessed limited knowledge of particular career paths within these majors and if the major they were in was the right fit.

Some challenges first-generation students experienced throughout their educational journey related with their career development at Rowan University included family, personal life, and financial responsibility. The majority of students in both focus groups felt their families did not understand their college life and the challenges of balancing many responsibilities such as family obligations and work while trying to understand their sense of self. Implications for program development ideas can include having a parent engagement night where parents have the opportunity of connecting with academic advisors, teachers, and first-generation student faculty to get a better

understanding of college life. Intergroup differences were also discussed amongst transfer students and one international student who was present in the second focus group. The four transfer students in the second group related with each other about having the feeling of being alone on campus at some point in time or experiencing challenges with the transition from one institution to the next. A couple of transfer students mentioned the Transfer Mentor Program on campus that one of the students does take advantage of, but other students were unaware of the program. Implications for program development ideas can include having the transfer mentor program connecting with the FFP to identify first-generation students who are also transfer students. Students can then not only find out more about resources on campus but feel connected with someone else who went through a similar experience that they did. Another intergroup difference was first-generation international student experience and frustrations with financial responsibilities and lack of knowledge from faculty. Implications for program development ideas can include cross training faculty on how to best help international students with their experience at Rowan University.

Despite the limitation of only having one first-generation freshman attend the focus groups, the one freshman student, along with other students in the group, emphasized the need for a freshman year first-generation student experience. Students felt that just being told about the resources, such as FFP or OCA, at an orientation was not enough. Some recommendations that were highlighted by the students included having a freshman year student experience specifically for first-generation students that would include workshops and a seminar to have all first time students connect and follow

up with each other throughout the year. Implications for program development ideas can include creating a first year program. O'Connor et al., (2016) explains how the First Year Forward (FYP) program at Hamilton College is a year career development initiative for first year first-generation college students. The program helps students with their professional development by having them complete specific requirements throughout the year such as informational interviews, individual meetings with a career counselor and attending professional development monthly group sessions. Students who complete all of their requirements become eligible to attend a career summer experience with a stipend provided (Hamilton.edu).

In conclusion the qualitative data analysis that was conducted using focus groups represented rich information about first generation students' experiences and their career development. Students expressed their concern of wanting more experiences and opportunities that would help towards their career development such as mentorship, networking, and work related experiences. Higher education professionals working in OCA and FFP at Rowan University can utilize the current research conducted to help with future potential programs such as an alumni-mentorship program, learning communities, professional networking events, and career related opportunities on campus.

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Appendix A:

First-Generation Focus Group Questionnaire and Protocol



The researcher will provide all supplies needed to conduct the focus groups. This

includes:

- A list of participants
- Copies of informed consent forms
- Pens and paper
- Name tags
- Audio/video recorders
- Flip chart and markers
- Copies of moderator's guide
- Researcher will ensure that room is set up correctly and supplies and refreshments are present prior to the start of the focus group. Researcher will check each participant in and review the informed consent form prior to the start of the focus group.
- *Introductions (5 minutes)*
- All focus groups will use the same format to ensure consistency. Participants will

be greeted as they arrive will be asked to make a nameplate for the facilitators to be able to easily call them by name. Focus group facilitators will have a facilitators guide provided. Keep in mind; moderator should speak less than 1/3 of the time.

- *Overview of study & focus group process*
- Each focus group will be greeted and thanked by the researcher. The researcher will briefly introduce the co moderators by name. Researcher will exit the room.
- Focus group facilitators will turn on the audio/video recorder and introduce themselves. Participants will introduce themselves as well.
- Facilitator will explain focus group process and informed consent form. There are no right or wrong answers.
- While one moderator facilitates the discussion the other will be taking notes for analysis BUT NO NAMES will be recorded.
- Respect the confidentiality of each participant by not quoting or attributing comments to anyone outside of the group.
- All should participate
- Discussion and disagreement are encouraged; no need to reach consensus
- Please be open and honest about your attitudes, opinions, and experiences — we want to hear it all.
- Speak one at time, encourage active participation. Clarify any questions or concerns before starting.

