Theses and Dissertations

6-25-2020

The experiences of first-generation master's students

Dominique A. Pierson
Rowan University

THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION MASTER'S STUDENTS AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY

by

Dominique A. Pierson

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education
at
Rowan University
April 28, 2020

Thesis Chair: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to every first-generation student who fought their way to the finish line: my parents, Kirstin and Derek Pierson and my siblings, Devin, Bailee, and Brenna. P6 (Pierson Six) is the reason I keep going.

Acknowledgments

I could not have completed this thesis without the love and support of my family. I want to sincerely thank them for making many sacrifices so I could further my education. Mom, I knew resilience before becoming first-generation, I saw it in you, and you instilled it in me; thank you for everything you've sacrificed. Dad, you inspire me to think deeper, share knowledge, and create change in our community, I love you. Devin, Bailee, and Brenna, the three of you have been and will always be my "Why"; remember you are capable of changing the world. Thank you, Pop-Pop and Grammy, for walking beside me and being there for big and small moments, I hope to continue making you proud. I want to thank my boyfriend Andress Mims. We found each other when we least expected it and I could not imagine these two years without you. Thank you for supporting my growth and independence, for listening to how I will one day use education to change the world, and for reminding me to always put God first, I love you. I also want to thank my advisor Dr. MaryBeth Walpole for her guidance and tough love, you saw the best in me as a student when I could not. To my RLUH family, and the many grads, faculty, and staff I've come across, from the bottom of my heart thank you for making Rowan University feel like home.

Abstract

Dominique Aryanna Pierson
THE EXPEREINCES OF FIRST-GENERATION MASTER'S STUDENTS
2019-2020
MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.
Master of Arts in Higher Education

First-generation college students are a heavily researched student population who are represented as being first in their family to go to college and graduate. Scholars suggest there are many barriers impacting their college accessibility, affordability, retention, and overall success, therefore, have called for specific services and interventions of support within higher education to help first-generation students persist. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of first-generation students who do persist and pursue advanced educational aspirations. Specifically, first-generation master's students are the subject of this phenomenological study designed to explore the experiences of eight students through one-on-one interviews. The data of this research adds to scholarly work on first-generation students to better understand persistence after graduation and recommends best practices, services, and opportunities of support for first-generation master's students at Rowan University.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents (Continued)

Table of Contents (Continued)

Chapter I

Introduction

Obtaining a college degree is often associated with access to the American Dream, suggesting that higher education is a crucial pathway to many social, economic, and psychological benefits (Ishitani, 2006; Phillips, Stephens & Townsend, 2016; Ma, Pender & Welch, 2016; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Whon, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss & Gray, 2013). Data revealed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), and *Education Pays* (2016) indicates that young adults with a bachelor's degree earn more than those with just a high school diploma, and those with masters, doctoral, or professional degrees earn 55% more than those with a bachelor's degree (McCarron, 2012). Median earnings increased with higher levels of education, and those with higher degrees relied less on public assistance (Ma et al., 2016). Elka Torpey's (2018) data on the increase in weekly earnings suggests "the more you learn, the more you earn" emphasizing the value of higher education in terms of economic and professional advancement (p.2).

However, the emphasis on earnings as the primary benefit of higher education often overshadows research that suggests there are social and psychological benefits of having an advanced degree (Ma et al., 2016). Along with greater socioeconomic opportunities, college completion can also lead to healthier lifestyle habits, increased civic engagement, and mental stability (Ishitani, 2006; Ma et al., 2016; Whon et al., 2013; Rocconi, Ribera, & Laird, 2015). Individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher were found to have better health care coverage and were more involved with their children's extracurricular activities (Ma et al., 2016). In addition, individuals with a bachelor's

degree or higher were more likely to vote in the 2014 midterm elections than those with just high school diplomas suggesting higher levels of civic participation (Ma et al., 2016)

Considering such findings, the increase in postsecondary enrollment by 6% from 2000 to 2016 is not surprising given that undergraduate and graduate credentials lead to greater opportunity for social and economic mobility (Brey et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2016, McCarron, 2012). While the benefits of having a degree demonstrate the payoff of higher education, researchers explain that access and degree completion remain disproportionate among various marginalized communities (Ishitani, 2006; Ma et al., 2016; Whon et al., 2013). For instance, the *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)* found in fall 2016 16.3 million undergraduate students were enrolled in degree granting institutions, and of that, 9.1 million were White, 3.2 million were Hispanic, and 2.2 million were Black (Brey et al., 2019). In the same study researchers examined the four to six-year graduation rates and found 74% of White students graduated in comparison to 54% Hispanic, and 39% Black students in six years (Brey et al., 2019). Similar studies have exposed the same gaps leading to closer observation of retention and completion rates of underrepresented student populations including not just students of color, but those from lower income backgrounds, and those first in their families to attend college (Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019). The existing disparities in access to higher education and increasing levels of education are important to examine given the beneficial outcomes that may be unavailable to individuals experiencing a myriad of challenges (Phillips, Stephens & Townsend, 2016; Tate et al., 2015).

In particular, a large body of research has prioritized understanding educational aspirations and outcomes of first-generation college students who are at risk of not

enrolling and finishing college (Atherton, 2014; Carlton, 2015; Cataldi, Bennet & Chen, 2018; Choy, 2001; Stuber, 2011; Gardner & Holly, 2011; Whon et, al.; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Falcon, 2015; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Most research identifies the array of challenges first generation undergraduate students experience when trying to access, navigate, and transition into higher education (Atherton, 2014; Carlton, 2015; Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Stuber, 2011; Gardner & Holly, 2011; Whon et, al.; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Falcon, 2015; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Factors such as racial and socioeconomic background, college preparedness, available resources, levels of support, and intersections of motivation and self-efficacy are associated with the success of many first-generation college students (Atherton, 2014; Carlton, 2015; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Falcon, 2015; Gardner & Holly, 2011; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Stuber, 2011; Whon et, al., 2013).

While access to higher education has expanded in recent years, considerable attention has been paid to first-generation college students confronting barriers that challenge their ability to experience social and economic freedoms (Payne, 2006). Though the numbers are small, first-generation college students are seeking advanced levels of learning hoping to climb occupational and financial ladders of success (Carlton, 2015; Cataldi et al., 2018; Gardner & Holly; 2011; McCrea, 2015; Tate et al., 2015). Similar to their perceived undergraduate experiences, their pursuit of masters or doctoral degrees can be just as challenging (Choy, 2001; Carlton, 2015; Lancaster 2010; Lunceford, 2010; Gardner & Holly, 2011; McCrea, 2015; Tate et al.,2015).

Statement of the Problem

Research shows that first-generation undergraduate students are more likely to be challenged by entry processes into college (Atherton, 2014; Falcon, 2015), and will experience similar difficulties seeking entry into graduate school (Lunceford, 2011). However, there is clear evidence that earning an advanced degree leads to opportunities of social and economic mobility (Tate et al., 2015). First-generation students seeking graduate education are assumed to be knowledgeable about the resources available, however they often make the most mistakes enrolling due to lack in guidance and support during the process (Lunceford, 2011). The McNair Scholars program is one of few programs offering support to post-bachelor first-generation students seeking doctoral programs, yet is minimally discussed in literature (Payne, 2006). There is a gap in research that looks to understand what motivates first-generation students seeking graduate study, and their experiences once admitted. We know very little about those who do persist and what their educational aspirations are beyond an undergraduate education. More research needs to be done so that more systems of support can be established to help first-generation students who are looking to advance their knowledge and careers.

Purpose of the Study

Specifically, there is very little research on the experiences of students with first generation identities who pursue a master's degree. If research demonstrates benefits associated with increased levels of learning, and we know first generation college students are being challenged by access and completion, then, what are the experiences of those who do persist and aspire higher educational achievement? This gap in literature is

problematic given what we know about the opportunities higher education has to offer and the experiences of this particular group of students. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study focuses on master level students who hold first generation identities to understand their current experiences and what factors led them to seek a graduate degree.

Significance of the Study

Lunceford (2011) and Payne (2006) propose in their research that more students will pursue graduate studies, inevitably resulting in an increase of first-generation students who will also seek access. Given their unique characteristics it is important to understand the challenges they continue to face and offer services that may aid their continued success prior to graduate enrollment and during the completion of their program. Scholars have dedicated research in order to understand the first-generation student as to provide the best possible services and support for success. However, the body of research on students who seek graduate education is limited and offers very few recommendations on how institutions can better support individuals who continue their education.

