

FIRST-GENERATION WOMEN AND IDENTITY INTERSECTIONALITY

Georgia Kouzoukas

A DISSERTATION

in

Higher Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Education

2017

Supervisor of Dissertation:

Shaun R. Harper, Professor of Education

Dean, Graduate School of Education:

Pamela L. Grossman, Dean and Professor

Dissertation Committee:

Shaun R. Harper, Professor of Education

Laura W. Perna, James S. Riepe Professor of Education

MaryBeth Walpole, Professor of Education, Rowan University

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I have been fortunate enough to have the most influential individuals in my life and without their unwavering guidance and support this dissertation would not have come to fruition. To my committee members, it was an honor and privilege to be your student and advisee. Dr. Shaun Harper, you are not only the epitome of a dedicated scholar, advisor, and mentor, but you instilled a sense of confidence in me that I did not know existed. I would not have been able to, nor have wanted to go through this journey without your insurmountable expertise and friendship. I will be forever indebted to you. To Dr. Laura Perna, your commitment to your students is unparalleled and could not have asked for a better professor and committee member. Thank you for making me a better researcher, critical thinker, and higher education administrator. Dr. MaryBeth Walpole, my research focus on first-generation students initially began because of your teachings and I thank you for continuously supporting me.

To the women in this study, thank you for letting me into your lives. You each represent what it means to be a first-generation student; driven individuals who are bound for anything but mediocracy. I am in awe of who you all are, what you have accomplished, and the great paths you will certainly take. I will never be able to thank you enough.

To my friends and family, no words can properly express what you all mean to me. To my grandparents, uncles, God parents, and God siblings, thank you for always encouraging me. Nick, Beba, Eleni, John, and Michael, you are the source of my laughter and happiness and I am grateful that our parents raised us as siblings. Reney and Kookie; I thank our parents every day for giving me my two best friends whom I idolize. Thank

you for letting me follow in your footsteps. I am also extremely blessed to have two aunts who are also my mothers. You both taught me what it means to be an intelligent, strong, independent woman. I would crumble without you. Lastly, to my parents. Thank you for overcoming challenges as Greek immigrants to raise first-generation women. And to my father; you are the strongest person I will ever know. Everything I have accomplished in this world is because of you. I would be lost without you.

ABSTRACT

FIRST-GENERATION WOMEN AND IDENTITY INTERSECTIONALITY

Georgia Kouzoukas

Shaun R. Harper

With a considerable focus to increase America's degree completion rates amongst our diverse population, higher education policymakers and researchers have examined the college access, persistence, and completion rates of first-generation students. However, minimal research has addressed the heterogeneous student population through a gendered or intersectional lens. To provide nuance to first-generation scholarship and identity development, the dissertation employed a narrative inquiry approach to examine the meanings five first-generation women made as they understood their intersecting identities within unique institutional contexts. Findings from the study are the following: the women defined themselves as individuals with multiple identities and not solely on their first-generation status; the saliency with which individuals associated with a first-generation identity varied; an initial identity conflict regarding first-generation status catapulted the women's understanding of other social dimensions and allowed them to transition from processing each identity in isolation to an intersectional conception of self; identity development was an evolving process with the saliency of social dimensions fluctuating based on temporal and situational contexts; and some women were not adequately challenged to reflect on their gender identity. The conclusions from the study will add to the knowledge base not only on first-generation students, but undergraduate women's *advantaged* experiences, and identity intersectionality within higher education.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

“But more than any single challenge, first-generation students describe the pressure of something less firm to the grasp: the constant and steady weight of assumptions” (Pappano, 2015, para. 57).

In the *New York Times* article, “First-Generation Students Unite,” L. Pappano (2015) introduces a number of individuals who are the first in their families to attend higher education, known as first-generation students to higher education practitioners and researchers (e.g., Gofen, 2009; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Included is the story of Ana Barros, a collegiate woman who essentially beat the odds to attend Harvard University, despite her disadvantaged and low-income upbringing. Although there are no physical identifying markers distinguishing whether an individual is the first in their family to attend college, Ana could be considered the visible *face* of the majority of first-generation college goers, commonly depicted through longitudinal and national statistical research (e.g., Choy, 2001; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007) as racial/ethnic minority students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who experience difficulty in the higher education context. Pappano also emphasizes and recognizes that first-generation students like Ana have historically not been the typical college student and continue to be underrepresented in all institution types, especially at prestigious and selective institutions, since the majority of first-generation students instead enroll in two-year colleges (Choy; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

A closer examination of Ana reveals that her identity and self-definition is shaped by her experiences both prior to entering college and while immersed in the postsecondary context. Ana is extremely cognizant of and impacted by income inequality at Harvard University, identifying as a low-income student experiencing a wealthy campus (Pappano, 2015), therefore, it could be assumed that her first-generation status, income, and ethnicity are salient dimensions of her identity. However, Ana's truth may not be the reality for other first-generation students on the same campus or at other postsecondary institutions. Whereas, first-generation student scholarship assumes that the student population has generalized experiences, as well as academic and social deficits, since they are predominantly from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations (Choy, 2001; Saenz et al., 2007), this study examined the complexity of individuals and the multiple dimensions of identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation) that influence and are influenced by experiences while in college.

This dissertation focused on the lived experiences and the intersectional identities of diverse first-generation women, adding nuance to the common themes found in first-generation scholarship. Special attention was given to the individual complexity of first-generation women, their self-perception, interpretation of their experiences, and how they made sense of their intersecting identities within postsecondary institutional contexts for which women are now the majority of college graduates despite their historical exclusion (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Instead of simply conflating race and income to understand first-generation students, an intersectional approach inspired the following

inquiry and others like it: how is first-generation identity gendered? (see Strayhorn, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

The overarching problem addressed in the study was referred to as muted intersectionality or the homogenous essentialization of the diverse first-generation student population. To emphasize, as the college age population in the United States is becoming increasingly more diverse (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, & Finney, 2012), scholars (e.g., Cerna, Pérez, & Saenz, 2009; McCabe, 2009) have given considerable attention to students who have been historically underrepresented in the postsecondary context, including individuals whose parents did not attend a higher education institution. However, limited research considers the collegiate experiences of first-generation women, illustrating a lack of emphasis on both the gendered and intersectional perspectives of students who are the first in their families to attend college. Instead, research has examined first-generation women as two entities. The following issues as they pertain to the compartmentalized/siloed groups of first-generation students and women were addressed in the study: 1) The term first-generation student has led to the categorization and generalized conception of a student population and their experiences in terms of college access, persistence, and retention, with limited information on identity intersectionality and an understanding of diverse perspectives, and; 2) Scholarship on undergraduate women has either utilized a generalized *advantaged* perspective, minimizing between gender disparities in higher education or

focused on racialized within group differences, incognizant of the intersection of race and gender with other social dimensions.

First-Generation Categorization

The term first-generation student was initially formulated by the federal government as an eligibility designation for federally funded programs for disadvantaged students and is defined as collegians whose parents have not obtained a degree from a postsecondary institution (Ward et al., 2012). Other researchers (e.g., Gofen, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004) have since adopted a more stringent approach, categorizing first-generation learners as students enrolling in and/or completing an undergraduate degree despite neither parent having attended a college or university. The former definition was used for my research as a means to more adequately understand the information, resources, and support that first-generation students bring with them into the postsecondary context regardless of whether their parents have zero or minimal higher education experience.

Depending on the definition, the number of first-generation collegians varies. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Radwin, Wine, Siegel, & Bryan, 2013), approximately 7.2% of undergraduates attending an institution that was enrolled in federal financial aid programs during the 2011-12 academic year, have parents who did not attend high school and 26.3% have parents whose highest level of education is a high school diploma. The considerable number of students deemed first-generation, have distinguishable characteristics. Scholars (e.g., Choy, 2001) have found first-generation students to be older than the traditional college

age population, with an age of 24 years or older. Students who are the first in their families to attend college are also more likely to have parents whose native language is not English (Bui, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012). In terms of race and ethnicity, data from the NCES (Radwin et al.) found that 28% of White students were first-generation, compared to 42% of Black or African American collegians, 47.8% of Hispanic students, and 32.8% of Asians. Similar to findings in other studies (e.g., Bui; Pascarella et al.; Ward et al.), first-generation students are more likely to be ethnic minorities. Another common demographic characteristic of the student population is in regards to socioeconomic status and a more frequent tendency to come from low-income backgrounds when compared to peers with parents who have had some college experience or completed postsecondary degrees (Choy; Radwin et al.; Ward et al.).

Gender differences are also evident with statistics from the 2011-12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study reporting that 35.2% of college women had parents who either did not complete high school or whose highest level of education was a high school diploma, compared to 31.1% of college men (Radwin et al.). While a seemingly minimal difference, first-generation college goers have been more likely to be women since the 1980s (Saenz et al., 2007), which is consistent with the general trend of an increased college participation rate for women (Freeman, 2004; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Although inconsistencies in the statistical proportion of students deemed first-generation are evident, it can be discerned that first-generation college goers experience intersecting sites of oppression since the generalized population is overrepresented within disadvantaged racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Compared to traditional collegians, first-generation students are less likely to enroll in a college or university (Choy, 2001; Gofen, 2009) and for those who obtain access to higher education, they experience difficulty within the postsecondary institutional context, do not perform as well academically, and have lower degree completion rates (Pascarella et al., 2004). Research on first-generation college goers has primarily focused on three areas: pre-entry attributes and transition into the postsecondary context (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Pascarella et al.), adjustment and engagement throughout their experience, and their academic preparation, self-efficacy, and motivation (Pascarella et al.; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Invariably, scholarship has utilized the term first-generation to categorize students who are the first in their families to attend college, resulting in the following issues. Foremost, a generalized conception of first-generation collegians as a homogenous student population has been established. However, not all first-generation students are nontraditional collegians from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, while White students are less likely to be first-generation (13.2% of first-generation students identified as White in 2005), “White (non-Hispanic) students represent a large majority of all entering first-generation college students due to their numerical majority within the entering college student population” (Saenz et al., 2007, p. 11). Secondly, similar to research on other underrepresented students, a primary emphasis has been on access and degree completion, for the ultimate purpose of developing collegians into contributing members of our technological and globalized labor market (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zumeta et al., 2012). Less attention, therefore, has been given to the independent and

individual experiences of first-generation students, diminishing their voice. Ultimately, although there is great heterogeneity within the first-generation student population, minimal information examines their identity development while in the college context. Instead, generalizations of the diverse first-generation student population stray from the contested purpose of higher education in developing the whole student (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Since self-concept and identity development formation in college can impact and be influenced by experiences within the environment (Deaux, 1993; Moran, 2003), a more in depth understanding of first-generation college goers and identity development during higher education was warranted.

Undergraduate Women

With a more salient focus on the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic dimensions of first-generation students, higher education researchers have not thoroughly examined the gendered and intersectional experiences of students who are the first in their families to attend college. To provide nuance to first-generation student scholarship, an examination of first-generation women was necessary, especially considering that the majority of students who are the first in their families to attend college are women (Radwin et al., 2013), echoing the larger gender disparities within the collegiate context. Specifically, higher education stakeholders have examined the shift in degree completion based on gender, since the percentage of women receiving bachelor's degrees has increased since the 1970s, now exceeding the educational attainment rates of men (Baum et al., 2013; NCES, 2004). A seemingly woman's advantage in degree attainment that is anticipated to affect the labor market and society (Patton, Harris, Ranero-Ramirez, Villacampa, & Lui,

2015), may give some institutional stakeholders the impression that the only remaining area of concern for women are gender disparities in major field of study; the most notable example is the underrepresentation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields (NCES, 2014; National Science Foundation, 2012).

Therefore, policymakers and higher education administrators have instead focused their attention on the experiences of collegiate men since their lower degree attainment rates are responsible, in part, for the United States' overall stagnation in college degrees (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013).

However, while women have made significant gains in regards to educational attainment rates, they are disadvantaged in other respects. Most noticeably, women's post-college outcomes are markedly different from men (Sax, 2008), earning lower wages due to a number of factors, including but not limited to, their overrepresentation in less lucrative occupations, experiences of discrimination in the workplace, and underrepresentation in high-level employment positions (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Since educational experiences are potentially linked to self-concept and internal locus of control, developments in identity established during the pivotal stage of adolescence (Josselson, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), additional insights are needed into how women understand the intersection of their identities while in the college context.

However, research on undergraduate women has either generalized the experiences of women to distinguish them from men or has predominantly examined within group differences between racially minoritized and non-racialized women (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Sax). Of particular salience are the higher educational attainment rates of White women

in comparison to women of color (Baum et al., 2013). Consequently, scholars have not thoroughly investigated how women make meaning of their other identity dimensions (e.g., parent's educational level and socioeconomic status) in conjunction with race/ethnicity and gender.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand the meanings recently graduated first-generation women made as they examined their intersecting identities within unique institutional contexts. Specifically, insight into how dimensions such as first-generation status, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation shaped individuals' lived experiences during the formative years of college was provided. The study was conducted in response to the national priority to increase degree attainment rates for underrepresented students, including first-generation college goers (Kruger, 2016), and the considerable attention devoted to ameliorating the generalized issues surrounding students who are the first in their families to attend college. However, to contribute a new perspective on first-generation student scholarship, this study focused on how first-generation college women viewed and interpreted the intersection of privileged and oppressed social dimensions in shaping their nuanced experiences, providing a gendered lens to first-generation research.

The central research questions that guided the study included: 1) How do undergraduate women situated in particular postsecondary contexts make meaning of being first in their families to attend college, and; 2) How do intersecting identities shape

first-generation undergraduate women's experiences within specific college and university contexts?

Significance of the Study

Due to the significant effort of institutional stakeholders and policymakers to increase degree attainment for first-generation students and other underrepresented populations, national quantitative studies have been employed (e.g., Choy, 2001; Saenz et al., 2007). Although, there is utility in the institutional resources created from such research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), they perpetuate generalizations and a deficit perspective now synonymous with first-generation college goers. Ultimately, since students who are the first in their families to attend college are overrepresented within historically underrepresented groups (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), the first-generation student label has conflated income status and race/ethnicity.

This study instead employed a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach to examine the nuanced experiences of diverse first-generation women who have graduated from distinct institutional contexts and their understanding of identity. The importance of which was twofold: 1) To explore additional factors that may impact first-generation students' college experiences outside of those researched and enacted in institutional programs, and; 2) To better serve our diverse student populations by focusing on both generalized experiences, as well as the specific needs of each student as they come to understand the intersection and saliency of their multiple identities within the contextual space of higher education.