Sessions will be recorded. Only the researcher will have access to the tapes. They will only be used for data analysis.

- Only group results will be shared; no individuals or individual responses will be shared.
 - Direct quotes may be used to illustrate a particular point.
 - We ask that we all respect each other and the confidentiality of the information that is shared during the focus group session.
 - Ask for any needed clarification, or questions and then begin the focus group.
 - *Introduction of Participants (10 minutes)*
- Each participant should share their name, major and hometown

Warm up activity. Each participant will be asked to share their favorite _____ College memory so far.

Discussion Questions

Research question 1:

1. What challenges do first-generation students perceive as preventing them from achieving their personal, educational, and career goals?

Focus group questions:

- 1) As a first- generation student what challenges do you face with your personal goals?
- 2) As a first-generation student what challenges do you face with your educational choices?
- 3) As a first generation student what challenges do you face with your career goals?

Research question 2:

2. How are first-generation students connecting their college experience with their career plans?

Focus group questions:

- 1) How have you become familiarized with the resources offered at Rowan University regarding career services?
- 2) Of the resources that you identified how many have you taken advantage of?
- 3) From those resources you have taken advantage of, which were the best learning experiences for you to help with your career plans?

Research question 3:

3. What have first-generation students done, to date, to help prepare them to achieve their career goals?

Focus group questions:

- 1) Do you know the qualifications for the job you desire?
- 2) What is the career plan that you have established for yourself?
- 3) How do you know that your career plan meets the criteria for the position/field that you desire?

Research question 4:

4) What advice would first-generation students like to receive to help with their career development?

- 1) What advice would you give to the Flying First Committee to help with your education and professional journey?
- 2) What advice would you like to share with another first-generation student to help them through their education and professional journey?
- 3) What advice would you have liked to receive earlier that you already know now toward your education and professional journey?

The Moderator guide was originally used by (Stansberry 2014; Pickering, 2013) and discussion questions have been modified to meet the research topic of career development of first generation students.

Appendix B:

Focus Group Moderator's Guide

1) Researcher will provide an introduction and overview of focus group study (5 minutes)

Hello everyone, my name is Desiree Saraceno. I am currently a graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program here at Rowan University. Thank you again for coming out today and agreeing to participate in today's discussion about your experience at Rowan University as a first-generation student. Please take this as a fun opportunity to voice your thoughts and feelings honestly about your experiences. The purpose of the focus group today is to get a better understanding of your academic, career, and personal experiences as a first-generation student at Rowan University.

2) Group Guidelines (2 minutes)

“We are going to go over group guidelines to help you better understand the focus group process. This will be an open discussion and each student will have the opportunity to actively voice your thoughts and feelings honestly. There are no wrong or right answers.”

“You will notice there is a recorder sitting in the back of the room taking notes and I will be facilitating the discussion. We want to protect your confidentiality and will NOT BE RECORDING names. As we ask each question one at a time, I ask each of you to be mindful when each of you is speaking and wait until each person is finished so we are being respectful of their response and are able to hear everyone's thoughts.”

“Does everyone agree with the group guidelines? Are there any questions before we begin?”

4) Audio/ Video Recording (2 minutes)

The session today will be audio/video recorded and only the researcher will have access to the tapes. The recording will only be used for data analysis of this study. Only group results will be shared, there will be not individual responses shared. At times throughout the study, direct quotations may be utilized to address a particular theme mentioned during the discussion.

5) Introduction of Participants (5 minutes)

We are going to go around in a circle and have everyone introduce themselves by sharing your first name, major, and hometown. After you have introduced yourself please give a favorite memory you have so far being at Rowan University.

6) Discussion Questions (40 minutes)

Research question 1:

1. What challenges do first-generation students perceive as preventing them from achieving their personal, educational, and career goals?