Additionally, research examining graduate student success and experiences report that environments of higher learning can cause increased levels of stress and anxiety during completion (Lancaster, 2010, McCrea, 2015). Graduate studies tend to be different than undergraduate education because of the expectation that students create new identities as scholars, and immerse themselves in research (Ostrove, Stewardt & Curtin, 2011). The coursework is often overwhelming, and many students are committed to fulltime jobs that compete for their time (Tate et al., 2015). McCrea (2015) reports that

graduate students tend to experience less of a sense of belonging compared to their peers and the institution due to their busy schedules and additional life stressors.

Combined identities of being a first-generation graduate student seem to have overlapping factors that may result in difficulty completing a graduate program. This study looks to explore the experience of first-generation master's students in order to determine best practices for universities to support and serve their students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study

1. What factors do first generation master's students perceive to have had an influence on pursuing their educational aspirations?

2. How do first generation master's students describe their transition into graduate school?

3. What has their overall experience been like as a first-generation master's student?

4. What resources do they believe should be made available for first-generation master's students?

Operational Definitions of Important Terms

1. First-Generation College Student: An individual who is first in their family to attend college (Choy, 2001).

2. First-Generation Graduate Student: An individual who is first in their family to complete a graduate or professional level degree.

3. First Generation Master's Student: An individual who is first in their family to seek candidacy into a master's level program.

6

4. McNair Scholars Program: The Ronald E. McNair post-baccalaureate Achievement Programs are designed to offer support to first-generation, low-income students seeking graduate study (Payne, 2006; Tate et al., 2015).

5. Graduate assistantship (GA): Part-time, paid work experiences for graduate students to gain experience in their desired career field. Some assistantships provide residential housing tuition remission.

6. Tuition Remission: Also known as tuition assistance is a benefit some University employees have available to them. Most tuition assistance packages come with either full-time work or a part-time graduate assistantship.

7. Gap year: Gap year or years refers to a college graduate who has taken time away from college before returning for an advanced degree.

Assumptions and Limitations

There is an assumption due to researcher bias that first-generation college students are likely to have troubling experiences while seeking entry into and completing their master's program. This study also presents a few limitations given the uniqueness of first-generation students. First, this study includes a small number of participants from one medium-size school. Future studies should expand their participation, especially at various institutions that tend to graduate lower number of first-generation master's students. Two, given the small sample size this study also only looks at the experiences of master's candidates which does not holistically encompass the experiences of doctoral or other professional degree seeking students. Therefore, the data provided, and conclusions drawn will not be generalizable. Three, there are no other factors considered in this study other than participants must self-identify as first-generation and be enrolled

in a master's degree granting program. Other factors such as race, gender, and class may be beneficial to consider in future studies to better comprehend and compare experiences amongst the first-generation population. It is likely that other competing factors will also alter experiences shared, especially being that graduate students in general experience stress that may result in less positive experiences. Lastly, the experiences provided are self-reported which can result in false reporting or information being shared.

Overview of the Study

Chapter II provides a review of literature on first-generation college students, graduate student experiences, and first-generation graduate student experiences.

Chapter III provides a detailed description on the methodology and procedures used to complete the study. The methodology overview reiterates explains the context of the study, population and sample size, data collection tool used, and data analysis.

Chapter IV reports findings from the study based on the research questions. The data is summarized and coded by theme in order for clear interpretation.

Chapter V reports major findings and offers recommendations for further study on the topic.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Of the millions of students enrolled in post-secondary education, 30% of first-year students will be first in their family to attend college (Cataldi, Bennet & Chen, 2018). Given the economic and social benefits of a bachelor's degree, the number of students said to enroll in the future is predicted to rise (Cataldi et al., 2018). Despite this expected increase in enrollment, first-generation college students are more likely to leave college before completing their degree, even when controlling for factors such as race, gender, and family income (Ishanti, 2003), and are less likely to graduate within a five-year period in comparison to their non first-generation peers (Ishanti, 2003; Pratt et al; 2019). Existing research identifies the challenges this group of undergraduate students experience when trying to access, navigate, and transition into higher education. Factors such as racial and socioeconomic background, college preparedness, available resources, lack of support, and intersections of motivation and self-efficacy influence, in most cases, the success of many first-generation college students.

This review of literature discusses the challenges faced by first-generation college students within the most common areas of research including first-generation demographic characteristics, retention, impact of capital, persistence, and the intersections of being first-generation and a graduate student. I will explore the characteristics of first-generation college students, identify the obstacles they experience navigating and completing college, and establish how the challenges they experience overlap with their pursuit of higher levels of education post-graduation.

Understanding the First-Generation Student

Historically, higher education has been less accessible to those from first-generation, low income, and racial or ethnic minority communities. As high school students are confronted every year with the decision to continue their education, collegiate institutions have prioritized strategies to expand access to marginalized students looking to obtain a degree (Falcon, 2015; Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016). Along with many factors that might influence such decisions, economic and social mobility are benefits most associated with the need to pursue higher learning as people seek career opportunities and personal advancement (Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Whon, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss & Gray, 2013). In 2010, adults between the ages of 25 and 34 with a bachelor's degree made 40% more than those who completed some college or just had a high school diploma **(**Whon et al, 2013) Similarly, the Bureau of Labor Statistics released data in 2017 displaying the difference in weekly earnings revealing how much more money people made with a bachelor's degree or higher (Torpey, 2017). Such data suggested "the more you learn, the more you earn" placing emphasis on the value of education (Torpey, 2017, p. 2). While these statistics display promising results, the opportunity to go to college is not readily available to all students, especially to those who are first in their family to pursue a degree (Falcon, 2015).

The college experience provides students with the ability to find their interests, expand their knowledge, and establish educational goals and career aspirations. Though associated with many benefits, the pathway to higher education for first-generation students is often challenging (Falcon, 2016). Commonly defined as students whose

parents do not have a bachelor's degree, or are the first in their family to attend college, first-generation college students are an "at-risk" population who are a focus of considerable research in higher education (Atherton, 2014; Choy, 2001; Stuber, 2011; Gardner & Holly, 2011; Whon et, al.; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Falcon, 2015; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Compared to their counterparts, they face significant challenges accessing higher education, struggle navigating once enrolled, and often do not complete their degrees (Atherton, 2014; Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006). Additionally, there are many demographic differences that serve as a disadvantage to these students such as, but not limited to, socioeconomic status, ethnic or racial background, and high school education that make the college process arduous (Atherton, 2014; Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006).

Characteristics of First-Generation College Students

The demographics of first-generation colleges students are vastly different than that of their peers (Atherton, 2014). Not only do their ethnic and racial backgrounds vary, their educational attainment, and college preparedness are telling of their high school experiences. Though they come from diverse backgrounds, first-generation college students are more likely to be students of color coming from lower socioeconomic status families and high schools with fewer resources (Atherton, 2014; Choy, 2001; Checkoway, 2018; Engle et al., 2006). In Choy's (2001) data only 6% of Black parents, and 4% of Hispanic parents had a bachelor's degree in contrast to the 83% of White parents who did. Additionally, 51% of those parents with only a high school diploma made less than $25,000 annually, compared to the 8% of parents with a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001). Research from The Pell Institute studying Texas first-generation students

shows 34% have parents born outside of the U.S, 35% have children, and 62% are financially independent (Engle et al., 2006).

These statistics of racial and economic disparities suggest that students are more unprepared academically and have lower educational expectations due to fewer resources offered by their parents and high school institutions (Atherton, 2014; Checkoway, 2018; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2006). In turn, this impedes their ability to aspire to higher education early on in their high school careers and minimizes their preparation for admission to a 4-year college (Choy, 2001). In a quantitative study with over 6,000 students, Atherton (2014) found first-generation college students were more likely to have lower SAT scores, grade point averages (GPA), and were less likely to be enrolled in advanced high school courses than their peers. Although this did not correlate with student's confidence in doing well, Atherton (2014) maintains that some first-generation students lack understanding of how GPA and low SAT scores will affect their readiness and admission into college.