As college campuses become more diverse, it is essential that higher education administrators recognize students' multiple layers of identity including both social identities or membership categories that individuals associate with, as well as personal identities, including behaviors and characteristics that are connected with identity categories (Deaux, 1993). Since college students are situated within constantly changing environments that afford them countless experiences, students' social dimensions shape their interaction with the higher education context. Furthermore, contextual influences either thwart or nourish students' multiple identity dimensions (Moran, 2003). Harper, Wardell, and McGuire (2011) highlight the importance for higher education administrators to understand students' identities:

Emphasizing the ways in which identities intersect and intrasect complicates static or essentialized perceptions that educators may hold about students. By considering multiple dimensions of an individual's identity, researchers are explicitly acknowledging the fluid and context-specific nature of how students view themselves and make sense of their own development. (pp. 83)

An intersectional approach was necessary to understand the meanings students associate with their experiences, the positive or negative impact this reflection has on their self-concept, and ultimately its influence on students' holistic well being (Torres, 2011). An exploration of the central phenomenon allows students and higher education administrators to acknowledge all dimensions of identity to understand first-generation women as "complex individuals" (Harper et al., 2011, p. 83) who interpret experiences in diverse ways. By uncovering the multidimensional needs of the first-generation student

population, students will acquire the holistic tools to be engaged in the environment and persist until degree completion. Consequently, by targeting our demographically changing and diverse college age population in a nuanced manner through the specific examination of first-generation women, a better understanding of how the intersection of advantaged and disadvantaged social dimensions (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, income) impact students' experiences within institutional contexts, which have been sites of oppression and privilege, can be established.

Definitions and Related Concepts

The following includes definitions of key concepts discussed and addressed in the dissertation.

First-generation student: A college student enrolled in a higher education institution, with neither parent (biological or otherwise) or guardian having graduated from a college or university upon the start of the student entering college.

College graduate: Individual who has completed the necessary requirements designated by their registered college or university to have a conferred associate's or bachelor's degree.

Complex Individuality: An understanding of who an individual is, their stage of development, and what is needed for them to process identity conflicts or reflection so that they have a self-actualized and productive post-college life (Harper et al., 2011).

Identity Intersectionality: Understanding identity and lived experiences in terms of the individual and their group associations, as well as the conception and saliency of privilege (Dill & Zambina, 2009).

Underrepresented Students: Individuals from racial/ethnic minority and low-income groups that have been historically denied access to higher education.

Woman Advantage: The phrase utilized to describe undergraduate women's higher educational attainment rates in comparison to men, reversing a historical gender gap in postsecondary participation and completion.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter two includes an extensive review of the pertinent literature related to underrepresented students, first-generation college goers, and undergraduate women. In addition, the theoretical perspectives that guided the study are also presented. The methodological approach and procedures for data collection and analysis are then discussed in chapter three. Chapter four presents the narratives of the five participants in the study. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of key findings, as well as recommendations for practice and implications for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As a means to understand the underlying concepts integral to the discussion of first-generation women, the following contains an overview of relevant published literature. First, an examination of the historical and contemporary landscape of higher education provides a temporal context for understanding the demographic shifts in college access. Given the current state of our nation, factors critical to college participation especially for those deemed underrepresented in terms of racial/ethnic background, income status, and parental education are then reviewed. To disentangle the conception of underserved students, scholarship specific to the population of first-generation college goers is highlighted. With limited information on first-generation women, the generalized experiences of undergraduate women are instead critically examined. Finally, theoretical perspectives guiding the nuanced understanding of first-generation women and identity development are discussed, including social and cultural capital models, which are critical to students whose parents did not attend college, followed by a review of identity development in higher education, culminating with the importance of intersectionality.

Historical and Contemporary Landscape of College Access

The higher education system in the United States and the demographic composition of postsecondary institutions has continuously evolved with the ever-changing state of our nation. At the inception of American institutions, access to the colonial colleges was exclusively given to elite White men of financial ability,

highlighting their preexisting social standing and developing intellectual and spiritual leaders for the church and state (Thelin, 2011). Albeit gradually, previously excluded groups of individuals, including those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, and women (who will be discussed in further detail in the subsequent section on women in college) have since been afforded the opportunity to pursue a college education.

Notably, the establishment of women's colleges and historically Black institutions was crucial, initial steps in extending the pursuit of higher learning, yet did so in a manner that perpetuated gender and racial segregation at the time. Since Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded and financed by White, religious missionary groups, the institutions either favored a curricula based on skilled trades (e.g., Hampton Institute and Tuskegee) as a means for Blacks to contribute to the economic development of the region and that of the institutions' financiers (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Thelin, 2011) or enabled a liberal arts education (e.g., Howard University and Fisk University) that focused on White cultural history as opposed to African American values (Harper et al.). Although Blacks were afforded the ability to pursue a higher education, the organizational governance and structure of HBCUs promoted an intellectually inferior perception of Blacks, thus attempting to justify separate education.

The creation of Oberlin College in 1834 instead brought the quintessential American institution based on democratic ideals into fruition, as women and Black students were openly admitted into a coeducational school (Goodchild, 2007). Although other institutions were not quick to follow suit, college participation continued to broaden

through public policy initiatives. The establishment of land grant institutions through the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, created higher education institutions in practical fields (e.g., agriculture, mechanics, military expertise), fostered affordable education at state colleges and universities for the industrial class and students from rural geographical areas, and expanded opportunities for minority populations as funding was provided to HBCUs (Thelin, 2011). Financial assistance through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, then enhanced the educational opportunity for a nontraditional cohort of students from various socioeconomic backgrounds, including veterans from modest incomes, as well as individuals who were older, married, and the first in their families to attend college.

In addition, the Truman Commission Report of 1947 proposed a blueprint for expanding the pursuit of higher learning and college affordability (Thelin, 2011; Zumeta et al., 2012), including increasing the number of junior or community colleges. Accessibility in terms of cost and location was the main impetus for the development of community colleges and as this institutional type expanded, Black and Hispanic students were disproportionately overrepresented (Thelin & Gasman, 2011). Later, the Higher Education Act of 1965 would create Minority Serving Institutions (Thelin & Gasman), as well as establish the federal government as a provider for student financial support through the guaranteed student loan program and the educational opportunity grants program (Zumeta et al.). As a means to further expand equal opportunity in the realm of higher education, the Education Amendments of 1972, Title IV, provided Pell Grants or need based grants to low-and-middle-income students that could be used at the institution

or vocational school of their choosing (Zumeta et al.). While college affordability continues to be addressed, such initiatives allowed issues of access based on socioeconomic status to be heard.

Through historical gains, the creation of an assortment of institutional types, and public policy efforts established to cater to the demographic shifts within the nation, the percentage of 25-34 year olds in the United States with a college degree increased from six percent in 1950, to 24% in 1990, and 34% in 2012 (Baum et al., 2013). A closer examination of the contemporary landscape of higher education indicates that with Hispanics, Blacks, and Native Americans increasing as a proportion of the population, historically underrepresented students have made significant gains in college participation, narrowing enrollment rates based on race and ethnicity. Specifically, 65% of White, 56% of Black, and 49% of Hispanic high school graduates in 2001 enrolled in a postsecondary institution within a year of high school completion, compared to 70% of White, 66% of Black, and 62% of Hispanic students in 2011.

Such statistics can be misconstrued to depict a prosperous higher education system, however, equal educational opportunity for our diverse population has not come to fruition, especially when considering the goal set by the Obama administration for the United States to once again lead the world in the proportion of college graduates, a position revoked in 1990 (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong, 2011). Although the percentage of Black and Hispanic students entering college has increased, differences remain between and within racial groups. National statistics indicate that 38.1% of White men and 45.3% of White women between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in a degree

granting institution in 2013, compared to 30.6% of Black men, 37.6% of Black women, 29.1% of Hispanic men, and 38.8% of Hispanic women (Radwin et al., 2013). College enrollment by income level also varies, with 82% of high school graduates from families in the highest income quintile (above \$90,500) enrolling immediately in college during 2012 (a nine percentage point growth since 1987), compared to 65% of those from middle-income quintile families (\$34,060 to \$55,253) (an increase of 18 percentage points since 1987), and 52% of students whose families earn less than \$18,300 (a 15 percentage point increase since 1987) (Baum et al., 2013).

Moreover, the institutional type attended is stratified by students' demographic characteristics with racial and ethnic minorities, as well as economically disadvantaged students being underrepresented in four-year public and private nonprofit institutions (Baum et al., 2013). In 2011-12, thirty-eight percent of dependent students whose parents earned incomes less than \$29,600 were enrolled in public two-year colleges and 44% were attending colleges in four-year public or private nonprofit sectors. In comparison, 22% of dependent students from high-income households (incomes of \$106,361 or higher) were attending public two-year colleges and 65% enrolled in four-year public or private nonprofit institutions. Further, Black and Hispanic students (Epenshade & Radford, 2009), as well as women (Bielby, Posselt, Jaquette, & Bastedo, 2014) are less likely to attend the most selective higher education institutions.

Ultimately, the examination of higher education from a historical and contemporary perspective reveals the significant gains previously excluded groups of students have made in the higher education context. The increased presence of

economically disadvantaged students, women, and racial/ethnic minorities is a tremendous feat considering the protest, segregation, and barriers to which higher education trailblazers endured. However, the demographic composition of American colleges and universities continues to be unrepresentative of our diverse population leading stakeholders (e.g., administrators, policymakers) to critically analyze forces that negatively or positively impact this unbalance.

Factors Shaping College Participation

As a means to engage and retain diverse students given the contemporary landscape of higher education and ultimately increase the number of individuals with college degrees to assist workforce demands (Zumeta et al., 2012), scholars (e.g., Perna, 2000; Perna & Kurban, 2013) have researched factors contributing to college participation. Based on the current culture of higher education, the most salient indicators of access, persistence, and completion are addressed in the following section, with special attention given to differences on these measures between traditional collegians and underrepresented students; particularly low-income, racial/ethnic minorities, and first-generation college goers (who will be discussed in the subsequent section).

The decision to enroll in higher education from a human capital theory perspective, posits that students weigh the perceived and identified benefits to both the indirect and direct costs (Becker, 1962, 1993; Paulsen, 2001). The expected benefits of college completion include a markedly higher salary in comparison to non-baccalaureate degree holders (Baum et al., 2013; Carnavale, Rose, & Cheah, n.d). The median lifetime earnings for individuals with a bachelor's degree compared to those with a high school

diploma are \$2.27 million and \$1.3 million respectively (Carnavale et al.). Intangible individualistic and collectivistic benefits such as greater job satisfaction, lower poverty rates, and healthier lifestyle habits are also noted (Baum et al.). Conversely, the costs associated with higher education include the actual cost of attendance at a students' chosen postsecondary institution, as well as foregone earnings that individuals could accrue if entering the workforce as opposed to pursuing a degree (Becker, 1962, 1993; Paulsen).

Such calculations are substantiated within contextual forces. More specifically, Perna's (2006; Perna & Kurban, 2013) conceptual model emphasizes the complexity of college enrollment, since the following layers of context impact the resources students of various backgrounds require when traversing the college choice process. The innermost layer, the student and family context or habitus, depicts a students' embedded environment, including their background, as well as the common set of beliefs and values which are a reflection of their gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural and social capital (McDonough, 1997; Perna). The school and community context reflects the social structures, teachers, counselors, and other resources within the school system that either assist or impede a students' collegiate decision. The third layer, the higher education context, recognizes the role that colleges and universities have in providing students and their families with information on enrollment, financial aid, and other sources of access and support. Finally, the social, economic, and policy context conveys the broader social forces and public policies impacting students' college choice.

Based upon the conceptual model, contextual forces provide a foundation for understanding critical indicators to higher education participation. Foremost, academic preparation is a strong predictor of college enrollment that differs across student populations (Perna, 2000; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Academic achievement within the postsecondary context requires the completion of a rigorous level of curriculum in high school, which according to the NCES (2011) is defined as four mathematics (including pre-calculus or above), four English, three foreign language, three science (including biology, chemistry, and physics), and three social studies courses. Yet in 2009, national statistics reported that six percent of Blacks, eight percent of Hispanics, 29% of Asians, and 14% of White students completed a curriculum at this level. Underserved learners' inadequate academic preparedness and therefore underrepresentation in higher education can be partially attributed to their secondary education, typically attending high schools for which racial and ethnic minorities, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation students make up the majority of the student body (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2010). Consequently, the socioeconomic conditions of communities for which school districts are embedded, impacts the quality of K-12 institutions (Engberg & Wolniak, 2014). With variability across schools, inconsistencies are also evident in regards to the types of courses offered, the level of curricular rigor, and students' overall academic preparedness for the collegiate level (Adelman, 2006; Long & Boatman, 2013). Further, a misalignment between the K-12 system and postsecondary institutions, leads students to believe that a high school diploma conveys college readiness (Conley, 2013), however they are typically ill prepared and inadequately equipped.

Another factor shaping access to higher education involves knowledge and information regarding college, or lack thereof. Especially for low-income, minority, and first-generation students, college-going knowledge strongly predicts access and choice (Perna & Kurban, 2013). However, researchers (e.g., Perna & Titus, 2005) indicate that Black and Hispanic students are less likely to have the social, cultural, and economic capital for college enrollment based on their habitus or family context (social and cultural capital will be discussed in the subsequent section on guiding theoretical perspectives). Therefore, underserved students are more dependent on non-familial institutional agents, especially high school guidance counselors, to disseminate information related to higher education. Although high school guidance counselors have become integral in this regard, 57% of counselors indicate insufficient training on college costs and the financial aid process (College Board, 2012). However, even if counselors attained proficiency in college related information, the ability to disperse such knowledge depends on their availability and the organizational structure of the high school. For example, within high schools considered to be low performing, counselors dedicate a majority of effort to assisting students in scheduling classes, testing, and personal counseling (as cited in Perna & Kurban). Further, the average national ratio of students to counselors in 2009-10 was 272:1 and 73% of private schools compared to 26% of public schools had at least one counselor responsible for college readiness (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2010). With counselors in private and public schools respectively spending 55% and 23% of their time on college counseling, not all students are given sufficient information (Clinedinst & Hawkins). Therefore, based on time constraints, the number of counselors available in a

high school, and their training, college counseling may also be geared more toward students with higher levels of academic achievement, leaving nontraditional students without such information and creating an additional barrier to accessing higher education (Perna & Kurban).