Focus group questions:

- 1) As a first- generation student what challenges do you face with your personal goals?
- 2) As a first-generation student what challenges do you face with your educational choices?
- 3) As a first generation student what challenges do you face with your career goals?

Research question 2:

2. How are first-generation students connecting their college experience with their career plans?

Focus group questions:

- 1) How have you become familiarized with the resources offered at Rowan University regarding career services?
- 2) Of the resources that you identified how many have you taken advantage of?
- 3) From those resources you have taken advantage of, which were the best learning experiences for you to help with your career plans?

Research question 3:

3. What have first-generation students done, to date, to help prepare them to achieve their career goals?

Focus group questions:

- 1) Do you know the qualifications for the job you desire?
- 2) What is the career plan that you have established for yourself?

- 3) How do you know that your career plan meets the criteria for the position/field that you desire?

Research question 4:

4) What advice would first-generation students like to receive to help with their career development?

- 1) What advice would you give to the Flying First Committee to help with your education and professional journey?
- 2) What advice would you like to share with another first-generation student to help them through their education and professional journey?
- 3) What advice would you have liked to receive earlier that you already know now toward your education and professional journey?

7) *Conclusion (10 minutes)*

Thank you so much everyone for answering the focus group questions. The information you provided was very beneficial toward the research study. Each of you will have the opportunity to review the summary notes and make any suggestions before the thesis is finalized. Please make sure to check your emails to go over what we recorded are your thoughts. Does anyone have any questions moving forward? Before everyone leaves I am going to ask you if you can complete a student demographic survey and then we will be picking from the raffle tonight for appreciating each of you coming out.

** Moderator guide has been adapted from Stansberry & Burnett (2014) and has been modified from (Evans, 2016).*

Appendix C:

Informed Focus Group Consent Form



I, _____ consent to participate in the research conducted by Desiree Saraceno, a graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program at Rowan University located in Glassboro, NJ on the date of _____.

I have been informed about the nature of the focus group study and the uses of any personal information I will be asked to disclose. Participating in the focus group is completely voluntary. I will be asked approximately 9 questions and will plan on completing the focus group in approximately sixty minutes. At no time will my name be used in the study, and all of the information collected will remain confidential. If at any time I feel uncomfortable answering a question, I will not have to answer and I may stop or withdraw my participation at any time without consequence. I am aware that my responses will be made in confidence and no one will have access to my responses except the researcher and program chair Dr. Tyrone McCombs.

My participation in the focus group and signature on this form will grant permission to record the focus group. Once the focus group has been completed, I will be provided with a summary of the group's comments for my review and approval. After I have had my comments reviewed and summarized, all audio recordings and notes will be destroyed to protect my confidentiality. I will be provided with the typed summary via email. Additionally, if needed I will be invited to respond to a few follow-up questions to provide me with an opportunity to verify the data.

If I have questions regarding the focus group or my participation in it, I can contact, the researcher, Desiree Saraceno at 856-278-2969. This study has received Human Subjects approval by Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rowan University. If you have any concerns or questions regarding this research, please contact Dr. Tyrone McCombs at mccombst@rowan.edu or 856-256-4500 ext. 3666.

Signature _____ Date _____
Printed Name _____

Appendix D:

First-Generation Student Experiences Invitation Email

Dear Student Engagement Committee,

My name is Desiree Saraceno. I currently am a graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program at Rowan University located in Glassboro, NJ. I would like to invite you to take part in a first-generation focus group on _____ about **first-generation student experiences and their career development**. The focus group will last about one hour of your time and will take place at the College of Education building at Rowan University. During the focus groups, no names will be used in the study, and all of the information collected will remain confidential. If at any time you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you will not have to answer and you may stop or withdraw your participation at any time without consequence.