Unfortunately, lack of resources and low parental education for most first-generation students results in a challenging path to college if they decide to pursue access into higher education (Choy, 2001; Falcon, 2016). Choy (2001) proposes five steps on the path to college that most will not successfully complete due to their parent's unawareness. Some steps include deciding to apply, taking the appropriate admission tests, and affording the expenses to support enrollment (Choy, 2001). These steps tend to be more challenging because parents are minimally educated on the process and receive little guidance (Choy, 2001; Atherton, 2014). Teachers and school counselors alike, especially from underfunded schools or with fewer resources, also contribute to the

unpreparedness and unawareness when helping students enroll (Falcon, 2016). As a result, most students lack parental guidance or involvement from high school faculty because of the lack of resources and knowledge to help support them (Falcon, 2016). This, along with the other factors mentioned, make it less likely that they will apply, and results in disproportionate application rates among first-generation students and their college bound peers.

Despite the challenges that first- generation college students may experience in the process of accessing higher education, some will persist (Falcon, 2016). And when they do, the obstacles they experience navigating and transitioning into college environments threaten their ability to stay enrolled. Further research from The Pell Institute recognizes that 49% delay entry into post-secondary education, enroll part time, work full-time, and do not receive financial assistance from family (Engle et al., 2006). Characteristics such as these have made first-generation college student retention a category of interest.

Retention. Despite the many characteristics that make accessing higher education difficult for first-generation college students, they are present in large numbers on college campuses, bringing with them various perspectives and unique experiences (Atherton, 2014; Checkoway, 2018; Choy, 2001; Cushman, 2007; Engle et al., 2006; Murphy, 2006). However, many of them will likely leave before finishing their degrees (Atherton, 2014; Cataldi et al., 2001; Checkoway, 2018; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Falcon, 2016; Murphy; 2006) From 1992-1993 31% of students who received their bachelor's degree had parents without any college education **(**Cataldi et al., 2001**)**. In 2008 that number decreased to 20%, and then decreased again in 2011 (Cataldi et al., 2001). While

the size of first-generation college graduates has become more proportional in size with other peer groups, in the U.S., first-generation college students amount for one-third of students enrolled in higher education, which would suggest not all of them are graduating (Cataldi et al., 2001). Choy (2001) notes that low retention rates apply mostly to first-generation college students who attend 4-year institutions, and not 2-year community colleges, which many choose to attend. Still, the graduation rates are low (Choy, 2001).

Many of the characteristics mentioned previously as challenges while seeking access, also serve as obstacles when first-generation students make it to college environments as they struggle to culturally adapt and integrate academically (Engle et al., 2001). Though there are navigational challenges and personal barriers, concepts of social and cultural capital are widely discussed in research that explains why first-generation college students experience difficulty persisting (Atherton 2014; Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986; Carter, 2003; DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, Fiore, 2012; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; O'Shea, 2016; Patton, Renn, Guido & Quaye, 2016; Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016; Stuber, 2001; Whon et al., 2013; Yosso; 2005).

Sources of capital. Institutional structures in higher education are responsible for exerting dominant class hierarchies and social reproduction (Patton et al., 2016). As previously expressed, first-generation college students are more likely to be low-income students whose parents might not support them financially, academically, or mentally because they do not have the proper resources or knowledge. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) introduced a theory describing the reproduction of socioeconomic inequality and

hierarchies that benefit or alienate different groups of people who do not possess higher statuses.

In this case, frameworks using Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social, cultural and economic capital, are utilized to explain why some students better understand admission processes, know how to navigate, and graduate at higher rates than first-generation college students (Whon et al., 2013). *Economic capital* refers to available monetary resources, *cultural capital* explains power as a resource of cultural knowledge to enhance societal positions, and *social capital* defines the resources one has through relationships and networks (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986; Patton et al., 2016). While all forms might be mentioned in discussing first-generation college students, social capital is most addressed as it determines the extent to which they access resources to gain mobility, and their connections to people through influences and networks of support (Whon et al., 2013).

Therefore, social capital tends to play a role in the success and educational achievement of first-generation college students (Carter, 2003; Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Whon et al., 2013). When they arrive on campus, they often need more assistance transitioning and integrating into the environment, however, they often lack the social capital that would provide them with the appropriate resources (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Schwartz et al's, (2016) research participants described difficulty establishing relationships with non-parental adults because of their self-dependency, shyness, and time limitations to meet with campus faculty or staff. First-generation college students are more likely to live off campus, not partake in extracurricular activities, and not communicate with their peers

outside of their academic responsibilities, making relationship building harder (Stuber, 2011).

Moreover, cultural capital to some scholars carries just as much importance as social capital (Carter, 2003; Stuber, 2011). Carter (2003) uses her research to examine forms of dominant and non-dominant cultural capital because of the common misconception that marginalized Black students do not have the "know-how" to succeed (p.137). As a result of class hierarchies, first-generation college students are perceived to not possess forms of dominant capital, and instead possess non-dominant capital that is often overlooked (Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Their cultural capital is built within their community structures and is hard to understand by outsiders (Carter, 2003). Institutions differentially value dominant capital and often reward student possessing it.

The Community Cultural Wealth Model also explains how disenfranchised communities such as first-generation college students operate with other capital forms outside of monetary and transferable measurements (Yosso, 2005). Based on individual ability and values, Yosso (2005) offers six forms of capital including, aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital and resistant capital, all embracing community cultural wealth that deconstruct normative and dominant views of social class. Familial capital explored by Gofen (2009) explains that family serves as the most important source of motivation and support even when they are unfamiliar with what their student is experiencing. Aspirational and resistance capital also serve as important forms as they speak to the character of first-generation college students who, in the face of many obstacles, do persist (Yosso, 2005).

First-Generation College Student Persistence

The characteristics of and challenges that first-generation college students face evidently make it difficult to attain educational and social success. However, while some may not, there are students who find areas of motivation to remain resilient (Falcon, 2016; Fentress, & Collopy, 2011). Motivation and resiliency of these students can also be found in the same areas that challenge them. In a qualitative study drawn from a Midwest University, family support seemed to be influential during times of stress, the participants often sought assistance from faculty, and small achievements served as a source of motivation (Fentress & Collopy, 2011). Fentress and Collopy (2011) argue that contrary to most existing literature, first-generation college students will experience success even in the face of adversity. Obstacles like financial support, academic preparation, lack of social capital, and identity were not as difficult to navigate as previous research acknowledges. This suggests that having experienced these barriers made the first-generation participants more resilient and provided motivation in getting past tough situations, ultimately aiding in their success.

First-Generation Graduate Students

First-generation college student success may in some cases be achieved through self-motivation and resiliency, and, there are many who persist, are successful, and who go one to graduate school. For those who persist, achieving a post-baccalaureate degree is just as challenging given the intersections of their characteristics and their undergraduate experiences. First-generation college students are less likely to enroll in graduate studies, and when they do, are less successful completing their master's candidacy in comparison

to their later generation peers. In a qualitative study with twenty doctoral participants identifying as first in their family to go to college, researchers found their experiences were nearly identical to their experiences as undergraduate students (Gardner & Holly, 2011). Many of the participants received little guidance navigating academia during and after graduation, received little familial support, struggled attaining financial aid, and were challenged by little provision from mentors and faculty once entering their doctoral programs (Gardner & Holly, 2011). Lack of family support and overall feelings of inferiority and inadequacy led to reports of feeling lost and lonely during their graduate experiences (Gardner & Holly, 2011; McCrea, 2015).

Writing about similar experiences Brett Lunceford (2011) explains that individuals seeking graduate education are assumed to be knowledgeable about the resources available, however they often make the most mistakes enrolling due to lack in guidance. The McNair Scholars program is one of few programs offering support to post-bachelor first-generation students seeking doctoral programs, yet is the focus of little research (Payne, 2006). In order to understand what motivates first-generation students seeking graduate study and to provide more opportunities for support and recommendations for services offered by institutions, more research must be done on those who enter graduate and professional programs (Payne, 2006).

Summary of Literature Review

First-generation college students experience a variety of challenges and have various backgrounds that make it difficult for them to access, navigate, and graduate college. Institutions and administrators of higher education are responsible for finding

ways to support this group of students and help them access college and succeed. The importance of undergraduate retention and achievement for first-generation college students will certainly remain significant to higher education. However, when they do persist and achieve their degree, how does their status of first-generation interact with their identities if they pursue higher degrees? For doctoral students, some of the same barriers make it challenging for them to accomplish higher aspirations (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

As they take on similar characteristics, who supports them? More research on graduate first-generation students, particularly those seeking master's candidacy, and how they navigate that transition is necessary to include in conversations that we have with undergraduates who are looking to continue but do not know how, especially with rough undergraduate experiences. The experiences of first-generation master's students are important to understand on any college campus, especially as they move beyond the barriers that are said to decrease their chances of success.