Finally, college affordability and an understanding of the cost of college are main factors to higher education, as consistently seen throughout the history of American institutions. With increasing tuition prices outpacing increasing family income, low to moderate-income students, who are the new majority of prospective collegians, are burdened the most (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2012), typically utilizing 58% of their income on average to pay the net price of college costs, while students in higher income brackets use approximately 12% (Callan, 2011; Heller, 2011). Therefore, when deciding on whether to invest in higher education from a human capital perspective, students from lower socioeconomic statuses anticipate financial hardship, tend to overestimate the cost of tuition, and are unaware of their potential eligibility for aid (Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003). Disinclined toward borrowing funds and accruing debt, students choose not to enroll if loans are perceived to be the only manner in which college can be financed (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). While student grant aid, especially need-based as opposed to merit-based aid, has been associated with increasing college enrollment levels (as cited in Perna & Kurban, 2013) and makes college an affordable investment, students and families are typically unaware of or misinformed regarding such financial resources.

Inadequate targeted college counseling during high school and the manner in which higher education institutions communicate financial information to prospective collegians, typically does not allow students to have a clear indication of the cost of college nor an informed perception of the availability and eligibility of financial aid (Perna & Kurban, 2013). In order to receive the aforementioned types of federal financial aid available and make college an affordable investment, individuals are required to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); however, research by Johnson, Rochkind, and Ott (2011) found that fewer than three out of 10 participants were familiar with the FAFSA and the availability of financial resources at the federal level. Other individuals find the FAFSA to be time consuming and complex, thus not completing the process. Approximately 750,000 applications for financial aid were initiated in 2011, but were returned to students due to inadequate information, and were not resubmitted (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). Consequently, research from Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2009) found that low to moderate-income individuals who were given hands on assistance with the FAFSA were more likely to complete the form in its entirety, submit the application, and enroll in college after receiving financial aid.

First-Generation College Students

As evidenced, the multitude of factors impeding individuals from participating in higher education are typical of underserved students, with first-generation college goers being a specific caveat of this student population. The following section examines relevant scholarship specific to students who are the first in their families to attend

college, illustrating the focus on access, persistence, and completion, as well as the generalization of a heterogeneous student group.

Factors Shaping College Participation for First-Generation Students

The first-generation student population, who is more likely to be women, ethnic minorities, and come from a lower socioeconomic background (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001), are less likely to enroll in college compared to continuing-generation peers (Choy; Ward et al., 2012). Utilizing national data sets by the NCES (the National Education Longitudinal Study, the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study), 59% of 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not attend college enrolled in postsecondary education by 1994, while the enrollment rates for students whose parents had some college experience or had at least a bachelor's degree were 75% and 93% respectively (Choy). Further, in 1995-96, forty-seven percent of students entering a college or university had parents whose highest level of education was high school.

Such comparative statistics have led to substantial literature examining issues of access specific to first-generation students; factors in addition to those addressed for all underserved populations. Foremost, first-generation students have lower educational expectations. Choy (2001) reported that 53.3% of 1992 high school graduates whose parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma or less, expected to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 89.5% of peers whose parents had earned a postsecondary degree.

In addition, first-generation learners are typically not as academically qualified nor prepared for entrance into college in comparison to continuing-generation peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nuñez, 2000). As discussed, a rigorous curriculum in high school that includes mathematics is associated with college enrollment. The likelihood of first-generation students attending a four-year institution compared to other first-generation learners increases after completing advanced mathematics courses in high school and particularly if the student completes algebra during eighth grade (Choy; Horn & Nuñez). In fact, the chances of enrolling in a four-year institution nearly double for first-generation college goers who partake in such courses (Horn & Nuñez). Similar to other underserved learners, however, first-generation students are less likely to take courses required for college admittance due to a lack of availability of course offerings at schools for which they are in attendance. This is especially the case since first-generation students are more pronounced in public high schools located in small towns or rural areas of which the majority of the student body is comprised of underrepresented minorities (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). In addition, first-generation students are less likely to report assistance from parents in determining and suggesting high school courses, since parental engagement and encouragement in students' curricular choices in high school is related to parents' educational background (Choy; Horn & Nuñez). Ultimately, advanced mathematics coursetaking increases first-generation students' chances of attending college, however, the student population remains less likely to enroll in a four-year college or university

compared to learners whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree, despite having similar academic abilities in high school (Choy).

Additional factors contributing to college access for students who are the first in their families to attend higher education include an understanding of the college going process. Parents of first-generation students are typically unable to provide first hand accounts or information regarding the collegiate context, leading to an unfamiliarity of the cultural norms associated with applying and financing a higher education (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Consequently, parents of first-generation students, even for college qualified 1992 high school graduates, are less likely than parents with a bachelor's degree or higher to have conversations regarding college plans (42.0% versus 60.6%), attend programs seeking educational opportunities (28.9% versus 50.7%), and visit a postsecondary institution (61% versus 82%) (Choy, 2001). Further, parents are less likely to discuss preparations for taking the SAT or ACT (16.2% versus 27.1%) (Choy), leading first-generation students to either complete college entrance examinations in lower numbers or underperform in comparison to continuing-generation peers (Warburton et al., 2001). Atherton (2014) reported that first-generation college goers received lower standardized test scores and that the chances of achieving a score above the median on the verbal portion of the SAT was 48% higher for a student with both parents having graduated from college. Finally, parents of first-generation students are less likely to seek information on financial aid (Choy) even though the cost of college attendance is a critical concern and factor influencing first-generation college goers who are also low-income (Saenz et al., 2007). Therefore, without the necessary guidance and

support, first-generation students are less likely to understand the college going process and the steps to successfully apply (Choy).

Transition into the Postsecondary Context

The precollege attributes of first-generation students are a hindrance to accessing higher education, therefore, the student population is more likely to delay entrance into a postsecondary institution (Chen & Carroll, 2005). However, first-generation learners ultimately choose to pursue higher education for the following reasons, which are ultimately familial; to gain respect and status, as well as provide financial assistance to family members upon completion of a college degree (Bui, 2002). Similar to continuing-generation learners, first-generation college goers also state the pursuit of a higher education because of parental expectations, persuasion by high school administrators and teachers, and because a college trajectory would allow the achievement of career aspirations, as well as provide future financial stability.

In terms of preferred institutional context, first-generation learners are more likely to select two-year colleges than continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001; Ward et al., 2012). The majority of first-generation students in 1995-96 attended two-year institutions at 56.1%, compared to 29.9% enrolling in four-year colleges or universities, and 14% attending a less-than-two-year institution (Choy). Low-income, first-generation students in particular are overrepresented in not only public two-year colleges, but for-profit institutions, as well (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Research has also shown that even academically qualified first-generation college goers are less likely to choose a rigorous and selective postsecondary institution (Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al.). Due to the

characteristics of first-generation students, two-year colleges provide a less expensive and accommodating means for the student population to pursue higher education while attending to personal and familial needs (Ward et al.). For similar reasons, students who are the first in their families to attend college are more likely to enroll in a college or university on a part-time basis (Choy; Pascarella et al.; Saenz et al., 2007). Saenz and colleagues report a decline in the proportion of first-generation students as part of the overall population of first-time college freshmen entering four-year institutions with full-time status; from 38.5% in 1971 to 15.9% in 2005. An increase in the proportion of first-generation students attending college part-time may be attributed to a higher percentage of the student population in comparison to continuing-generation students working full-time while enrolled in school (22% versus 9%) (Warburton et al., 2001). It is important to note however, that some first-generation students initially begin college at four-year institutions, but are more likely than traditional students to do so at public comprehensive institutions (41% to 26% respectively) (Warburton et al.).

For first-generation learners who obtain access into higher education, researchers (e.g., Gofen, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004) have predominantly examined their transition into the environment. Having lower levels of self-efficacy compared to traditional students, first-generation collegians begin the postsecondary experience assuming inadequate performance and are therefore poorly adjusted by the culmination of the first year (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard (2007) also emphasize initial self-confidence as integral to first-generation students' adjustment into higher education regardless of high school achievement.

In addition to academic perceptions, first-generation students find it difficult to acclimate emotionally and psychologically to being the first to attend higher education. More specifically, Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) report that first-generation college goers, particularly from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, are wrought with family achievement guilt due to having surpassed the educational accomplishments of family members, and as a result transition and adjustment in the higher education context are negatively impacted. Further, first-generation students may experience a sense of culture shock after leaving a familial upbringing that emphasizes interdependence and instead entering an unfamiliar higher education environment for which independence and middle and upper class societal values are the norm (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). However, emotional and informational support provided by parents has been found to be effective in reducing stress levels for first-generation women in particular during the transition to college (Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011).

Academic College Experience

Due to a lack of academic preparation during high school as noted earlier, first-generation students are less equipped to handle the scholastic rigor of college and are therefore more likely to require remedial assistance (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Of the first-generation learners who attended college between 1992-2000, fifty-five percent enrolled in at least one remedial course, compared to 27% of students whose parents had a bachelor's degree. Further, 40% of first-generation college goers took a remedial course specifically in mathematics (versus 16% of non first-generation learners) and 13% required a remedial reading course (versus 6% of students whose parents had a bachelor's

degree) (Chen & Carroll). The need to take remedial courses also differed depending on first-generation students' declared major of study, with 59% of first-generation learners who majored in the social sciences, journalism, or communications requiring at least one remedial course. Low-income, first-generation students are also more likely than traditional students to require remedial assistance in every institutional type aside from the for-private sector (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Regarding undergraduate major, students who are the first in their families to attend college have a more difficult time choosing an academic field of interest. Chen and Carroll (2005) reported that 33% of first-generation students did not have a declared major after entering college. When deciding on a major, first-generation college goers may be limited to certain fields because of inadequate academic preparation, but aim to pursue a career that will provide a lucrative salary upon entering the workforce. The most popular chosen majors for first-generation collegians, including low-income, first-generation learners, are business, health science, and the social sciences (Chen & Carroll; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

When examining academics more generally, research on first-generation college goers consistently reports that the student population tends to receive lower grades compared to traditional collegians (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Regardless of attendance at a two or four-year institution, first-generation students have lower grade point averages in the first year and throughout their entire enrollment as undergraduates (Chen & Carroll). Lower academic performance compared to non-first-generation peers is also evident across many disciplines, including

mathematics and science. In addition, first-generation learners complete fewer credit hours (Chen & Carroll; Pascarella et al.) during the first year of college and accumulate fewer credits throughout all college years compared to students whose parents earned bachelor's degrees (Chen & Carroll). Such a discrepancy impacts completion rates, which is addressed in the forthcoming section.

Scholastic performance may be attributed to first-generation students' unfamiliarity with the academic culture. More specifically, the student population has been found to experience difficulty when interpreting faculty expectations and understanding course syllabi (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). Collier and Morgan reported that although explicit course information is provided to students, first-generation learners have difficulty interpreting such expectations and are apprehensive when communicating with faculty depending on the style of speech and vernacular utilized. In addition, students conveyed issues with time management and deciphering syllabi, which is of critical importance since demonstrating knowledge of course material requires not only a comprehension of the discipline, but also a mastery of the college student role and understanding professors' expectations.

Despite scholastic difficulties, specific academic disciplines are developmentally beneficial in terms of "internal locus of attribution for academic success" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 274). For example, coursework in the arts and humanities and mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, and engineering has positive effects on first-generation students' writing skills and educational plans. The number of courses taken in these disciplines also has significant positive effects on first-generation collegians' writing

skills and educational plans compared to peers whose parents had postsecondary experience. Further, engagement in academic activities, including amount of time studying and the number of papers written have positively affected first-generation students in terms of critical thinking, writing skills, and learning for personal understanding (Pascarella et al.).

Engagement in College

In addition to academics, other aspects of engagement contribute to first-generation college goers' experiences in the postsecondary environment. More specifically, compared to traditional collegians, first-generation learners are employed more hours per week while enrolled in coursework (Pascarella et al., 2004), and low-income, first-generation students are more likely than strictly low-income (63%) or first-generation collegians (42%) to report working in excess of 20 hours a week (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In addition, students who are the first in their families to attend college are more likely to live off-campus (Pascarella et al.). With limited time on campus, the first-generation student population is less likely to take part in extracurricular activities, volunteer efforts, and athletic groups during the second year of college. Further, during the third year, first-generation students tend to have less peer interaction outside of classroom activities. While time constraints and place of residence do not allow participation in certain aspects of campus life, the first-generation student population reaps the most benefits from extracurricular and peer engagement when compared to other collegians (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al.). Specifically, such engagement positively affects first-generation students' critical thinking abilities and

degree plans (Pascarella et al.). Further, interacting with fellow students outside of the classroom positively impacts first-generation students' writing abilities and science reasoning.

Other reasons contributing to first-generation college goers' lower levels of engagement may be due to their discomfort on campus with peers (Arzy, Davies, & Harbour, 2006). First-generation students are less likely to have a social support system at their postsecondary institution that they are able to relate to and feel comfortable confiding in (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). Without emotional support from others, first-generation college goers are unable to successfully cope, leading to feeling overwhelmed (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Feeling socially isolated and unable to approach parents since they cannot relate to their situation, first-generation learners become less confident in how to succeed within the college environment.

Factors Influencing Persistence and Completion

When first-generation college goers obtain access into the postsecondary context, they are more likely than traditional students to remove themselves from a college or university prior to degree completion (Ishitani, 2006). Utilizing data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88 and NELS: 1988-200), Ishitani found students who are the first in their families to attend college to be 1.3 times more likely to depart an institution when compared to students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. Further, it is during the second year of academics that first-generation students are most likely to leave a college or university. Specifically, first-generation college goers were 8.5 times more likely to depart during the second year of college compared to peers.