The purpose of the focus group is to assess first-generation students' experiences, challenges, and resources related to their career development. Currently there has been limited research with student's perspectives regarding first-generation student's experiences and challenges. Your perspectives and responses during the focus group will be valuable information used to help with future program planning to help current and prospective first-generation students. Not only will you be a great resource but also as an appreciation toward your participation in the study, we will be giving out prizes for your participation.

If you would like to take part in the focus group on _____ please reply back to this email confirming your interest.

Thank you for your consideration,

Desiree Saraceno

Appendix E:

Audio/Videotape Addendum to Consent form

I have already agreed to participate in the first-generation student research study conducted by Desiree Saraceno. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audio and videotapes part of a focus group research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study. The recording will be used for collecting qualitative data from first-generation students in the Flying First Program (FFP) on the Student Engagement Committee at Rowan University. The data will be used to help programs on campus such as FFP and the Office of Career Advancement (OCA) to better serve the needs of first-generation students related to their education, career, and personal goals.

The recording will include identifiers such as pseudonyms, for all participants in the focus group. Participants will be asked to say their full name and then their pseudonym number next to it on the informed consent form. For videotape recordings facial features will include full facial pictures.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file cabinet and linked with a code to subjects' identity. After comments are reviewed and summarized, all audio recordings and notes will be destroyed to protect participant confidentiality. Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Printed Name _____

Appendix F:
Participant Demographic Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey to help better understand first-generation student's experiences at Rowan University. The purpose of the study was to analyze first-generation student experiences and their career development at Rowan University who are involved on the Student Engagement Committee of the Flying First Program. All participants must be 18 years or older and all questions are confidential with no personal information being collected. Participation is voluntary and is not required to answer all the questions. If there are any questions or problems during the participation of this study, please contact Desiree Saraceno by phone 856-278-2969 or email at saracenod1@students.rowan.edu or Dr. Tyrone McCombs, research study advisor by phone at 856-256-4500 ext. 3666.

Please **circle** and **complete** the appropriate answer below.

1. What is your gender? Male Female

2. What is your age? _____

3. What is your race/ethnicity?
African American/Black
American Indian/Alaskan Native
Asian/Pacific Islander
Hispanic/Latino
Multicultural
White
Other

4. Are you currently employed/not employed?
not employed
working less than 20 hours per week
working more than 20 hours per week

5. What is your current GPA?
4.0-3.8 (A)

- 3.7-3.4 (A-)
- 3.3-3.1 (B+)
- 3.0-2.8 (B)
- 2.7-2.5 (B-)
- 2.3-2.1 (C+)
- 2.0-1.8 (C)
- 1.7-1.4 (C-)
- 1.3 or below (D+ to F)

6. Are you involved in extracurricular sports, clubs, or organizations at Rowan University?
Yes No

7. What college at Rowan University are you currently majoring in?
College of Education
Rohrer College of Business
Henry M. Rowan College of Engineering
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
College of Performing Arts
College of Science and Mathematics
School of Earth and Environment
College of Communication and Creative Arts
Other

8) What academic year are you currently in?
a) Freshman
b) Sophomore
c) Junior
d) Senior

9) Do you currently receive Financial Aid?
Yes No

10) Do you live off or on campus?
On Off

Appendix G:

First-Generation Student Flyer

**DO YOU IDENTIFY AS A FIRST-GENERATION
STUDENT AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY?**

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES
ABOUT YOUR ACADEMIC, CAREER,
AND PERSONAL GOALS?**

**COME SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES
AND HAVE A CHANCE TO **WIN A RAFFLE PRIZE.****

**Thursday, February 28th from 5:00pm-6:00pm
James Hall 2097**

**Tuesday, March 5th from 5:00pm-6:00pm
James Hall 3091B**

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN ATTENDING

PLEASE CONTACT:

DESIREE SARACENO

saraceno1@students.rowan.edu or

DR. TYRONE MCCOMBS mccombst@rowan.edu

Study has been approved by Rowan IRB. IRB# Pro2018000304