Chapter III

Methodology

Context of the Study

This study was conducted at Rowan University, in Glassboro, southern New Jersey, currently named the 6th fastest growing research university and 91 among top public institutions (Facts, 2019). Home to over 19,000 Profs, Rowan University serves 2,228 graduate students within 44 masters programs and 6 doctoral degree programs on the Glassboro, Camden, and Stratford campuses (Facts, 2019). Within the last 10 years Rowan University has grown its campus and partnership to include affordable options for students seeking a Rowan degree without paying the four-year price. Specifically, the University's partnership with regional county colleges is most notable. New Jersey residents have the opportunity to participate in Rowan's 3+1 program with Rowan College of South Jersey (RCSJ) or Rowan College of Burlington County (RCBC) allowing admitted students to take 75% of their courses at their county college, and 25% taught by Rowan University faculty to earn a bachelor's degree. Similarly, Rowan Choice offers first year students to experience residential living while attending RCSJ. For the fraction of the cost, participating students are introduced to the college experience.

Rowan University has not only dedicated efforts toward affordability, but also mending the gap between its first-generation student population. The Flying First task force at the University began last fall and has since joined administrators, faculty, staff, and students in like-minded efforts to examine the experiences of first-generation students and provide systems of support during their academic journey (Rowan Today, 2018). The Flying First community, open to anyone identifying as first-generation has

implemented sessions during new student orientation, educational and social programs throughout the year, and symposiums inviting surrounding institutions on campus to join the conversation. Their most recent initiative includes a residential learning community where students who live-on campus have the opportunity to live a d learn closely with other first-generation students. Flying First aims to provide resources for first-generations students so that they feel a sense of belonging on campus and succeed.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study

1. What factors do first generation master's students perceive to have had an influence on pursuing their educational aspirations?

2. How do first generation master's students describe their transition into graduate school?

3. What has their overall experience been like as a first-generation master's student?

4. What resources do they believe should be made available for first-generation master's students?

Population and Sample Selection

Following IRB approval and consent, participants were selected based on purposeful sampling to select students working toward their master's degree and who identify as first-generation college students. Purposeful sampling is most appropriate for qualitative studies as there is clear justification for selection and intentional "information-rich" data (McMillan, 2016, p. 125). The desired sample size for this study was 8-10 participants. According to Groenwald (2014) 2-10 participants are a decent sample when carrying out phenomenological qualitative research, and specifically one-on-one

interviews, to ensure that the study includes diverse perspectives. In effort to reach my target population and size, I sent an email to the Department Chair of Educational Services and Leadership, MaryBeth Walpole requesting assistance forwarding my recruitment email to other department chairs and their student master's student listservs. Additionally, I also sought assistance from the Flying First Task Force and provided them with the information of my study to forward to qualifying students. Once the appropriate information was received, and with clearance from IRB, I sent an email to all viable addresses explaining who I was, describing the study being done, and criteria for participation. Through a google form they had the chance to express interest, leave their phone number, and times throughout the week that work best with their schedules to meet.

Instrument Used for Data Collection

In an effort to explore the experiences of first-generation graduate students and identify their challenges and the factors that influence their educational aspirations, a phenomenological study was conducted as best suited to interpret and describe participants lived experiences (McMillan, 2016). As multiple perspectives were presented, this qualitative approach aimed to address commonalities between participants within the realities they were encouraged to share (McMillan, 2016). The primary tool used for data collection in this study was a semi-structured one-on-one interview with each participant. As a qualitative approach calls for direct interaction with participants, face-to-face, or one-on-one semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences through opened-ended questions that were intent driven, yet permit "follow-up, and clarification" (McMillan, 2016, p.191). One-on-one interviewing was suitable for

this study as non-verbal expressions support the need for clarification on specific

questions, and also allow of behavioral observations (McMillan, 2016). Caution was

taken however as the intent is not to form leading questions but to stay objective and

allow room for appropriate probing, and for the interview to flow smoothly (McMillan,

2016). Interviews took place in a natural setting so that reflective experiences and natural

behavior could occur without external influences (McMillan, 2016). Additionally,

participants were recorded so that data could be documented and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Considering the sample size, and allowing enough time to gather participants, and

code data, this study was done over the span of three months. The first two months were

dedicated to getting IRB approval, and gathering, then interviewing participants. The last

month, or equivalent amount of time during the process was for transcribing interviews.

After interviews were concluded they were transcribed to include the dialogue between

both myself and the participant. As acknowledged by McMillan (2016) the researcher's

comments are a required part of data to understand what the participant is saying. Data

was then organized by reviewing each interview looking for words and phrases that could

be used to create different codes (McMillan, 2016). Once the data was coded and major,

or key codes were defined, they were used as themes to lead the data summary and

interpretation.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this research study was to examine the experiences of first-generation graduate students currently enrolled in a master's level program at Rowan University. As defined in the literature review of this study, first-generation master's students are first in their family to get a bachelor's degree and are now first to work toward a master's degree. There is a large body of research on first-generation undergraduate students exploring how they navigate their collegiate experiences, yet a gap exits in literature studying student experiences once they persist and seek advanced degrees. This study utilizes a qualitative phenomenological approach to allow first-generation graduate students to share their experience in a one-on-one semi-structured interview which followed an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions (Appendix B) Four research questions guided the overall study to better understand individual experiences.

1. What factors do first generation master's students perceive to have had an influence on pursuing their educational aspirations?

2. How do first generation master's students describe their transition into graduate school?

3. What has their overall experience been like as a first-generation master's student?

4. What resources do they believe should be made available for first-generation master's students?

This study helps to mend the gap between research on first-generation students who graduate and continue their education, as well as provide recommendations for best institutional practices of support.

Profile of the Sample

Participants in the study were students who identified as first-generation pursuing their master's degree at Rowan University. Purposeful sampling was applied in order to recruit students who represented the population being studied (McMillan, 2016). Master's students enrolled within the College of Education were contacted via email describing the study and criteria for participation. Those interested were instructed to send an email expressing interest and indication of preferred days and times for an interview. Fifteen students expressed interest, however only ten met the required characteristics and two decided to withdrawal participation before interviewing. In total, eight students participated in this study all of which represented three different master's level programs at Rowan University and were either in their first or second year in their program. Between February 16th and March 29th eight one-on-one interviews were held lasting from 15 to 50 minutes; locations were chosen by the participant.

Sample biographies. Below is a brief biography of each student who participated in the study. In order to maintain confidentiality, real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

- Cathy has been a master's candidate in the Higher Education Advising track program for two years. Cathy also identifies as a non-traditional student and receives tuition remission as a full-time employee.

- Kyle is a master's candidate in the Counseling in Educational Settings program for his third and final year. He is a residential student and receives tuition remission through her GA.

- Ray has been a master's candidate in the Counseling in Educational Settings program for his second and final year. Ray is a transfer student and has received tuition remission through a graduate assistantship and lives on campus.

- Julia is a master's candidate in the Higher Education Administration program for her second and final year. She is a residential student, Rowan alumna, and receives tuition remission through her GA.

- Maddie is a master's candidate in the Higher Education Administration program for her second and final year. She is a residential student and receives tuition remission through his GA.

- Veronica is a master's candidate in the Higher Education Administration program for her second and final year. She is a residential student, Rowan Alumna, and receives tuition remission through her GA.

- Wendy has been in the Master of Business Administration program for one year. She is a residential student and receives tuition remission through her GA.

- Adam has been in the Higher Education Administration program for one year. He is a residential student, Rowan alumni, and receives tuition remission through his GA.

Analysis of the Data

Eight interviews were conducted in order to learn more about the experiences of first-generation master's students. The co-investigator met with each participant and had

them read through their consent forms for clear understanding. The interview began once the co-investigator received verbal and written consent and was transcribed directly after the interview for accuracy. The co-investigator also took notes during the interview and asked for permission from each participant as to ensure the environment was comfortable. Each transcription was coded in order to find themes between the described experiences. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research as to identify patterns and make sense of the collected data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Data analysis occurred by producing major and sub-codes after intense review of field notes and interview transcriptions. Four themes emerged from the analysis conducted highlighting the experiences of first-generation master's students, namely: (1) Finding Fulfillment, (2) Balancing Act (3) Social Isolator, and (4) Pressure to Perform.