Although there are clear distinctions in terms of retention and degree completion rates when comparing first-generation learners and students whose parents are college educated, within group differences are also evident (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). In terms of gender, first-generation men are 9.4% more likely to persist in college from the first to second year compared to first-generation women. However, Ishitani (2006) indicates that women first-generation students are less likely than first-generation men to drop out during the fourth year. Further, first-generation collegians who also identify as Hispanic are 35.4% less likely than White first-generation students to remain in the postsecondary context from the first to second year. First-generation college goers whose primary language at home is not English, are also 14.7% more likely to continue in college compared to students whose primary spoken language was English. Moreover, low-income, first-generation students are more likely than students who are either strictly low-income or first-generation to depart a postsecondary institution after the first year (26% compared to 7%) (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

College persistence for first-generation college goers can be attributed to a number of factors. Most noticeably, students' attrition is dependent on available financial resources, with the first-generation student population being 6.4% more likely to remain in college for every increase of \$1,000 in work-study funding compared to continuing-generation students being 4.4% more likely to persist with the same amount of funds (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Similarly, Ishitani (2006) reported that students who acquired grants or a work-study position, were 37% to 41% less likely to leave during the first year of college than peers who did not receive financial assistance. Low-income, first-

generation students who depart college after the first year or fourth year have been reported to accumulate an average loan debt in the amount of \$6,557 and \$16,548 respectively (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Institutional selectivity also influences degree attainment. First-generation students typically begin their academic career at a two-year institution since attendance is more affordable and allows for greater flexibility in terms of balancing other responsibilities (Bui, 2002). But, first-generation learners are more likely to receive a bachelor's degree if directly enrolled in a four-year institution when beginning a collegiate career (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012). Further, Ishitani (2006) indicates that first-generation students were 30% less likely to leave college during the second year if having attended a private institution compared to similar students attending a public four-year college or university. However, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) instead found that first-generation students who attended a private institution were 12.3% less likely to continue from the first to second year compared to first-generation college goers enrolled in public institutions. In addition, low-income, first-generation collegians are most likely to drop out of public two-year and for-profit institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Regardless of institutional type, first-generation college goers are more likely to persist until graduation if they choose a college or university that allows them to reside at home (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Moreover, Lohfink and Paulsen found that first-generation students were 16.7% more likely to continue within the collegiate context if they had greater satisfaction with the social component of their experience compared to

traditional students who were 8.7% more likely to persist if they were satisfied with their social lives. Having a low to moderate amount of participation in activities on campus, working approximately 35 hours or more per week while being a student, and having a GPA under 2.0 are also associated with higher rates of college departure for first-generation college goers (Choy, 2001).

Institutional Resources for First-Generation Students

Based on first-generation student research (e.g., Choy, 2001, Pascarella et al., 2004) specific institutional resources have been created to ameliorate ubiquitously reported issues in access and persistence to foster a positive experience that ultimately leads to degree completion. Notably, summer bridge programs or transition programs have been utilized in colleges and universities to provide access to, assist in retaining, and graduating low-income, minority, and first-generation students (Ackerman, 1991; Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2008). During the summer prior to a learners' first year as a collegian, first-generation students in the program are provided with academic and personal support, as well as social development through a residential experience on campus at the institution (Ackerman; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), to enhance their understanding of and comfort level in the college environment (National Center for Postsecondary Research, 2011). While the effects of participation in summer bridge programs have been inconsistent, students note an increased familiarity with campus resources, time management development, and form a sense of community (Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley, & Perry, 2012).

Living-learning communities have also been utilized to assist first-generation college goers in their transition into higher education, however, faculty participation, academic advising, mentoring, and programming is more robust since students reside together during the academic year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). First-generation students participating in a living-learning community indicate a positive academic transition to the college context due to available faculty interaction and resources in the residence hall (Inkelas et al., 2007). In addition, living-learning communities allowed first-generation students to have a more successful social transition.

First-Generation Student Identity

As evidenced, scholarship on the experiences of students who are the first in their families to attend college has essentially led to a homogenous categorization of the student population, allowing stakeholders (i.e., policymakers and higher education administrators) to formulate overarching institutional resources for all students deemed first-generation regardless of other factors. Although scholars (e.g., Stephens et al., 2012) have addressed the nuanced experiences of first-generation students based on other identity markers, such as race, gender, and income (i.e., low-income, first-generation students or racial/ethnic first-generation college goers), such research has focused more so on culture shock and processing the college environment with a family life that is unfamiliar with higher education.

Other researchers (e.g., Orbe, 2004; Wildhagen, 2015) have instead examined first-generation students and how a multifaceted identity is both constructed and understood within the college context. Utilizing a qualitative approach with first-

generation college goers of all races/ethnicities and genders, Orbe examined the saliency of first-generation status based on experiences, situational context, and interactions with others. Notably, students were incognizant of a first-generation identity if attending an institution predominantly comprised of other first-generation learners. A first-generation status was instead more salient outside the college context, when intersecting identities are more pronounced and noticeable. For example, Black and Latino students reported disparate experiences in regards to their first-generation status when at home—either celebrated because of their representation of the larger community or met with contention and jealousy; similar to family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Within the home environment, first-generation status was typically seen as unavoidable, however, the higher education context allowed the identity to be invisible unless explicitly made known (Orbe). For example, some students willingly disclosed being a first-generation student, while others chose not to enact this identity due to the perceived negative stigma attached. Further, saliency depends on the level of privilege associated with students' other social identities, with first-generation status being on the periphery of some students' self-concept if they also identified with being White, a man, and of a middle to upper socioeconomic status. Although Orbe adds to the nascent topic of first-generation student identity formation, parental education status was the most critically examined, warranting more extensive research on the complexity of multidimensionality.

Undergraduate Women in College

The previous literature on students who are the first in their families to attend college has viewed the student population in a generalized manner with a predominant

focus on race/ethnicity and income, as opposed to utilizing a multidimensional lens to understand first-generation college goers. Therefore, limited information has examined the experiences of first-generation women specifically, even though undergraduate women in general have been researched due to their educational attainment rate advantage in comparison to men (Baum et al., 2013). To provide a foundation for research on first-generation women, in this section, literature pertaining to collegiate women as a whole is synthesized, focusing on the historical rise in women's educational rates, as well as their experiential and post-college outcomes in comparison to men.

Understanding Women's "Advantage" in Higher Education

Initially excluded from higher education by state mandate (Thelin, 2011), the decision to educate women was met with contention, as public opinion deemed such learning as either extremist and detrimental to traditional roles or potentially advantageous in educating the nation's sons (Palmieri, 2007; Solomon, 1985). After the Civil War, coeducation for women and men was prominently established, taking cues from Oberlin College who spearheaded such institutions (Thelin). With the newly formed ability of women to pursue a higher education, college participation increased, however women of all backgrounds initially experienced segregation. Women increasingly entered coeducational institutional contexts under the assumption that their educational opportunities would be similar to men, but were instead met with mistreatment, discouraged from academic disciplines, and excluded from extracurricular aspects of college life (Geiger, 2015; Thelin).

The establishment of prominent women's colleges such as Radcliffe, Smith, Bryn Mawr, Vassar, Wellesley, Barnard, and Mount Holyoke, collectively known as the Seven Sisters, not only provided women with additional access to the collegiate system, but afforded them an abundance of opportunities from which they were excluded from in the arena of coeducation (Geiger, 2015; Thelin, 2011). Most notably, women were able to pursue advanced academic studies, eventually allowing alumnae, including Black women, to pursue Ph.D. programs and enter the fields of medicine and law (Perkins, 1997; Thelin). Furthermore, women's colleges were prosperous in obtaining robust endowments to facilitate an educational mission and culture parallel to, but separate from men's colleges (Thelin). However, an increase in educational opportunity was not necessarily provided equally to all women, since some Seven Sister colleges limited admission to Black women and established segregated educational and residential practices for those who enrolled (Perkins; Thelin). Further, with the high financial expenses of women's colleges and the demographic composition predominantly encompassing privileged, elite women, moderate to low-income students were either unable to enroll due to monetary constraints (Thelin) or completed domestic chores to receive a tuition reduction (Solomon, 1985).

Although the overall gender gap in higher education continued to favor men in subsequent years, the number of women participating in higher education steadily increased in the 1970s, reaching parity, and eventually superseding the undergraduate enrollment and completion rates of men (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Freeman, 2004; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). According to DiPrete and Buchmann, utilizing American

Community Survey data, women's bachelor's degree completion rates overtook those of men during the 1980s (accomplished by women born in the late 1950s and early 1960s). The ascent of women in higher education has continued with recent data indicating that 1,025,729 women received bachelor's degrees in 2011-12, while 765,317 degrees were conferred to men (NCES, 2013). Gender differences within racial groups are also evident, with 43% of White women, 24% of Black women, and 17% of Hispanic women ages 25-29 having completed college in 2012 compared to 35% of White men, 16% of Black men, and 11% of Hispanic men (Baum et al., 2013).

Reasons attributed to the higher education gender gap reversal have been well researched, with historical changes in the social and economic facets of the United States playing a major role (DiPrete & Buchman, 2013). The participation of women in the labor force has expanded throughout the years from less than 33% after World War II to 57% in 2014 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). As occupations required higher education, women were incentivized to complete a college degree (DiPrete & Buchmann), with 40% of women in the labor force between the ages of 25-64 having completed postsecondary education in 2014 compared to 11% in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Labor demands in combination with initiatives such as the Women's Rights Movement (United States Department of Labor, n.d.) promoted the opportunity for women to be employed, have a family, and receive an advanced education. There has also been a growing interest of women to reap the value and return to investment associated with a higher education aside from labor market opportunities. These include, but are not limited to, an increased likelihood of marriage and in turn, a decrease in

potential divorce rates, the assurance of a high standard of living due to higher earnings related to educational level, and the minimization of income deprivation (DiPrete & Buchmann).

A women's advantage in educational attainment rates across all races and ethnicities, an unthinkable feat based on the historical underpinning of higher education, has consequently shifted the attention of postsecondary stakeholders (e.g., policymakers and higher education administrators) to men's lower degree completion rates, which DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) argue is partly responsible for the United State's stagnation in the number of college educated citizens. As a means to restore the nation as a leader in higher education and remain competitive internationally, institutions have attempted to achieve a more balanced gender composition on campus. Gender based affirmative action has been cited, yet unproven, as a possible tactic utilized by college admissions, particularly at selective institutions to bolster men's enrollment and, by consequence, completion rates (Bielby et al., 2014; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013).

Although the number of men both entering higher education and graduating has remained flat for the last few decades, women's educational attainment advantage is not necessarily a threat to men's college participation and completion rates as it has been portrayed to be. National statistics illustrate that enrollment and attainment rates for men have not declined, but to the contrary, have actually steadily increased (Freeman, 2004; NCES, 2013; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Between 1972 and 2001, the proportion of men enrolled in a four-year institution increased from 35% to 41% (Freeman). In addition, the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded to men increased 39% between 2001-02 and

2011-12 (765,317 degrees), with 816,000 degrees projected to be conferred to men in 2020-21 (NCES, 2013). Comparatively, women's rates have increased 38% during the same time period, with a projection of 1,162,000 bachelor's degrees in 2020-21.

Gender Differences in the Higher Education Context

As evidenced, both men and women have made advancements in the postsecondary context, however since women's gains in college completion have been more substantial, other critical gender differences during college have been overshadowed. Women are more likely to disclose the following intentions to pursue higher education: to achieve a general education and to satisfy parents' educational aspirations for their children (Sax, 2008), especially since undergraduate women are less likely to have parents who graduated from college (Saenz et al., 2007; Sax). Moreover, women collegians report a lower median family income in comparison to men and are therefore more concerned with the cost of college (Sax). Consequently, women are more likely to anticipate finding employment whilst attending college and typically choose a higher education institution based upon awarded financial assistance, as well as the likelihood that the college or university will lead to a semi-lucrative employment opportunity after graduation.

In regards to academics, prior to college entry, women receive higher grades in elementary and secondary institutions across all disciplines, which subsequently leads to earning higher grade point averages during college (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Sax, 2008). Women's stronger academic orientation and engagement, reflected in the amount of time spent studying and completing homework,

supersedes that of men (Sax), which consequently is another factor contributing to women's educational attainment rate advantage (DiPrete & Buchmann).

Regardless of scholastic ability, chosen academic discipline differs. The highest proportion of undergraduate degrees conferred to women in 2001 were in the fields of health professions and related sciences (84%), psychology (78%), and education (77%) (Freeman, 2004). However, women are underrepresented in business and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sax, 2008; Siebens & Ryan, 2012), a consistent trend throughout student cohorts. With respect to engineering, 3.2% of women degree holders ages 65 years and older majored in the field, compared to 11.6% of 40-64 year old women, and 20.1% of the 25-39 year old age group (Siebens & Ryan). Although collegiate women have made strides in fields traditionally dominated by men with 30.6% of White women, 45.4% of Asian women, 37.1% of Latinas, 35.4% of Black women, and 28.2% of American Indian or Alaska Natives having conveyed interest and intended to major in science and engineering fields during their first year in 2012 (National Science Foundation, 2012), women are more likely to later opt out of these academic fields and pursue non-STEM majors (32% of women to 26% of men) (NCES, 2014). Women of color especially earn fewer bachelor's degrees in STEM compared to their White counterparts, although being more likely to have initially intended to pursue such disciplines when commencing their postsecondary education (National Science Foundation, 2014).

Ultimately, the dichotomy between women's overall high scholastic aptitude yet underrepresentation in academic disciplines and major fields of study can be understood

in terms of self-evaluative competence as opposed to ability determined by grades and standardized test scores (Correll, 2011). More specifically, women have lower levels of intellectual self-confidence during the first year of college, which widens throughout the postsecondary experience (Sax, 2008). Most notably, women have less confidence in mathematical ability and a higher amount of confidence in writing ability; formulated conceptions prior to college entry that inevitably deter women from entering mathematics and science fields. To emphasize, throughout primary and secondary school, men slightly outperform women in mathematics and are more likely to take Advanced Placement examinations in calculus BC (59% to 41%), physics B (65% to 35%), and computer science (81% to 19%) (National Science Foundation, 2014), leading to the assumption that men pursue mathematical activities in college due to their precollege performance (Correll). However, men's perceived mathematical competence may be a result of sociocultural factors and gender-based socialization, in which cultural beliefs delineate academic fields for men versus women, with mathematics and science ubiquitously deemed masculine tasks (Devor, 2001; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). As individuals choose careers that align with their socially constructed identity, women are less likely to enter fields that involve mathematical ability and are instead drawn to areas that emphasize social interaction and working with others (Diekmann, Brown, Johnston, & Clark, 2010), such as education, a historically predominant academic field for women (Geiger, 2015).

For those women who do enter fields dominated by men, high levels of stress are experienced, which can be attributed to academic demands and climate (Sax, 2008).

Black, Latina, and American Indian women at a predominantly White institution reported being discouraged by the scientific learning environment made up of large lecture classes and taught by faculty whose interaction and encouragement was minimal if not nonexistent (Johnson, 2007). Further, being one of the few women of color, race, gender, and ethnicity was unacknowledged, leading to the notion that middle class, White men are the norm in science related fields. In relation, stereotype threat, a social-psychological threat regarding a negative stereotype associated with a particular group, has been well researched in regards to the negative impact on performance and achievement women's perceived mathematical inferiority has on them (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

As evidenced, the college experience tends to inflate the socially constructed and ingrained gender beliefs and stereotypes that students arrive to campus with; whether students are implicitly or explicitly cognizant of them (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). For example, gender role attitudes for collegiate women are seen to be more traditional if majoring in education and/or attending a college that grants a high percentage of education degrees (Sax, 2008). Being surrounded by others who are pursuing an occupational field that is traditionally women centric, women's gender role attitudes tend to be more conservative. However, women are less likely to uphold the traditional gender belief of having a family if attending a higher education institution that employs more women faculty members. In general, such findings showcase the potential influence that faculty have on students' beliefs regarding gender. Comparatively, women have more progressive gender role attitudes if they socialize with diverse individuals (Sax), implying

that the racial/ethnic makeup of an institution encourages an acceptance of nontraditional roles.

Post-College Outcomes

Ultimately, the experiences of women in the undergraduate context influences post-college outcomes, a well-researched area of interest due in part to women's educational attainment rate advantage. Over the years, the proportion of degrees granted to women at the post-baccalaureate level, including master's, doctorates, and professional programs in medicine, law, and dentistry have also increased (Freeman, 2004; NCES, 2015; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Between 2002-03 and 2012-13, the proportion of master's degrees earned by women increased by 48% (NCES, 2015). A similar ascent during this time period has been seen in regards to doctor's degrees, with women's attainment rates increasing by 53%. While women have reached parity and exceeded men in post-baccalaureate degrees, gender segregation in academic fields seen at the undergraduate level have persisted (Freeman). The rates of women with graduate degrees in fields dominated by men such as business management and engineering have increased, however, women remain underrepresented.

Although women have made significant gains in educational attainment and labor market participation rates, post-college outcomes in terms of employment earnings reveal disadvantages. In general, college completion is associated with an increase in earnings, however, women graduates earn less than men with the same educational level (Baum et al., 2013; Freeman, 2004). The median earnings for women ages 25-34 with full-time employment in 2011 who received a bachelor's degree was \$42,100, while men earned

\$51,800 (Baum et al.). Due to women's college completion rates and increased participation in occupations deemed as lucrative, the gender wage gap has narrowed throughout the years (Pew Research Center, 2013). Other forces, however, withhold women from receiving earnings equal to men. In particular, women are more hesitant to ask for an increase in salary or a promotion. Further, women are less likely to aspire to advancing as a boss or senior manager within their occupational field. Consequently, few women have attained prestigious positions within corporate America; only four percent of Fortune 500 CEO positions are held by women (as cited in Pew Research Center).

Ultimately, it is assumed that women's significant gains in educational attainment would translate into workforce advantages, however, research illustrates the contrary (e.g., Baum et al., 2013; Freeman, 2004). To provide clarity to such irony, an understanding of identity development in the college context and its potential impact on post-college outcomes may be warranted. Even though scholarship on women's generalized and racialized experiences within higher education is prevalent (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Sax, 2008), limited information examines socioeconomic status, as well as how the social construction of gender is understood in relation to the intersection of other social dimensions.

Guiding Theoretical Perspectives

The term first-generation has changed from a label marking students' parental education level to implying racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disadvantage (or more simply that first-generation students are underrepresented minorities from low-income backgrounds whose parents did not attend college). To disentangle the notion, an

examination of first-generation women specifically, allows for an understanding of the ways in which multiple identities play in concert with one another. While a number of dimensions shape individuals, their race, gender, socioeconomic background, and first-generation status are of focus. In the following section, an overview of theoretical perspectives imperative to understanding such identities are presented. First, social and cultural capital theories are explained since the constructs are commonly referenced when discussing students who claim first-generation status. A review of identity development frameworks are then discussed, illustrating the evolution of a siloed focus on identities to a multidimensional and intersectional approach.

Social and Cultural Capital Models

Scholarship on the first-generation student experience has typically utilized the sociological constructs of social and cultural capital. Although various conceptualizations of capital models exist, cultural capital focuses on attributes, behaviors, cultural knowledge, and preferences, which are passed down from an individuals' parents and are indicative of their income status and educational background (Bourdieu, 1986; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Individuals from the middle and upper income class possess the most valuable forms of cultural capital, allowing them to maintain a privileged status (McDonough). Moreover, social capital refers to group membership and the social networks an individual not only possesses, but sustains valuable connections with (Bourdieu; Morrow, 1999). According to Bourdieu, the volume of social capital is dependent on the actual size of an individuals' social network and the amount of capital (social, cultural, and economic) each member in the network independently possesses and

can transmit to others, with social context or habitus being an integral link. Thus, social capital is seen as a tool advantaging the dominant class by ensuring their position, especially since structural barriers either restrict or lead to differential access to resources for individuals of various racial/ethnic backgrounds and genders (Bourdieu; Dika & Singh, 2002; Perna & Titus, 2005). Conversely, Coleman (1988) emphasizes that social capital, or the norms and social controls individuals acquire, are derived from and a reflection of the relationship an individual has with their family, as well as the social relationships their parents have with the adult community connected with their school context. Supporting Coleman's conceptualization, Perna and Titus found that the volume of social and cultural capital available from social networks within a school context is positively associated with college enrollment.

While all individuals regardless of background possess some degree of social and cultural capital, an examination of the theoretical perspectives in terms of postsecondary education reveal dissimilarities based upon parent's educational background (Pascarella et al., 2004). Specifically, individuals with college-educated parents may have a greater familiarity with the culture of higher education and the benefits of educational attainment. In comparison, first-generation students are typically at a disadvantage in regards to accessing pertinent college related information and resources, potentially impacting their navigation through the college experience; either lowering their postsecondary aspirations (Choy, 2001) or overperforming when in the collegiate context as a means to compensate for a social and cultural capital *deficit* (Pascarella et al.). It is important to note that cultural capital is a cumulative process and not solely obtained with

the culmination of a college degree, but through any type of higher education experience (Ward et al., 2012). To emphasize, parents with partial first-account knowledge regarding college can pass on such information and students themselves accrue cultural capital while participating in higher education. Ultimately, the previously addressed issues of access, persistence, and completion associated with a first-generation status are related to differences in social and cultural capital in comparison to continuing generation peers.

Review of Identity Development in Higher Education

Other perspectives integral to understanding college students include psychosocial identity development theories, which have focused on the psychological and experiential issues individuals face at different junctures throughout the life span (Evans, 2011).

Initially derived from Erikson (1980), development from adolescence to adulthood is seen to occur through eight stages, each of which has a crisis an individual resolves that enables them to move forward and handle subsequent issues later in life. Ultimately, crisis resolution in conjunction with contextual forces, allows for the development of self-concept, an understanding of how the self relates to others, and a consistently changing and more established identity.

Expanding on Erikson's (1980) conception of identity, Chickering's (1969) theory of identity development, introduced in the 1960s, became a foundational framework in understanding psychosocial development as it pertains to college students specifically (Evans et al., 2010). Seven vectors were introduced to comprehensively understand the establishment of identity while in the postsecondary context: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing

mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purposes, and developing integrity (Chickering; Evans et al., p. 67-69). As opposed to sequential stages, the theory emphasizes that collegians move through vectors or developmental tasks at different rates and have the ability to reexamine issues that were previously addressed (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). However, the vectors can build off one another as a means toward intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal development and ultimately individuation. Recently, the theory has been revised to include the development of diverse populations, however, at the time of its inception, identity development based on gender, race, and other social identities were not considered.

Consequently, psychosocial theories evolved into social identity theories, as a means to further understand the critical years of adolescence especially within the college context, as well as address the various dimensions of identity (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) (Torres, 2011). Given the diversity on college campuses and the larger sociohistorical context of the United States, the development of both privileged/dominant groups and oppressed/non-dominant groups have been researched within social identity theoretical frameworks. Racial identity development models (e.g., Cross, 1991) focus on the process of developing a Black identity, from low race salience to a more complex meaning of race based upon encounters of racism within societal and institutional contexts (Torres). In addition, White identity theories (e.g., Helms, 1990) primarily emphasize the privilege associated with being in the racial majority and acknowledging how such privilege influences the relationship or rather distance, between diverse races (Evans et al., 2010; Torres). Although well-established racial identity

development models have been created for Blacks and Whites, as well as Latinos (e.g., Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001) and Asians (e.g., Kim, 2001), the frameworks examine identity formation strictly from a racial/ethnic perspective, not taking into account other social identities, such as gender and socioeconomic status.

Similarly, gender identity theories primarily focus on understanding gender from a social constructivist perspective, without considering dimensions of race and income (Torres, 2011). For example, and of particular salience to first-generation women, Josselson's (1987, 1996) longitudinal research with 60 collegiate women indicated that when developing their identity, women focus more on the type of person they strive to be, taking into account the societal norms and expectations of women, as well as their belief of traditional gender roles (Torres). Consequently, the manner in which women enter adulthood, based on their experiences in college, influences whether the individual leads the years after graduation with either direction or confusion. Identity development and their attitude in the process of defining themselves, may have implications for career choice, family life, and other post-college outcomes.

Ultimately, social identity theories have contributed to the knowledge base on student development and how collegians understand themselves in relation to others, however, the frameworks view individuals as separate entities based on gender or race. Understanding students' experiences based on one social identity is problematic since it reinforces essentialized perceptions (Harper et al., 2011) and disregards other dimensions that may be specifically salient to collegians and their development. The Multidimensional Identity Model initiated the importance of understanding how

individuals from various group memberships experience and negotiate multiple oppressions (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Jones and McEwen (2000) expanded the framework, developing a fluid and dynamic three-dimensional model that emphasizes consistent identity construction influenced by context. Specifically, the contextual influences of family background, sociocultural conditions, and current experiences, impact the level of importance different dimensions of identity (e.g., race, gender, income status) are to an individuals' core sense of self. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) then reconceptualized the model to emphasize how an individuals' developmental stage impacts meaning-making capacity and ultimately the perception of their multiple identities. A more complex understanding of self lessens the influence of contextual elements on identity development while a weaker meaning-making capacity can lead individuals to formulate an identity based upon the context as opposed to their inner self. The model allows individuals to not only recognize their multiple identities, but understand the manner in which identities are perceived and influenced by cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes et al.).

Identity Intersectionality

The theoretical approach of intersectionality, credited to Crenshaw (1991), provides a more comprehensive understanding of multiple identities in terms of privilege, power, and oppression (Jones, 2009). Rooted in Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), Crenshaw emphasized structural, political, and representational intersectionality when specifically addressing employment of and violence against women of color. Structural intersectionality highlights Black women's experiences of subordination, best understood

as the overlap between racism and sexism. Further, political intersectionality refers to the common practice of ignoring Black women's experiences within racial or gender inequality discussions. Finally, representational intersectionality emphasizes the depiction of women of color based upon common racial and gender stereotypes (Brunn-Bevel, Joy Davis, & Olive, 2015; Crenshaw).

Although Crenshaw's (1991) research was initially situated in the exploration of how race and gender intersect, she acknowledged that other frameworks such as income and sexuality are critical in understanding the integration of all aspects of identity. Research on intersectionality is therefore characterized through the following: examining the lived experiences of individuals, including those from marginalized groups; understanding identity in terms of the individual and their group associations; exploring the saliency of identity based on the conception of privilege; and ultimately aiming to promote social justice (Brunn-Bevel et al., 2015; Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Moreover, it is important to note that intersectionality recognizes the experiences of an individual as part of homogenous and essentialized social identity groups (e.g., Black, Latino, woman identified), yet pushes against an additive approach (e.g., Latino/a + woman = Latina woman) that compels individuals to choose one identity over another (Crenshaw, 1991; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2013). For example, although studies (e.g., Stewart, 2008, 2009) indicate that Black collegians perceive themselves as multifaceted, opting to choose multiple salient identities to reflect their self-concept as opposed to one, some students express the need to negotiate and choose aspects of their identities, depending on whether the environmental climate is deemed supportive (Stewart, 2008).

Conversely, through multiple case studies Winkle-Wagner and McCoy found that Black first-generation students typically discuss their identities as intersecting, unable to disentangle their race, income, gender, and first-generation status when reflecting on their college experience and graduate school aspirations. A similar perception of identity coherence is seen through interviews with 13 Black participants from three institutional settings, in which Stewart (2009) reported that Black collegians were capable of eliminating the need to negotiate identity roles and instead harmoniously maintain all salient facets of themselves through an emphasis on their spirituality.

Furthermore, taking an intersectional approach allows an understanding of how individuals may have common identities, yet also have distinctive and unique differences, avoiding the insinuation that the experiences of a collective group, such as Black women, are the same (Crenshaw, 1991; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2013). Through in depth interviews with 19 Black women attending predominantly White, highly selective institutions, Walpole (2009) found that although students identified as Black women, their moderate socioeconomic identity led to feelings of detachment and tension from the Black community who viewed them as not “Black enough” (p. 99). Such feelings of isolation, as well as experiences of microaggressions are typically cited in intersectionality research on women of color (McCabe, 2009; Patton & McClure, 2009). Ultimately, race, class, and gender, as well as context, concurrently and uniquely impact the collegiate experience of individual students even though populations, such as Black women, are consistently viewed as one collective group.

Ultimately, scholarship on intersectionality has predominantly focused on individuals of color, in particular women, since they overlap multiple sites of oppression, yet the framework can be more critically examined by studying other diverse individuals. Since the purpose of intersectionality, as argued by Strayhorn (2013), is to examine the experiences of individuals who are situated within multiple social dimensions (i.e., race, gender, income status), as a means to understand the influence of oppression and privilege on social inequalities, such as access to higher education, aspirations while in the college context, and post-college outcomes, the theoretical perspective was a critical guide to understanding first-generation women, since the student population cuts across various racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Summary and Synthesis of the Reviewed Literature

Although historically underrepresented student populations have made significant gains in college participation, creating a diverse contemporary higher education landscape, issues remain (Baum et al., 2013). In terms of first-generation students, scholarship has focused on their generalized issues related to access, persistence, and completion. Conversely, research on women has utilized a gendered or racialized lens to examine women's predominant presence in higher education. Ultimately, however, identity development while in the college context has not been robustly examined within first-generation nor undergraduate women scholarship. With first-generation students cutting across disadvantaged and advantaged dimensions of race/ethnicity, income status, gender, and parental education, research on first-generation women provides an in depth

understanding of the impact intersectionality has on students' experiences and identity development while in the college context.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

The following chapter contains the research methods that were employed to explore the lived experiences of selected first-generation women and how they made meaning of their intersectional identities within unique institutional contexts. Foremost, I examine the importance of qualitative inquiry and the rationale for its utilization. Secondly, I discuss the methodological approach in this study: narrative inquiry. Next, the selection of participants and sites are discussed, along with a description of the procedures for data collection and analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a set of strategies that were utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, as well as the positionality or role of the researcher.