Finding Fulfillment

Much like the experiences of many first-generation undergraduate students, the decision to attend graduate school presents feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. In speaking to each student their shared experiences made clear the decision to pursue an advanced degree is not one made without varying influences and self-discovery. Whether they decided to take time off from college, or continue straight through, each participant in one way or another sought another level of educational and career fulfillment. Gap year(s) and the next step serve as sub themes found within finding fulfillment. However, it should be noted different influences such as financial security, marginalized identities, and thoughts of career advancement also played a role in making the decision to continue their education.

Gap year(s). Four of the eight participants recall their decision to go back to school after taking a year or two off to gain field experience.

Cathy, familiar with being a "non-traditional student" tearfully remembers feeling "bored and unfulfilled or maybe a little depressed even". She continues

> I started seeing a counselor, and I decided that I needed to go back to school and take classes. Maybe that's what was missing, but I didn't feel like I had enough confidence in myself. A lot has to do with the experiences I had in undergrad. I didn't feel competent and then going to counseling helped me to realize I could try one class. What did I have to lose?

Ray, a transfer graduate who waited nearly two years before returning to college recalls wanting "real-world" experiences and began working in the field he was passionate about at the time. He shares

> I was satisfied with my job, but I wasn't financially satisfied. So, I branched out and ended up working [for a different organization] and their schedule was ridiculous, like work-life balance was crazy and I felt like I wasn't satisfied with my life. I wasn't happy. I was financially happy; I just wasn't happy within myself. I felt like a robot. I didn't feel like myself at all. I'm typically bubbly, positive, always energetic and being there, I just wasn't able to express my true personality. So, I had to dig deep and figured out my purpose…mind you, I didn't want to go to school. I was tired of school from undergrad but I felt like I was in a low light, to be honest, like I had to talk to somebody about it because speaking to my parents, they never been to college... they just know I was making good money. But then

after speaking to my mentors I just knew that I had to better myself somehow, some

way, and in order to do so I had to go to graduate school.

Cathy and Ray, who shared rather deep moments of reflection, express feelings of uncertainty as they navigated conversations with others to find their passion.

The notion of wanting real world experiences, though individually unique, was also a shared influence by Kyle who explains "I wanted real world experience before I went onto graduate school, especially to see if like what I wanted to do for my career path was actually what I wanted to do… because that's what I thought I wanted". Maddie, who was already working two years within her desired field of work recounts "I found myself doing a lot of more work outside of my job description that [my employers] weren't willing to pay me for because I didn't have a masters and I always said I was going to go back to school… so I struggled with the fact that I was either being missed for opportunities because I was young, or a person of color, or was because I didn't have a master's." Maddie uniquely exposes an experience where her real-world experiences are complicated by intersections of race, age, and education, all of which heightened her decision to continue her education.

The next step. For others, the decision to attend graduate school was made before crossing the undergraduate stage. "To be honest, attending grad school felt like it was just the next step" Veronica says as she explains she felt "her work was not done" as both an influence to continue her education and do so by remaining at Rowan University. Similarly, Julia explains "I wanted to pursue my master's because I know in [my field of work] you need a masters and/or terminal degree to move up. So, I was like, I'm going for it, why stop here?". Like Veronica, Julia also identifies as a Rowan University alum and described

feelings of comfortability and familiarity making the decision to pursue graduate school as Rowan seemed attainable.

For Adam this was also the case, however, his experience elicits feelings of future financial security as influence to keep going. He shares, "initially I wanted to go for a master's in English, but I realized the financial risk of that… so I figured higher ed was my backup idea. I needed to keep this train going if I want to find something that's going to make money at some point. So here I am". Wendy too discusses her thought to continue as the next step, but also one that held potential financial gain and was influenced by the position she was in as a person of color. "With my [undergraduate] degree in business marketing, I was like 'how much more money can I make with an MBA?'. As a person of color, you also stand out with that second degree, you know?" she states. Wendy was transparent about her educational experiences as a person of color and mentioned being of color as the reason she "knew [she] had to continue".

Balancing Act

Making the decision to attend graduate school served as only the beginning of the challenges presented by pursing a master's degree. While only some mentioned financial stability as an influence, all eight participants held either a full-time job at the University or a graduate assistantship to help with the financial burden of graduate school. "I'm going back but I'm not paying" says Maddie who knew she would need financial assistance. Cathy, who was informed about an opening at the University, "did what [she] had to do" in order to help get school paid for once she found out benefits included tuition remission. Ray described "paying out of pocket was brutal, it was expensive" before transferring and attaining a graduate assistantship. Wendy, who admits "I already had a lot of loans taken

out for undergrad" knew finding "a way to pay for it was the only option". "I do not have the safety net like other students do" says Adam, "I couldn't apply without knowing it would be fully funded, it just doesn't work for me, otherwise I will end up drowning in debt". As a result of each participant relying on some form of tuition remission through University employment, the theme balancing act describes participant transition experiences of being now a student and employee, and the implications existing in both spaces has on time management.

Time management. Adam explains

if I didn't have this graduate coordinator position that gives me housing, I am homeless. Because there's no space for me to live with family members. So, this is extra imperative for me that like if this goes well, and I keep this grad job, even if the grad job kind of puts me out of my ability to like to be well, sometimes because it's so much stress. I have to have it. And that makes it harder to kind of like be strong academically because I don't have as much time to get my work done. I will say time management for me, it's kind of, it's still the problem.

When asked to elaborate on what he meant by being well, he further states "graduate jobs are like, we want you to basically be flexible with hours and do whatever we want, we want you to do it and we're going to compensate you, but we know that you need us so we can kind of mistreat you a little bit because we know that you need us".

Julia, who also has a graduate assistantship appreciates graduate school for its condensed learning, but recognizes "if you don't have time management, if you don't learn how to handle everything, you'll struggle because now you're juggling a full-time job, you know? They say your GA is a part time job but you're always doing extra, almost doing

40 hours plus a week…it's so difficult to balance everything in our lives". For Kyle and Maddie, time management was a difficult part of their transition as well. Maddie reflected on her undergraduate experience

> So, once I left my house, I was very much in the mindset that I was gonna go get it myself. I worked a lot when I was an undergrad. So that became kind of a priority to me, like making sure that I was good money wise and have anything that I needed, so I didn't have to bother anyone at home. So that took like a front seat, and then classes took a backseat to it. So, I didn't go to class that often to be honest. I still graduated with a pretty good GPA for someone who didn't go to class, but I could have done so much better. Which is why when I graduated, I said I wasn't going straight to grad school, I was gonna take some time off. Even my advisors, even close friends were like " yeah you're never going back to school" because of the pattern that they saw while I was an undergrad.

In speaking about her transition, she then acknowledges "I had to focus more on time management which I didn't before. I really know the struggles it takes to [financially] get this done. I have to work, and I got to do it myself. But I also got to get schoolwork done". Though a gap year allowed more work experience for both of them, Kyle also admits "for me the most difficult part was time management with like working almost a full-time job at the same time".

It's a "balancing act" says Wendy, as she emotionally recalls what it felt like her first semester on campus figuring out how to balance being a new student in an unfamiliar area, while also managing a part-time graduate assistantship that took more from her than she expected.

When working becomes too much for me, I don't have the option to go home and still be able to afford education. So, it's kind of like I can put myself on autopilot and do anything for the next two years as long as like my school it provided for, I still make some type of money on the side as well as have a place to live and eat. Considering the work, I do, it's not always easy. It definitely provides us with challenges and sometimes you do want to give up.

says Veronica, who, despite wanting to give up at times remembers without her position is the only way she can afford to be a student. Though time management was not a new concept to anyone, learning how to balance all competing factors as a student and employee seemed to have a heavy impact on how some participants describe their transition into graduate school. However, their motivation and resiliency to keep going and prove themselves means that some put themselves on out-pilot, while other just keep pushing, something they are all to familiar with.