Qualitative Methods in Education

Characteristics of Qualitative Inquiry

A number of characteristics delineate the differences between qualitative and quantitative inquiry, which are subsequently outlined. First, qualitative approaches are naturalistic, purposefully selecting participants to obtain an in-depth/information-rich understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena, as opposed to the emphasis of quantitative research in deriving statistical generalizations (Patton, 2015). Although quantitative inquiry may deem objectivity to be the gold standard for research, qualitative researchers instead argue that active engagement in the field allows for not only a more thorough understanding of external behaviors, but internal perspectives such as values and opinions. Second, qualitative methods enable a holistic perspective, establishing a

comprehensive picture and understanding of a person or phenomena, with significant attention to context, nuance, and complexity. Since many factors in research are not quantifiable, quantitative research oversimplifies lived experiences, whereas a qualitative approach strives to comprehend the complexities of the researched as a whole. Third, the researcher is a key instrument in qualitative inquiry, not only by personally collecting data (Creswell, 2013), but engaging in sympathetic introspection to acquire an all-encompassing understanding of a participant or situation (Patton). Consequently, qualitative research is also mindful of reflexivity or the importance of researchers developing a cognizance of their personally owned perspectives, biases, and assumptions that can both inform and influence a study (Creswell; Patton). A critical and systematic self-awareness on the part of the researcher enables the inquiry and methods employed to be more credible. Finally, during qualitative analysis, researchers utilize deductive and inductive reasoning to establish patterns and themes, synthesizing the participants' meanings and voice through narratives or other creative presentations; a hard departure from statistical reports omnipresent in quantitative research that seemingly omit the nuance of a phenomena (Patton).

Rationale for the Use of Qualitative Methods

The rationale for having employed a qualitative approach to study first-generation women is discussed as follows. First, a predominance of information on the first-generation student population has been ascertained through quantitative data and longitudinal research (e.g., Choy, 2001). Although such statistics provide the essential information for institutional stakeholders (e.g., policymakers and higher education

administrators) to create outreach initiatives and resources for first-generation college goers, the data also leads to the overgeneralization and homogenization of diverse individuals. Instead, qualitative inquiry is intended to capture participants' meanings and inner perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015), which has been critical in generating information rich responses in connection with first-generation women and the examination of identity intersectionality. Since the purpose of the study was to meet each of five first-generation women in a complex manner so as to understand their individual experiences and the meanings they made as they reflectively examined their identities, a qualitative approach was necessary.

Second, qualitative inquiry also aligned with the central research questions of the study. Specifically, Creswell (2013) states that qualitative research questions are nondirectional and open-ended, exploring a phenomenon through questions that ask *what* or *how*. For this study, the guiding questions were focused on ascertaining how first-generation women make meaning of their identities, which garnered rich descriptions of their experiences while in specific college and university contexts. Since the study was not intended to examine causality, for which *why* questions would be more appropriate, qualitative methods were better suited to answer the questions in a manner that avoided categorization and instead focused on the nuance associated with first-generation college goers.

Finally, the study aimed to understand first-generation women and how identity intersectionality was experienced within their institutional contexts. Although first-generation women and not the college or university were the unit of analysis, a

qualitative approach enabled data collection to be retrieved at the site for which some participants were embedded (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). By interacting with three participants in their natural environment, the institution for which they were previously registered as a full-time student, a more thorough understanding of participants' experiences were ascertained.

Methodological Approach: Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry guided the methodological aspects of data collection and analysis. Rooted in social and humanities disciplines (e.g., education, sociology, anthropology, and history), the approach extensively examines the lived experiences of an individual or a small number of individuals by gathering detailed accounts of their stories, allowing the researcher to create chronological narratives of their lives with a critical focus on the meanings associated with them (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2013). Clandinin states that, "the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals' experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (p. 18). Therefore, narrative inquiry is the understanding and inquisition of the human experience.

The work of narrative inquirers, such as Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is influenced by the educational thinker John Dewey (1938), and his conceptualization of experience. Dewey emphasized that education is a result of personal and social experience. Specifically, individuals are understood as both independent entities and in connection to others, constantly situated within a social context (Dewey; Clandinin &

Connelly). Moreover, continuity is central to experience, in that experiences lead to subsequent experiences; therefore, every individual is positioned on a continuum with past, present, and future situations. Dewey states that, “In a sense, every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience” (p. 47).

Clandinin (2013) discusses four key terms integral to the narrative methodological approach for which lockstep procedures are absent, instead favoring a process by which the participant and narrative inquirer collaboratively live alongside one another over time: living, telling, retelling, and reliving. Specifically, individuals both live out and tell their experiences, not simply for the story to be retold, but for the narrative inquirer to meaningfully unpack such information so that experiences are relived. Narrative stories that emerge are co-constructed in a chronological manner, with attention to turning points in an individuals’ life, and placed within contextual forces (Clandinin; Creswell, 2013). Although data collection is primarily through interviews, other forms of qualitative data such as observations and documents can be utilized to highlight identities and individuals’ self-perceptions (Creswell).

Compared to other qualitative approaches, a main theme in narrative inquiry is the relationship between the researcher and participant(s) (Creswell, 2013; Reissman, 2008). Since the goal during data collection is to obtain detailed accounts of lived experiences, the interview process is reminiscent of a conversation instead of a structured endeavor (Reissman). During the encounter, both parties learn from one another, negotiating the

meaning of stories told by the participant, while consequently allowing the researcher to gain insight into their own life. Narrative inquiry was employed for this study since the stories and experiences of first-generation women as they made meaning of their identities within postsecondary contexts was told in collaboration with myself; a first-generation woman researcher with diverse lived experiences.

Selection Criteria and Participant Selection

As a means to provide nuance to the experiences of first-generation college goers, one first-generation woman from a total of five higher education institutions participated in the narrative inquiry. Since first-generation women are the units of analysis, the selected colleges and universities were of various institution types and campus settings. To emphasize, the following postsecondary colleges and universities were utilized: 1) a highly selective private research institution—University of Pennsylvania; 2) a large public research institution—Temple University; 3) a community college—Community College of Philadelphia; 4) a Historically Black College or University—Cheyney University; and, 5) a small, yet highly selective liberal arts institution—Bryn Mawr University. Moreover, due to the uneven number of institutions, three were embedded in urban campus settings, while two were in suburban areas.

The University of Pennsylvania is a private four-year institution located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. According to NCES data (2017), the total undergraduate enrollment in the fall of 2015 was 11,588 students, with 146 individuals having transferred into the institution. While 37,268 individuals applied for undergraduate admission in the fall of 2015, ten percent were accepted. Of the undergraduates enrolled,

90% attended full-time. In terms of gender, 52% of undergraduates are women and 48% are men. In terms of race/ethnicity, 44% of the undergraduate population in 2015 was comprised of White students, while 19% were Asian, 10% were Hispanic/Latino, and seven percent were Black. Ninety-four percent of undergraduates in the fall of 2015 were 24 years old or under and the majority of students (68%) were out-of-state students, while 18% were in-state, 11% were international students, and three percent of undergraduate student residences were unknown. The cost of tuition and fees at the University of Pennsylvania has steadily increased from \$47,668 in 2014-15 to \$49,536 in 2015-2016 and increased by 3.9% in 2016-17 to \$51,464. During the 2014-15 school year, 58% of full-time undergraduate students who began college for the first time received some type of financial aid, with 13% of students receiving Pell grants. The most recent information from the University of Pennsylvania indicates that 12% of those entering in the class of 2020 are first-generation (“Incoming Class Profile,” 2017). Of the undergraduates who began in 2009, eighty-seven percent completed their bachelor’s degree in four years and 95% completed in six years.

Temple University is a large, public four-year institution also located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (NCES, 2017). In the fall of 2015, a total of 28,609 undergraduate students were enrolled with 2,428 being transfer students. NCES (2017) data indicates that 28,886 students applied for undergraduate admission at Temple University in 2015 and 56% were admitted. Of the undergraduate students enrolled at the institution in 2015, fifty-one percent were women and 49% were men. The racial/ethnic makeup of the Temple University undergraduate population in 2015 notably included the

following students: 55% were White, 13% were Black, 11% were Asian, and 6% were Hispanic. The majority of undergraduates resided in the state of Pennsylvania (74%), while 24% were out-of-state residents, and two percent were international students. The cost of tuition and fees at Temple University in 2014-15 was \$14,696 for in-state students and \$24,722 for out-of-state individuals. In 2015-16, the cost increased to \$15,188 for in-state students and \$25,494 for out-of-state individuals, with another increase in 2016-17 to \$16,274 (in-state) and \$27,266 (out-of-state). Of the full-time undergraduates enrolled at the institution (or any institution) for the first time, 92% received financial aid, with 30% receiving Pell grants. In 2015, 34.7% of first year students at Temple University had parents who did not graduate from college (“Temple University and First-Generation College Student Enrollment,” 2016). Of the undergraduate students who entered in 2009, forty-two percent completed their bachelor’s degree in four years and 71% completed in six years.

The Community College of Philadelphia is a two-year public institution located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. With an open admission policy, enrollment statistics from the NCES (2017) indicate that 18,966 students were registered at CCP in the fall of 2015, with 62% being women and 38% being men. The student population in 2015 included the following: 43% were Black, 21% were White, 12% were Hispanic, and six percent were Asian students. The majority of students attended part-time (73%) and resided in-state (98%). In addition, 56% were 24 years of age or under, while 44% were 25 years of age and over. For students who began in the fall of 2012, two percent completed their program in the “normal time” to do so and 12% completed within 150% of the “normal

time” (NCES). The cost of tuition and fees at CCP in 2014-15 and 2015-16 was \$4,920 for in-district students, \$9,360 for in-state students, and \$13,800 for out-of-state students. For full-time beginning students at CCP, 84% received some type of financial assistance and 71% were awarded Pell grants.

Cheyney University is a four-year public institution located in Cheyney, Pennsylvania and is the first HBCU in the nation, being founded in 1837 (“History of Cheyney University,” 2015). With an open admission policy, the total number of undergraduates enrolled at Cheyney University in 2015 was 686 students (NCES, 2017). The gender makeup of the institution was split with 50% men and 50% women. Given that Cheyney University is an HBCU, the majority of students in 2015 were Black (82%), with five percent being Hispanic, and two percent being White. NCES data indicates that 58% of undergraduate students enrolled in 2015 resided in-state, 41% were from out-of-state, and one percent were international students. The cost of tuition and fees in 2014-15 was \$9,090 for in-state students and \$13,744 for out-of-state students and has increased 21.5% between 2015-16 and 2016-17 (from \$9,344 to \$11,356 for in-state residents). Nearly all undergraduate students (97%) received some type of financial assistance in 2014-2015 and 72% received Pell grants. Of the students who entered the institution in 2009, six percent completed their Bachelor’s degree in four years and 17% took six years to finish their degree.

Bryn Mawr College, located in the suburban area of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania is a private four-year women’s college that was founded in 1885 (“History,” 2017). While other women’s colleges in the United States existed prior to Bryn Mawr College’s

opening, it was the first to offer a Ph.D. program to women. In the fall of 2015, Bryn Mawr College enrolled 1,346 incoming undergraduate students, with 36% being White, while 12% were Asian, nine percent were Hispanic, and six percent were Black (NCES, 2017). While 100% of the undergraduate students are women (NCES, 2017), Bryn Mawr College does allow any student, including men, from Haverford College, Swarthmore College, and the University of Pennsylvania (all located in Pennsylvania) to register for courses (“Bi-Co, Tri-Co, and Penn,” 2017). The majority of students are out-of-state residents (62%), nine percent reside within the state of Pennsylvania, and 28% of the undergraduates in the fall of 2015 were international students (NCES, 2017). In terms of selectivity, Bryn Mawr accepted 39% of the 2,890 students who applied for admission in the fall of 2015. The estimated cost of tuition and fees has also increased at Bryn Mawr from \$45,540 in 2014-15 to \$47,140 in 2015-16 and the most recent amount in 2016-17 is \$48,790. Seventy-five percent of full-time undergraduates in 2014-15 received some type of financial aid, with 14% receiving Pell grants. In addition, the most recent data available indicates that 20% of students in the class of 2020 are deemed first-generation (“Class Profile,” 2017). Of the undergraduates who entered Bryn Mawr in the fall of 2009, seventy-eight percent completed their bachelor’s degree in four years and 85% completed in six years.

Since the goal of the study was to capture the stories and experiences of first-generation women within institutional contexts, considerable attention was given to participant selection. Aligning with the purpose of narrative inquiry to understand the lived experiences of a single individual or several individuals in extensive detail, opposed

to a phenomenological approach that focuses on commonalities amongst individuals (Creswell, 2013), five participants were selected. Foremost, criterion sampling was utilized to ensure that participants could address the research questions, attest to the central phenomenon of the study, and provide information-rich responses (Patton, 2015). Participants were self-identified women of first-generation status who successfully graduated from the chosen higher education institutions. All participants were full-time students when they were undergraduates at their institution. Participants were also chosen based on having graduated in the years 2015 or 2016 (regardless of age) in order to garner a nuanced understanding of participants' identity intersectionality given the following assumptions: their maturity level is more developed at this stage; graduates have taken part in the entire collegiate experience allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of its influence on their identity conceptualization. Further, declared major and grade point average remained open as a means to attain the necessary number of participants. Since first-generation students have typically been found to not perform as well academically compared to traditional students (Choy), applying a grade point average criteria would have potentially excluded a number of individuals who could have brought insight into the study.

In addition to the standardized criteria, purposeful sampling was attempted so that participants across a range of identities in addition to gender and first-generation status, such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation would be selected. Despite constraints in terms of access, diversity was achieved with the individuals who volunteered to participate in the study. Through the selection criteria, generalizations

across all first-generation women was avoided, with a more critical focus on exploring the in-depth stories of each participant.

Eligible students were identified by contacting relevant organizations affiliated with the selected institutions. Specifically, an e-mail (Appendix 2) was sent to administrators who oversee on-campus student affairs departments. These included general student life centers, programs specifically for first-generation students, as well as women and gender studies departments. An e-mail clearly addressing the purpose, goals, and conditions of participation in the study was sent to either administrators listed as the contact person for each organization or to general departmental e-mail accounts. My university e-mail account was utilized to legitimize the message (Weiss, 1994).