Just A Number

While some participants struggled to balance their time between competing roles, others also struggled to feel a part of a community, something they were expecting but did not receive. The most intriguing theme that emerged from this study was the notion of feeling like a number at the University rather than a member of the community. Not only did participants express not feeling a part of a community, but that resources are not made as available as they are for undergraduate students. Ray mentions early on in his interview "being here at Rowan, it's kind of like, I'm just a number". Which is then echoed by Wendy who states, "and then I came to Rowan, it was like, I'm just a number". The theme of

feeling like a number encompasses participants who mentioned needing varying support and resources and/or not feeling apart of the Rowan University Community.

Academic and advisory support. For two participants there were mentions of not feeling supported academically during their graduate experience. Maddie, who spoke often about her intersecting identities shares how she overcame writing anxiety as a Spanish speaking student and someone unfamiliar with writing lengthy papers.

> We had to write a 15-page paper" she says, "I don't remember the last time I wrote a paper because I was a business major…and now we're doing APA and [I] was expected to write a long concept paper when English is my second language… I hadn't practiced my grammar and I never did APA.

For Ray, seeking academic support from family was non-existent, "they don't understand anything, anything that I bring up; research projects or an essay, any type of academic work, I know not to even contact anybody". When asked who he does find academic support in he explains "I found mentors who I knew would help me understand everything more".

Some mentioned needing more advisory or faculty support, for example Veronica who states, "we don't have grad advisors unless we seek them out ourselves". Or for Adam who believes "Rowan Global does an absolutely horrific job". He recalls speaking to his advisor once during the application process "but after that it was like 'got in? Here's how you register for classes, good luck'" he continues "I've never seen an advisor in person". For Wendy, relationships with her professors is where support for her is lacking "the professors here, they're not big on relationship building". She continues by adding at her undergraduate institution she felt valued as a person, and no longer feels that way. "Grad

school is a different world, different monster, different beast, especially for people doing research and writing theses" she adds; "they have an automatic connotation that since you [graduated] , you should be able to do it ten times more in grad school and it's just like, no, you don't know how to do things just because that's the expectation. We need help."

Community, resources, and support. Feeling welcomed as part of the community was mentioned by a few participants who expected a warmer welcoming than they received. More specifically, two participants directly speak on the community at Rowan in comparison to their undergraduate institutions. Ray, an HBCU alum views Rowan's community as "cliquey" and "anti-social" stating "nobody speaks unless you initiate conversation or anything like that… you got to really go out there and find things to do. You don't really make any friends with people". Much like Ray, Wendy was also surprised by the community at Rowan "you come here (Rowan), you're on your own. There is no community where we're going to help each other rise together".

Wendy's perspective is unique as she describes "there are two different types of cultures within graduate school". Those, she explains who are older and want to work and go to class, and those who are looking for more opportunities to get involved. "I love mentoring, and I love helping people. I love doing community service… but they don't offer those opportunities to us". Passionately she argues "we still want to feel welcomed at the graduate level too." She the continues talking about graduate student mental health by saying

> if you are going to offer the same assistance to undergrad you need to offer the
> same assistance graduate students, whether they take it or not, it still needs to be

available in order to make everyone feel comfortable. And you know maybe that if it was available, maybe the campus would be a little bit different.

For two undergraduate Rowan alum, those feelings resonate. Julia agrees "as a grad student there are less clubs, organizations, and resources that we have, which is unfortunate…Rowan is doing a great job incorporating the undergraduate first-gen perspective, like the Rowan flying first symposium, but it's not really catered toward the graduate student.. there just aren't many resources for students like us". Comparably, Adam comments "I feel much less connected to campus life. I don't feel as a graduate student, especially as a graduate worker, that I'm kind of able to partake in the same things with the same level of enthusiasm". He later explains that graduate school has felt more like a "natural isolator" expressing

> I kind of feel like I'm alone a lot. On campus I kind of spend more time alone than I ever did before, it's a lonelier feeling because you can't go home and have people get what you're doing. And often when you're in a first-gen situation and your family just works, they don't value the school conversations the way that someone who has gone to school would.

For Adam, having a sense of belonging was extremely important and he made sure to express his dissatisfaction, not without recommendations of course. In fact, Wendy and Adam both mention the idea of graduate student government as a resource to facilitate connection between graduate students and the Rowan Community. "My [undergraduate institution] had a graduate level student government… they knew what grads wanted; they knew what would make grads feel welcomed to campus" says Wendy. Adam recounts his

experience watching a friend organize something similar out of need for more graduate representation on campus. He suggests

> there should be more like forward facing 'you are now in graduate school, it's going to be a lot, here are some resources you can take and here's someone you can talk to at any time'… a graduate force that actually helps you acclimate to the environment.

It should be noted that while some participants felt less connected, one participant in particular knew she was not coming to Rowan to make friends, and another relied heavily on established mentorship. "My intent was never to do anything big for two years" says Maddie, "but I got so much more. I got friends, I got people that I would hope will be in my life for a long time. And I got support system I was not expecting". Though she claims much of that has to do with being residential, she is grateful for those who went out of their way to build relationships with her. So is Veronica, an alum with already established friends and mentorship, who she "attributes her success" and "prober guidance" throughout graduate school to her mentors.

Pressure to Perform

For many first-generation students the pressure to be the first to go to college and perform well is often anxiety ridden with the expectation of being good role models and family examples. For the participants in this study, all attested to feeling like a role model, needing to support their families, and proving that they could do it again. The word pressure in many different contexts was used to express their performance in graduate school. This theme, while not surprising, also alludes to participants self-motivation and resiliency in the face of adversity and potential failure.

Role models. For some participants serving as a role model for their family naturally comes with being the first in the family to graduate. Ray recalls "wanting to break the curse" and pushing to be the first in his family. He explains

> I'm like a role model for my younger siblings and the rest of my family. A lot of people look up to me, which is ironically strange, like I got older folks in my family that look up to me… I'm just breaking the mold and I know it motivates my younger siblings.

For some, the expectation of being a role model means family will never fully understand. Maddie talks about her family celebrating her graduation and the pride she feels knowing she will be an example for her nieces and nephews, however, she explains

> they still don't know what we went through, but they're here. So, it's more for me, being the first and actually proving to yourself that you were able to do it, even though you had no idea what you were doing maybe 95% of the time.

Wendy, the first out of 30 cousins to go to college and graduate describes feeling like a "trophy" at times, explaining her family holds her to a higher standard always depending on her to be the figure her cousins will follow. She emotionally recounts a personal experience of her grandfather and close friends passing within the same time frame. She often remembers where she comes from, a neighborhood filled with drug and gang violence

> I keep that image in the back of my head… it might seem strange, but I've been through a lot. So sometimes I'm like 'yo, I understand you don't like it, this is different for you, but you gotta push… you're supposed to be the one to create change'.

For Ray, Maddie, and Wendy, being a role model might be an expectation but it's personal to prove to themselves and to others that they did and will continue to lead by example.

Julia on the other hand looks forward to being a role model for future first-generation students. When recommending graduate voices be included in flying-first she eagerly states

you're going to be a role model for those that have no idea they can continue. I know a lot of undergrad students; they have no idea what grad school is. It's like starting the college process all over.

Shortly after she explained her mom thought she didn't graduate when she told her she was going back to school.

my mom doesn't even know what a master's program is. She has no idea what I'm doing right now. So that just kind of goes to show like, a lot of first-generation students, their parents have no idea that there is education beyond a bachelor's degree. No, they have no idea what a terminal degree is, nothing.

Julia is excited to serve as a resource to other students who want to further their education one day, even if not directly after they graduate.

Pressure. There is a certain level of pressure that comes with being a role model. More specifically, some participants express the pressure of having to support their families and make decisions based on what they know will bring them a sense of stability. Specifically, Adam discusses how cautious he is making decisions. He knows he couldn't "go to school for what [he] loved", instead he was thinking about how he could best support his family. "There's a constant anxiety that you have to perform well" he explains, "and the work that you do has to be over par, because you need to represent yourself and your

family well because your family line is poor and you want to take them to new levels". He goes deeper in explaining first-generation students understand the magnitude of failure, therefore are constantly under pressure to perform without breaks. He continues

> that puts a lot of pressure in your head. You end up feeling really sad when you don't do well or when you can't figure something out, or when all your classmates that comes from privileged backgrounds are able to do all these things all the time and you can't… you want to start feeling like a professional like someone who competent, but you still have that like poor burden on you.

For Kyle, the pressure of doing well began in high school; "I've always had like a pressure growing up to like, do well in school… not that I didn't get praised for it, but it was always expected". He acknowledges the pressure he felt made it difficult to admit when he was struggling, because his family just wouldn't understand. Wendy recalls how the pressure she experienced the first-semester of her graduate experience impacted her mental health, "I felt a lot of pressure that weighed on me" she says "I didn't want to be first-gen anymore because it was just so much pressure to succeed'. For these participants however, the pressure to perform certainly did not outweigh their ambition to continue.

Chapter V

Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, and, Recommendations

First-generation master's students have unique experiences brought on by being first in their family to graduate from college and pursue an advanced degree. The decision to continue their education and the experiences they have while doing so prove to be similar to the challenges undergraduates experience as examined in the bulk of research on first-generation students. This final chapter of the study summarizes the study and looks to mend the gap in research by offering discussion on first-generation master's students. This chapter also provides answers to the four research questions guiding this study by using the qualitative findings from chapter IV. Recommendations and further research will also be presented as to develop practices of support for future first-generation master's students.

Summary of the Study

This study investigated the lived experiences of first-generation master's students, an underrepresented student population in research on first-generation college students. Little is known about first-generation students who persist and seek graduate school candidacy; therefore, the primary goal of this study was to understand how their first-generation identity interacts with their persistence, and overall experiences as a graduate student. In doing so, another goal of this study was to provide a platform for participants to share their experiences in order to see if the challenges that exist compare to the obstacles said to complicate their undergraduate experiences both academically and socially. Overall, the findings of this research add to a much-needed conversation for our

first-generation continuing education students whose narratives have been left out yet continue to need support and services from their college institutions.

The research took a phenomenological approach as it is best suited for finding commonalities between participants shared experiences (McMillan, 2016). Purposeful sampling was then used to select participants who met the criteria of being a master's candidate and first-generation student at Rowan University. Eight students who expressed interest and met the criteria were then invited to a one-on-one semi structure interview. With consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed by the co-investigator directly after the interview. The co-investigator also took notes during each interview and used those notes during thematic analysis of the data. Over the course of approximately three months, the co-investigator conducted interviews, coded, and analyzed the collected data to find emergent themes. Quotes from each interview were used to establish relevancy for each theme and further discuss their shared experiences.

Discussion of the Findings

Research question 1. What factors do first generation master's students perceive to have had an influence on pursuing their educational aspirations?

The decision to attend graduate school was experienced by each participant to be influenced by varying personal and professional factors. Four of the eight students in this study took what most defined as a gap year, or time away from college. Wanting to gain real world experiences, or time away from college allowed a phase to establish purpose and provide room for error and growth. Two participants in particular, were influenced by counselors and mentors who helped when feelings of depression and unfulfillment clouded their ability to continue their education.

Some were influenced by higher career aspirations and getting to the next step in the future. Experiences like being missed for opportunities due to lower education or knowing a master's degree meant more stability, heighted their reason to further advance their education. Economic and job security also served as an influence. Money may have been a motivator, but it was the influence of economic security that made pursuing a master's degree feel promising. Some respondents were aware of the benefits they could receive for their future families if they attained their degree and continued to climb professional and educational ladders. These findings support Garner and Holly's (2011) research suggesting many will rely on advanced education to achieve their career aspirations and establish economic stability.

Research question 2. How do first-generation master's students describe their transition into graduate school?

All of the participants in this study served in both student and employee roles. Whether in full-time positions, or graduate assistantships, students describe feeling overwhelmed by both academic and work-related demands. Time management was often mentioned as being the greatest challenge. Navigating work-life spaces while simultaneously being a student proved to complicate their transition and have an impact on their ability to transition as smoothly as expected. Though being an employee of the University guaranteed some type of tuition remission, some felt over worked therefore challenging their ability to focus more on their education. Those who took time away from college experienced this less than those who went straight through, likely because of their familiarity already working fulltime.

Research question 3. What has their overall experience been like as a first-generation master's student?

The experiences of first-generation master's students at Rowan University are comparable to the experiences described in existing literature as being unsupportive. Feeling like a number at the University rather than a member of the community was expressed plainly by two participants and felt by others. Between lack of advisory support and opportunities for involvement outside of their program, students felt detached from the University and valued less than undergraduate students. There is the assumption that because graduate students have done it once, they can do it again and as a result of this assumption students expressed not feeling comfortable asking for help.

Lack of advisory support was mentioned multiple times as students sought resources to acclimate themselves both socially and academically. Some struggled academically and navigated personal obstacles such as a language barrier and assignment comprehension on their own or through the support of mentors. Lack of resources, not having a sense of belonging, and wanting more opportunities led to feelings of loneliness and isolation. These findings echo research that suggest graduate students, especially those who identify as first-generation will experience inadequacy and reports of feeling lonely (Gardner & Holly, 2011; McCrea, 2015).

Research question 4. What resources do they believe should be made available for first-generation master's students?

Though the interview protocol of this study did not include a question regarding desired resources, many participants mentioned services that might be useful. As mentioned in question three, a lack in advisory support was expressed as a gap that

44

needed to be filled. To feel academically, professionally, and socially prepared for graduate school, advisory support would be useful to ease the transition and enhance graduate experiences. Having someone to go to with questions, or when seeking available resources would create opportunity for graduate students to build relationships and feel valued. Similarly, suggestions of a graduate student government were expressed to provide social support and a feeling that graduate students belong. A graduate student government would provide space for graduate students to connect with one another, advocate their needs, and find solace in their shared experience.

As it relates to their first-generation identity, another resource would be utilizing the presence of the Flying-First Task force to include first-generation master's student voices both as a way to gain support and provide support to other students. The presence of the task force has certainly been progressive in the ways in which the force acknowledges what first-generation students need. Having one representative as a participant suggests, who serves as a connector between master's students and other faculty and staff could prove to be beneficial for first-generation master's students looking for more support.

Conclusion

First-generation college students are resilient students who tackle obstacles head on to prove their success is not determined by their circumstance. For the participants in this study, they prove furthermore the kind of resilience it takes to move beyond the barriers said to keep first-generation students from accessing the "capital know-how" to keep climbing professional and education ladders (Whon et al., 2013; Yosso, 2005). There is not enough existing literature on first-generation students who persists and

continue their education. As a result, there is a lack in resources for this group of students who still need to feel like they belong and are supported during their educational endeavors.

This research also shows that first-generation master's students are still influenced and motivated not only being the first in their family, but also by the economic stability that can be achieved when you pursue higher levels of knowledge. Their awareness of the stability that might follow also makes them keenly aware that their social economic status does not allow for them to persist without tuition assistance. Unfortunately, as shown in this research attaining a graduate assistant ship or tuition remission as an employee complicates their experiences and adds additional challenges.

The findings in this research support Gardner and Holly's (2011) research on first-generation doctoral students who uncover there is still a lack in access, financial, and emotional support for first-generation students as continue their education. The same can be concluded in this study based on how students describe their experiences and express the challenges they have endured. Additionally, in support of Fentress and Collopy's (2011) research, motivation and resiliency of these students can also be found in the same areas that challenge them. This is to say the disadvantages they experience are also where they find the willpower to keep going.

As students continue their education beyond a bachelor's degree, it is imperative that we continue examining what first-generation students need and how they are being prepared for their next educational step. This study begins a conversation that researchers are not having and should be. The data provided can be used to implement opportunities for support and services for both undergraduate students looking to advance their

education, and master's students who have taken the next step and need additional guidance. I am grateful for having had the opportunity speaking with the participants of this study and want to thank them for being vulnerable and trusting me with their stories.

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this research, existing literature on first-generation students, and suggestions provided by the participants in this study.

1. Rowan University should invest in a graduate school to house all graduate disciplines as to embrace graduate students as members of the community and provide increased support. Providing graduate students with a graduate school could increase feelings of belongingness and house needed services.

2. Adequate advisory services should be provided to all graduate students beyond enrollment and class registration. Opportunities to meet with an advisor throughout the semester should be available.

3. Rowan University's Flying-First Task Force should consider taking on a graduate student representative who can serve as a resource to connect graduate students with networking-like opportunities. They should also consider a peer-mentor opportunity, or panel discussion for master's students to share their experiences.

4. Rowan Student Government should consider partnering with graduate students to forma. Graduate council that would serve and advocate on behalf of all graduate students.