Data Collection Procedures

Once participants were selected, I clearly described my relationship with the study (both via e-mail and during the first interview) and identified myself as a first-generation woman to provide a level of comfort and relatability. Such a relationship is imperative in narrative inquiry as a means to create an atmosphere of trust that enables participants to discuss their lived experiences in extensive detail (Creswell, 2013; Reissman, 2008). Further, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and signed an informed consent form (Appendix 1) (Creswell). They were notified that the study was voluntary, confidential, and were able to halt the interviews at any point (Weiss, 1994). Participants were explicitly told how I planned to utilize the results of the information (Creswell) and that a pseudonym (first and last name) would be created to ensure students' privacy and protect their identity (Creswell; Weiss). One participant requested a specific first name

pseudonym, while the others allowed one to be created for them. Further, consent was reaffirmed and renegotiated throughout the entire interview process as new data was collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Utilizing a narrative inquiry approach, participants' stories were gathered through semi-structured in depth, face-to-face interviews/conversations. Four of the participants took part in in-person interviews, while one participant had video conversations via Google Hangout given her current location. Interviews were conducted since it aligned with the goals of the study, which were to understand the individual experiences of each student. Further, interviews achieved depth and insight into emotional feelings and thoughts, which is typically unable to occur through other research methods, such as surveys (Weiss, 1994). Also, conversations were a cathartic experience that allowed participants to verbalize their internal state, answering the research questions on their experiences in a postsecondary institution as a first-generation woman with other identity dimensions. Although the interviews were by no means equivalent to therapeutic sessions, the participants were candid about their thoughts and feelings, discussing aspects of their lives that they have not shared with some of their closest confidants.

Utilizing Seidman's (2006) three-interview series, each participant took part in three separate interviews, specifically because understanding the meaning making experiences of students warranted timely self-reflection on the part of the participants. The first interview focused on participants' life stories and examined how the women in the study understood their identities prior to college entry, whether their identities were an important factor or not in the college choice process, and the meaning participants and

parents/guardians associated with being the first in their families to have attended college. Participants were asked to reconstruct and narrate events associated with themselves, their first-generation status, and other identity dimensions up to the point of college entry, which established the necessary contextual and background information to move forward to the topic of the subsequent interview.

During the second interview, participants concentrated on providing detail surrounding their lived experiences when they were attending college, the topic area of paramount interest in the study (Seidman, 2006). To emphasize, participants discussed what it meant to be a first-generation student with a multitude of social dimensions when they were undergraduates in their institutional context. Participants were specifically asked to reconstruct a day in their life at the institution. Further, they discussed their experiences and relationships as they pertained to the aspects of their first-generation status, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and/or sexual orientation and the degree to which these social dimensions were of salience to them and their self-concept during their formative college years.

Finally, with a sound foundation from the first two interviews, the third interview allowed participants to reflect on the meanings associated with their experiences (Seidman, 2006). Although the first-generation women in this study made meaning of their experiences throughout all interviews as they shared their stories, they were able to integrate the factors that they previously discussed in an effort to better understand their present identity. In addition, the final interview allowed each participant to clarify and/or revise any topics of discussion. Further, based on their meaning making process,

participants were asked to voluntarily suggest any resources or support services the institution could have provided that would have positively influenced their experience when they were enrolled or could assist students who attend the institution in the future.

The semi-structured interview protocols (Appendix 3) were established via a peer debriefing group (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Spall, 1998). While the narrative approach allowed myself as the researcher to be involved in the process, creating a foundational interview guide in a vacuum could have led to biased questions representative of my own experiences as a first-generation woman. Lincoln and Guba indicate that peer debriefing can maintain a sense of “honesty” while assisting in the development of the research design (p. 77). Therefore, the protocols were constructed in collaboration with two first-generation women who have graduated from postsecondary institutions. Selected based upon access to the researcher and expert insight (Creswell), acquaintances with varying social dimensions who attended different institutional types assisted in formulating questions that guided the three-interview process and provided a level of confidence in the interview protocols (Maxwell, 2013). The peer debriefing group continued to be utilized in the research process and is discussed further in a forthcoming section.

However, in line with the conversational approach utilized in narrative inquiry (Reissman, 2008), the interview protocol was adjusted depending on the participant to allow for a more interactive process and assist participants in disclosing a comprehensive account of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Weiss, 1994). Each of the three interviews were approximately 90 minutes in length with slightly more or less

time needed depending on the participant's loquaciousness. However, each participant was given adequate time to productively engage in the conversations (Weiss). Further, all interviews were completed during the fall semester of 2016, between September and December. Although the participants agreed that approximately one week would separate each interview in their three-interview series (Seidman, 2006), the interviews were conducted at convenient times for the participant. Regardless of the time in between interviews, participants maintained a connection with the study since they were given the opportunity to provide additional reflection and clarity after I supplied them with an overview of what was discussed in our previous conversation(s). Further, speaking with the women in the study over approximately a five-week time frame enabled a long-term partnership and trusting relationship to be established and allowed participants to formulate a level of comfort in discussing their personal experiences. Since participants agreed to multiple interviews of this length, a substantial commitment for individuals, participation in the study was encouraged during the initial recruiting e-mail through a \$25 gift card to Amazon.com.

The interviews took place at neutral and convenient locations (Weiss, 1994); private offices located within the selected institutions ensured that the information disclosed was confidential. For the three interviews conducted via Google Hangout, both myself and the participant utilized our own private area of residence. All interviews were audio-recorded, after receiving permission during the informed consent process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Weiss). However, some written notes were recorded not only as a precaution in the case of an audio-recording malfunction (Creswell, 2013), but

to take note of speech patterns and tone as participants discussed specific events (Creswell; Weiss); imperative to retelling and reliving a participants' narrative story (Clandinin, 2013). All audio recordings were transcribed in order to have a written document to examine during the data analysis process. Four interviews were manually transcribed and eleven were professionally transcribed through GMR Transcription Service. Transcriptions and typed notes have been kept in a separate computer file with specific folders for each participant that are inconspicuously labeled to ensure confidentiality (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), and will be properly erased after a necessary amount of time has passed since the interviews (Creswell). Hand written notes have also been stored in a similar organizational manner and kept in a locked filing system.

Research Memos

Throughout the data collection process, I kept a journal including specific memos. Memos are an integral technique to facilitate reflective thought and analysis throughout all stages of a study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, after each interview and in culmination, I reflected on the conversations and noted emergent topics, questions, and/or issues that needed to be addressed in the data collection process. Further, by incorporating my own feelings in memos, I was able to decipher my own thoughts to those of the participant, maintaining ownership of their own story (Creswell, 2013). In addition, by being cognizant of the personal biases I may have as a first-generation woman, any limitations to the study were seen.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis “refers to the family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (Reissman, 2008, p. 11). Not only content, but intention and language are essential components of participants’ stories. Therefore, narrative analysis strays from the customary use of categories in other qualitative approaches that fragment participants’ accounts and make generalized statements across individuals.

Although there are various analysis orientations in narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional space approach was utilized. Specifically, field texts (i.e., interviews), were analyzed for the following: interaction, continuity, and situation. In combination, the terms create “a metaphorical *three dimensional narrative inquiry space*, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and social along a second dimension, and place along a third” (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 50). The element of interaction includes personal conditions such as individuals’ feelings, reactions, and dispositions, as well as the social conditions for which events unfold (e.g., familial, cultural, institutional). Further, continuity refers to temporality and the importance of examining experiences in the past, present, and future. Finally, situational elements are also examined with a cognizance toward the interconnection of experience and place.

After the interviews were personally or professionally transcribed, I listened to and read each transcription at least three times. In addition, I reviewed all professional transcripts and corrected any errors and missed words or phrases to ensure verbatim quotes. Consequently, detailed, sequential, and individual stories of each first-generation woman in the study were then created through narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000; Creswell, 2013). Collaboration between the participants and myself is seen in analysis since each participant was presented with their narrative. Although validation checks were consistently employed throughout the interviews as I asked participants to clarify and negotiate the meaning of their experiences, providing each woman with their final narrative ensured that their story is an accurate reflection of their lived experience.

Specific themes emerged within an individuals' narrative, providing nuance and meaning, however, the themes are not generalizable (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013). For example, while one participant identifies as a Hispanic, first-generation woman with a middle-income status, who is queer and attended a large public research institution, her experiences and understanding of identity may not be mirrored in the lives of other individuals with similar social dimensions at a comparable postsecondary college or university. Consequently, narrative analysis aligned with the goals of the study to meet various first-generation women who may have similar categorical identities, but the intersection of these dimensions as well as their experiences within a particular context, illustrates the heterogeneity of a student population.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which qualitative research is authentic and credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Two validation strategies were employed to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings: member checking and peer debriefing groups. First, member checking was done throughout all interviews with participants. Each participant was asked to explain any portions of the transcriptions that could benefit from clarification. Further, participants collaborated and co-constructed the retelling of

their lived experiences, which enabled a more accurate and credible narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2013). Further, member checks provided a clear understanding of the participants' voice, avoiding misinterpretation, and also identified any biases I may have had that could have affected final data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). Ultimately, each participant was presented with their narrative and were invited to discuss their reactions, thoughts, provide insight and clarification, as well as retract aspects that they were not comfortable sharing. The final narratives presented in this dissertation were co-constructed with participants who adjusted the retelling of their story to accurately reflect their lived experiences.

Second, the technique of debriefing was employed to ensure credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). As previously discussed, a peer debriefing group, including informed acquaintances, collaborated in the creation of the interview protocols in order to assess the soundness of the research design. However, since narrative inquiry is a collaborative process with each participant (Creswell, 2013), the peer debriefing group did not engage in data analysis, but instead provided cathartic support throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba; Spall, 1998). It is important to note that since the narratives were constructed in connection with each participant, I was not the sole interpreter of data, thus eliminating an element of bias from the study (Creswell).

Limitations

While the aforementioned techniques assisted in the trustworthiness of the study, a number of limitations are noted. Foremost, in regards to selection criteria, certain first-generation collegians were excluded, including men, students from other postsecondary

institutions, and individuals who may be considered first-generation based on other definitions. Further, while participants were contacted via university affiliated departments and organizations, not all potential participants were sought after. To emphasize, if students were not engaged on campus, personally known within the contacted departments, or if students did not openly discuss their first-generation status while at the institution, they may not have been considered to be part of the study. In addition, although purposeful sampling was attempted to understand the diverse makeup and experiences of first-generation women, students of all social dimensions were not included. However, the study is not meant to be generalizable or representative of all first-generation women.

Second, data collection and analysis may have been impacted by my own positionality. Since I identify as a first-generation woman, my own experiences and interpretations may have biased the study. Although collaboration in narrative inquiry is honored and my own personal reflection is necessary (Reissman, 2008), the issues surrounding ownership of the narrative and how the story can be retold may become evident. Conversely, despite the extensive information on context, experiences, and life stories, it is naïve to assume that I have a clear understanding of students' lived experiences, especially after a few weeks. Therefore, consistent member checks were critical in narrative co-construction.

Role of Researcher

Reflexivity is a noted concept of research in general and this study specifically, since the researcher is part of the entire research process, both influencing aspects of it

and being influenced by it (Clandinin, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Reissman, 2008). Since the narrative inquiry approach stresses the collaborative effort between researcher and participant in crafting a narrative of lived experiences (Clandinin; Patton, 2015), it was essential that I critically examine my own story for the following purposes. First, since I also identify as a first-generation woman, purposefully sharing my experiences created a trusting relationship with the women in the study. Secondly, reflecting on my personal and educational background has continuously allowed me to be cognizant of my influence on all aspects of the study, including the goals, research questions, design, and analysis.

The daughter of Greek immigrants, my upbringing consisted of strong ties to family, the Greek culture, and my Greek Orthodox faith (considering that Greek culture and religion typically go hand in hand). My entire family and most especially my father, are the epitome of hard work, coming to the United States as teenagers, with a middle school education, and no knowledge of the English language, they were able to establish a strong footing to raise my cousins, sisters, and myself. Throughout my upbringing the importance of an education and receiving a college degree was strongly emphasized. As such, there was no question in my mind that I would attend college and after a painstakingly difficult and confusing application process, I was accepted and enrolled in Rutgers University; specifically chosen because one of my older sisters was already in attendance at the institution and the location was a manageable distance away from home.

When entering higher education, I dealt with a number of college going issues. For example, I was unaware of the financial aid process and was not accustomed to living

away from home; all aspects that I assumed were difficult for any incoming first year student. In terms of academics, I initially struggled with learning how to appropriately study for courses, but quickly adjusted my study habits by going to the library to avoid residence hall distractions. The academic content was not particularly difficult for me, but if I had questions, I asked fellow students. Throughout my educational career, I consistently employed this method since asking my parents for assistance with schoolwork was never the norm. In general, I quickly excelled in college, graduated with honors, and ultimately feel as though I had an outstanding undergraduate experience. Even though I knew that some of my struggles were due to my parents not having gone to college, I thought it was more so because they were immigrants, not as accustomed to or familiar with American culture.

To be honest, it was not until I entered a graduate program in higher education, that I heard the term first-generation student. At no point in my four years of college did I know I was part of a student population for which research examined our experiences within higher education. As I became more knowledgeable about first-generation students and that first-generation was not simply a term for those with immigrant parents, I realized that my own story was not reflected in research. Therefore, my perceptions allowed me to critically analyze research on students who are the first in their families to attend college and consequently explore the heterogeneity within the student population. Since I was interested in utilizing an anti-deficit perspective, I later conducted my master's thesis on high achieving first-generation students and their college engagement experiences, aiming to shatter a conception that the majority of first-generation students

experienced difficulty in college. I gained a tremendous amount of insight from my interviews with students and later came to the realization that I did not want to simply utilize an anti-deficit perspective as it pertained to first-generation students' academic capabilities, but I was interested in breaking away from any commonalities and themes that have been consistently seen to discuss the student population.