While these suggestions are derived from a study conducted at Rowan University, they can be implemented at other institutions in need of suggestions to support first-generation students.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following recommendations for further research are based on the findings of this study:

1. More studies should be conducted on the experiences of first-generation graduate students including both master's and doctoral students. The study should be done using a larger sample size and include other intersecting factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

2. Future studies should be conducted on first-generation graduate student perceptions on faculty and staff support.

3. Researchers should consider conducting studies on first-generation master's student's academic success in comparison to their continuing generation peers.

References

Atherton, M. C. (2014). Academic preparedness of first-generation college students: Different perspectives. *Journal of College Student Development*, *55*(8), 824-829.

Bourdieu, P., & Richardson, J. G. (1986). Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. The forms of capital, 241-258.

Brey, C. D., Musu, L., McFarland, J., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Diliberti, M., Zhang, A., ... & Wang, X. (2019). Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups 2018. *Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics*.

Carlton, M. T. (2015). First generation students and post-undergraduate aspirations. *SAGE Open*, *5*(4), 2158244015618433.

Cataldi, E. F., Bennett, C. T., & Chen, X. (2018). First-Generation Students: *College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes*. Stats in Brief. NCES 2018-421. National Center for Education Statistics.

Carter, P. L. (2003). " Black" cultural capital, status positioning, and schooling conflicts for low-income African American youth. *Social problems*, *50*(1), 136-155.

Checkoway, B. (2018). Inside the Gates: First-Generation Students Finding Their Way. *Higher Education Studies*, *8*(3), 72-84.

Choy, S., National Center for Education Statistics, E. W. D., & MPR Associates, B. C. (2001). *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment. Findings from the Condition of Education, 2001*.

Cushman, K. (2007). Facing the culture shock of college. *Educational Leadership*, *64*(7), 44.

DeAndrea, D. C., Ellison, N. B., LaRose, R., Steinfield, C., & Fiore, A. (2012). Serious social media: On the use of social media for improving students' adjustment to college. *The Internet and higher education*, 15(1), 15-23.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, *12*(4), 1143-1168.

Engle, J., Bermeo, A., & O'Brien, C. (2006). Straight from the Source: What Works for First-Generation College Students. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*.

Facts, R. F. (2019). Facts 2018-2019. (nd).

Falcon, L. (2015). Breaking down barriers: First-generation college students and college success. *Innovation Showcase*, *10*(6).

Fentress, J. C., & Collopy, R. (2011). Promoting resiliency among first-generation college students. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*, *13*.

Gardner, S. K., & Holley, K. A. (2011). "Those invisible barriers are real": The progression of first-generation students through doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *44*(1), 77-92.

Gofen, A. (2009). Family capital: How first-generation higher education students break the intergenerational cycle. *Family Relations*, 58(1), 104-120.

Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *3*(1), 42-55.

Ishitani, T. T. (2006). Studying attrition and degree completion behavior among first-generation college students in the United States. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(5), 861-885.

Lancaster, C. M. (2010). First-generation college students, graduate school, and social support(Masters thesis). *San Jose State University, CA*.

Lunceford, B. (2011). When first-generation students go to graduate school. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2011(127), 13-20.

Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society. *Trends in Higher Education Series*. College Board.

Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education, 9*(3).

McCarron, G. M. P. (2012). An examination of the factors that contribute to undergraduate persistence and graduate degree aspirations for first-generation college students attending elite universities. University of Maryland, College Park.

McCrea, D. (2015). The experiences of first-generation graduate students with a Latino Background. Doctoral dissertation, *The Chicago School of Professional Psychology*

McMillan, J. H. (2016). Educational research: *Fundamentals for the consumer* (7th ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon

Moschetti, R. V., & Hudley, C. (2015). Social capital and academic motivation among first-generation community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(3), 235-251.

Murphy, C. G., & Hicks, T. (2006). Academic Characteristics among First-Generation and Non-First-Generation College Students. *College Quarterly*, 9(2), n2.

O'Shea, S. (2016). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': First-in-family students, cultural capital and the higher education environment. *Higher Education*, 72(1), 59-78.

Ostrove, J. M., Stewart, A. J., & Curtin, N. L. (2011). Social class and belonging: Implications for graduate students' career aspirations. The Journal of Higher Education, 82(6), 748-774.

Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

Payne, T. H. (2006). Perceptions of first-generation college students: Factors that influence graduate school enrollment and perceived barriers to attendance. *The University of Alabama*.

Phillips, L. T., Stephens, N. M., Townsend, S. S., & Goudeau, S. (2016). Access is not enough: Cultural mismatch persists to limit first-generation students' opportunities for achievement throughout college. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Rocconi, L. M., Ribera, A. K., & Laird, T. F. N. (2015). College Seniors' Plans for Graduate School: Do Deep Approaches Learning and Holland Academic Environments Matter?. *Research in Higher Education*, *56*(2), 178-201.

Schwartz, S. E., Kanchewa, S. S., Rhodes, J. E., Cutler, E., & Cunningham, J. L. (2016). "I didn't know you could just ask:" Empowering underrepresented college-bound students to recruit academic and career mentors. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *64*, 51-59.

Stuber, J. M. (2011). Integrated, marginal, and resilient: race, class, and the diverse experiences of white first-generation college students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *24*(1), 117-136.

Tate, K. A., Fouad, N. A., Marks, L. R., Young, G., Guzman, E., & Williams, E. G. (2015). Underrepresented first-generation, low-income college students' pursuit of a graduate education: Investigating the influence of self-efficacy, coping efficacy, and family influence. *Journal of Career Assessment,* 23(3), 427-441.

Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher education*, 37(1), 1-22.

Torpey, E. (2017) "Measuring the value of education," *Career Outlook,* U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Toutkoushian, R. K., May-Trifiletti, J. A., & Clayton, A. B. (2019). From "First in Family" to "First to Finish": Does College Graduation Vary by How First-Generation College Status Is Defined?. *Educational Policy*, 0895904818823753.

Wohn, D. Y., Ellison, N. B., Khan, M. L., Fewins-Bliss, R., & Gray, R. (2013). The role of social media in shaping first-generation high school students' college aspirations: A social capital lens. *Computers & Education*, 63, 424-436.

Yosso*, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race ethnicity and education*, *8*(1), 69-91.

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

eIRB Notice of Approval

STUDY PROFILE

Study ID:	Pro2019000801		
Title:	Experiences of First-Generation Graduate Master's Students		
Principal Investigator:	MaryBeth Walpole	**Study Coordinator:**	
Co-Investigator(s):	Dominique Douthit	**Other Study Staff:**	There are no items to display
Sponsor:	Department Funded	**Approval Cycle:**	Twelve Months
Risk Determination:	Minimal Risk	**Device Determination:**	Not Applicable

Review Type:	Expedited	**Expedited Category:**	6 7	**Exempt Category:**	N/A
Subjects:	10	**Specimens:**	0	**Records:**	

CURRENT SUBMISSION STATUS

Submission Type:	Research Protocol/Study	**Submission Status:**	Approved
Approval Date:	1/31/2020	**Expiration Date:**	1/30/2021
Continuation Review Required:	Progress Report		

Pregnancy Code:	Not Applicable	**Pediatric Code:**	Not Applicable	**Prisoner Code:**	Not Applicable

Protocol:	Informed Interview Consent Form.docx Thesis Protocal .docx Audio: Videotape Addendum to Consent Form .docx Interview Questions.docx	**Consent:**	Informed Interview Consent Form.docx.pdf Audio: Videotape Addendum to Consent Form .docx.pdf	**Recruitment Materials:**	Recruitment Email.docx

---

Appendix B

Instrument: Semi-Structured Student Interviews

First-Generation Masters Student Interview Protocol

1. What influenced your decision to apply to graduate school?

2. How did you decide to attend this institution? Did you apply to other Universities?

    a. What were you looking for in an institution?

3. Has your graduate experience been different than your undergraduate experience? If so, how?

4. How has your transition from a undergraduate to graduate student been?

5. How do you feel your first-generation identity has impacted your graduate experience?

    a. Financial constraints?

    b. Lack of support?

6. What has challenged you the most during your graduate experience?

    a. Are those challenges related to you being first-generation?

8. Do you think your experience would be different if you were not first-generation?

9. What advice would you give a first-generation student considering graduate school?

10. Is there anything else I should have been asking and didn't? Is there anything additional you would like to share about your experience?