Since my first-generation identity is extremely salient due to my personal experiences and knowledge, I have since reflected on my other identities and how these were shaped and influenced by my undergraduate experience. Even though I was not consciously aware of it at the time, my gender identity, heterosexual orientation, and religion were integral to my self-concept. Specifically, in regards to my gender identity as a woman, not only did I grow up surrounded by independent, resourceful, and determined women, but my father (who only has daughters) constantly ingrained these qualities in me, as well. Therefore, my drive and hard work in college was steered by my motivation to make my family proud, but also because I strived to possess these qualities, which I associated with being a woman. Even though I was not aware of it at the time, as an undergraduate, I even chose a woman-centric major field of study focused on helping others; psychology. Later, I realized that regardless of my work ethic, my gender identity would require me to be outspoken in my goals and career. Therefore, after finishing graduate school, I was the first of my friends to negotiate my salary and advocate for other women to do so.

It is important to note that while participants and myself both utilize the labels, woman and first-generation, the similarities end there. How I understand the intersections

of my identities differed from that of the participants. However, the goals of this study were not to formulate themes and commonalities, but to understand complex identities. Ultimately, my personal narrative and dedication to understanding the lived and diverse experiences of first-generation women influenced my collaboration with each of the five participants in the pursuit of providing nuance to research on first-generation students, contribute a gendered and intersectional lens to their experiences at selected institutions, add to the existing literature on women's collegiate majority, and ultimately address how identity formation in college influences holistic development and experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter provides findings from interviews with five first-generation women from selected higher education institutions. Presented are the separate, co-constructed narratives of participants in the study; Anna DeJesus, Lauren Smith, Christina Li, Chelsea Jones, and Tyana Brown. The section focuses on the individual lived experiences of each participant. Rich insights and reflections regarding how participants made meaning of being the first in their families to attend and graduate from college and how their intersecting identities shaped their experiences are provided, thus addressing the study's research questions. A summary of key findings from the narratives is discussed in the following chapter.

ANNA DEJESUS

With a glance at the name Anna DeJesus, I assumed simply, immediately, and without question that the first participant of my study identified as a Hispanic woman. Upon our initial meeting, my assumptions regarding her ethnicity were confirmed, based in part by her physical appearance, having a darker complexion and hair color, as well as her noticeable Spanish accent. Anna was quick to also visibly showcase mannerisms and characteristics that represented both her confidence and lively personality. However, an air of reservation surrounded Anna. While I initially took such feelings to be associated with a certain uneasiness related to meeting myself, essentially a stranger who would be asking detailed questions about her entire 22 years, I realized after our conversations that the combination of confidence and reservation that she exuded is a dichotomy that is

abundantly evident throughout her life. Anna’s college experience consistently weaves an intersecting story of advantage and disadvantage, visible and invisible realities, and sense of independence and interdependence for the ultimate purpose of wanting to both personally be comfortable in her identity and be understood by others as a first-generation woman of color, from a low to middle-income background, who is queer. As a means for this to come to fruition, Anna learned to “play the game” and trusted me enough to share her playbook even though she may have been unconsciously or consciously skeptical of whether I would understand who she is.

First Quarter: Trophy Wife

Despite being born in New York City, the epitome of a melting pot, Anna describes her upbringing in the Bronx and Washington Heights as living in a “bubble”—she was constantly surrounded by friends and family who, similar to her parents, were also from the Dominican Republic and/or identified as Hispanic. As such, Anna’s own Hispanic ethnicity and Dominican nationality are ingrained in her and are identities for which she is intensely proud. While her parents were not afforded the opportunity to pursue higher education since her father and mother were focused on working and providing for their family (as a school janitor and nurse’s assistant respectively), Anna always knew that she would. One critical motive for which Anna chose to pursue higher education is based on her cultural upbringing and the responsibility she has toward her close knit immediate family. She said:

I don’t know if this is true for other people, but I know in like, for like Dominicans and me and my sister talk about this all the time. We feel like we have like such a responsibility to take care of our family. So, it’s just like, there’s no other way to be able to do that. So, that’s why I went to college... We feel like

we have to figure out a plan to take care of everyone else because that's even how our parents—that's what our parents are doing here. Like they came to the United States to send money back to the Dominican Republic. So it's—we got the chance to go to college, like lucky us, so we have to do the same thing. Completing a college degree would allow Anna to not only contribute financially,

but exhibit her allegiance to her family and make her bubble and culture proud.

Ironically, however, her second motive to attend and complete college was due to her desire to detach from her environment—one that had an ability to make her feel comfortable since those around her were ethnically similar to her, but also represented a stagnant existence since she noticed that individuals in her group association were closed into “regular” occupations without a desire to advance. Since Anna repeatedly characterized herself as having a sheer internal drive, ambition, and motivation; qualities that overflow the room when she speaks about her experiences, her New York environment was not conducive to her future aspirations and it seems it would have been catastrophic to her development and make her self-combust if she had remained there.

Keeping in line with her independent natural predisposition, Anna took the initiative to apply to higher education institutions and ask questions regarding the college choice process on her own. She was given minimal assistance from the guidance counselor at her all girls private high school and no *direct* assistance from her parents, aside from using their social security numbers to complete forms and take out loans in her father's name, for which he is incognizant of. While Anna chose to attend Temple University because of its affordability and close proximity to her family in New York, the ultimate deciding factor was explained as: “I was trying to stay within my comfort zone like a little bit. I was just concerned with um not being understood.” Such a statement

would prove to be the most powerful reflection Anna would have about her college experience and identity development during her four formative years at Temple University.

From the moment Anna began her journey as a first-generation student on Temple University's campus, she felt as though she was an "outsider" who had to "play catch up." Outside of her middle school friends who Anna came to college with and who also did not have parents who pursued higher education, Anna did not connect with any other first-generation peers. Instead, she was initially surrounded by acquaintances who she could not relate to and did not understand her level of independence. While her peers mentioned worries surrounding their parents viewing grades or visiting campus and relied on parental support to understand how college worked, Anna's parents only touched foot on campus during move in and graduation; during the time in between, she did not reach out to them for assistance regarding her college experience. When speaking of these differences between herself and peers, Anna said: "I felt like when you're in those conversations so often or like you're hearing other people's experiences, it's kind of like why aren't my parents like this or why do I have to do this for myself?" She also described her independent first-generation status as: "To be honest, even if I didn't get A's my parents wouldn't have any idea. I could be out here just selling drugs and my parents would have no idea." Even though Anna's parents were unaware of her college experience and could not assist, Anna felt both a tremendous amount of internalized and direct familial pressure as a first-generation student at Temple University. She said:

It's like hard to explain. It's kinda like bittersweet because it's awesome because I feel like I'm moving my family forward, but then it feels like a lot of pressure. It's

a lot, a lot of pressure. Like I feel like I don't have a choice but to finish. I don't have a choice but do great. I don't have a choice but to be successful.

To Anna's family, the gold standard was to graduate from college and become a professional. When she did so, they were extremely proud, bragging about her accomplishments as though she reached a "trophy wife" status. However, they may not have realized that Anna needed to independently navigate a very strategic route for *their* goal to come to fruition.

Specifically, Anna decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in Business Administration as a Marketing major at Temple University simply because college administrators mentioned that it would allow her to be more well-rounded and she personally thought there was more financial security in a business degree as opposed to her true interest in the School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management (she is currently now a graduate student in the School for Tourism and Hospitality Management). Despite the program that Anna chose, she felt a sense of academic unpreparedness in comparison to her peers, which led to her reserved and quiet demeanor in class settings. Anna explained:

I would be in class and I'm just like I have nothing to say. I'm not going to say anything because. And I would sometimes have the right answers and I wouldn't speak up and say like. I was so hesitant in class 'cause I just felt like I did not know what everyone else knew. I felt—I just felt totally behind. Like the entire time.

Anna believed that she was essentially at a crossroad during her college experience. One road shined a light on her belief that she was not academically up to par. As a first-generation student, going down this path meant playing catch up, and regardless of the number of pre-college courses she completed, it would be a potentially

tiresome feat to try and academically out run *successful* college students. A second road emphasized her internal voice craving an accomplished and professional future that she believed she could achieve by utilizing her other strengths and through sheer determination. Anna explained her thought process in choosing her path when she stated:

I felt like I had to choose between being a straight A student or being like or having an amazing resume. And I was just like I know I can kick ass at this. Like I can have an amazing resume. And I feel although my grades weren't what I wanted them to be. At the end of the day, everything, all the opportunities I've been given were thanks to my involvement and my mentors that I got through that. And like my resume. So I feel like it was worth it although I do, I'm kind of like sad that like I didn't get as good as an education as I could've gotten.

While Anna believes that other students may be capable of having a stellar academic performance as well as an impressive resume, and she too wanted to feel accomplished in both regards, she chose what she believed to be the path of least resistance that would award her the most gains in life. She elected to join the college game on her own terms; a game that would prove to be a reflective experience in understanding how others perceived her and even how she perceived those closest to her.

Second Quarter: Super Hyper Dominican

As a means to build a professional resume and comfortable community in a playing field of non-first-generation peers, Anna dedicated the majority, if not all, of her energy into student organizations and her many work positions (both work study related and off campus in retail). Specifically, she became involved in a Hispanic affinity group on campus, stating:

I came from an environment that was mostly Latinos and all that kind of stuff, so I was really trying to create a community away from like my home. So I would—I would really hunt people down. Like I would hear accents, I would hear music. I'd be like, "Are you Spanish? Can we be friends?" So I was like hunting people

down trying to create a community because when I got to Temple I um realized that there was really not much of a community... So I dedicated a lot of time to rebuilding, recruiting, and like just revamping the entire organization.

Anna also mentioned that the reason for her extreme devotion to the Hispanic affinity group was due to the atmosphere at Temple University taking an either/or approach to students' identities. When being asked quite simply if she was Black or White, with no alternative option of an identity outside of those parameters, Anna would indicate that she was neither because: "When I went to the Black parties, I wasn't Black enough and if I went to the White parties, I didn't know what to do there to be honest." Her commitment to growing the Latino/a group allowed her to transition from feeling as though there was "nothing for us," to peers and acquaintances associating her with her Hispanic culture and being known as a "super hyper Dominican" who would sell empanadas with her student organization. This comfortable and social persona was in stark contrast to her reserved façade as a first-generation student in academic contexts who did not build close relationships with professors or students in class, mentioning that: "When it came to my education, I was very in and out."

Desiring additional professional development opportunities, Anna decided to run for a leadership position within one of Temple University's main organizations on campus, an aspect of her college experience that was particularly poignant and memorable to her and what I believe to be a defining point in her identity development. Winning this leadership role aided in obtaining skills that would be beneficial for her future career aspirations as an event planner, but came with a price tag. Practically, the time commitment needed to be president meant that she could no longer also hold her

leadership position in her Hispanic affinity group. In addition, since Anna was not previously involved in this student organization prior to running for president, her election was not greeted favorably. She initially began her term as an outsider and described a chilly reception from her vice president and other peers.

Most noticeably, Anna explained that her vice president would comment on and make fun of her Spanish accent, suggesting that Anna take courses to rid of it. For a brief moment, Anna considered this route, which in my opinion would have shattered the Hispanic identity that has come to encompass everything that she is. However, she instead reconsidered. Ensuring that she did not “come out of character in that position” as a professional and still remain connected to her salient Hispanic identity by keeping her accent, she dealt with the criticism by delegating others to speak during specific events on campus. In other college contexts, Anna initially took commentary about her accent to mean that she was interesting to listen to and people were curious about who she was and where she was from. Since the majority of her existence took place in a bubble surrounded by others who were similar to her, she never really noticed or examined her ethnicity before college, so she initially welcomed such questions. However, her accent was later associated with being unprofessional and she soon became annoyed by conversations revolving around it since peers were more concerned with how she was speaking and not the content nor importance of her speech.

With Anna’s experience in this leadership role being extremely negative, she decided to play the game and work the system by focusing on her responsibilities and connecting with administrators by speaking their language. She explained that her

mentality at the time was: “I’m gonna kill this and I am not gonna make any friends. I’m not here to make friends. I am here to build my resume.” Even when recalling the aforementioned events, Anna remained poised and professional, vocalizing a roll with the punches attitude, but I could sense a hurt and disappointed tone having had to endure such scrutiny for being a Latina who was determined to succeed and in my eyes, one of the most strong-willed young women I have spoken to as a higher education administrator.

Third Quarter: Person of Color versus Woman/Woman of Color

Making meaning of adversity, Anna mentioned that the college context allowed her to be comfortable with her Hispanic identity, which is clearly of particular salience to her and an identity she has always associated with. Being a person of color was more worrisome for Anna at Temple University specifically in the context of her extracurricular engagement and when she exuded her “super hyper Dominican” traits. Issues involving race and ethnicity were closer to the forefront of her mind since these were topics of discussion within her student organizations especially since students of color did not believe that Temple University was advocating or supporting them—even when the University attempted to create a Diversity Office, it failed miserably. However, in the academic realm, race and ethnicity were not directly noticed since her class sizes were large, enabling her to fade into the background unless she was required to give a class presentation that would cause her ethnicity to be heard. Anna explained her thoughts on her Hispanic identity in the classroom, stating:

I wasn’t tryin’ to like bring that up at all. I was more so just tryin’ to. I don’t even know what I was tryin’ to do. I was tryin’ to act—I was tryin’ to act professional I

guess. Whatever that's supposed to mean. So, I definitely tried to kind of put that on the back because I didn't want that to be like in the forefront.

In contrast to her ethnicity, Anna seemed to be caught off guard by my inquiry regarding the meaning she associates with being a woman, to which she simply responded that an individual is a woman based on her anatomy. Anna quickly admitted that she did not give much thought to her gender identity in college. This was especially the case because the majority of her time was spent in extracurricular activities at Temple University, for which women were more heavily involved in student organizations. Therefore, it was the norm for women to hold leadership positions on campus, and consequently, her "go-getter" personality was not viewed in any regard.

However, upon further reflection by both Anna and myself, it could be ascertained that Anna's conception of her gender identity has been shaped more so due to the experiences she has had specifically as a woman of color. Growing up in a Dominican household where she, as opposed to her brother, was responsible for cleaning the dishes and doing laundry, Anna mentioned that she developed a complex about being domestic: "If you did anything remotely like that made me feel like you were trying to domesticate me like into the typical role of a woman, I would rebel and I would have a fit."

Fast forward to college, Anna recalled one issue surrounding gender identity during business classes, stating:

I would get shut out of conversations often if I was in like a group of men. Mostly like White men. 'Cause my um school was predominantly White so I would have to do like group projects or we would have to do like group discussions and I would always get shut out of the conversation.

In this particular situation, Anna's retaliation to being directly shut down was to also internally shut down, remaining quiet since she felt as though she was unable to respond to such actions. Her non-response was a departure from her typical character and vocal disagreement when she has had to deal with conversations surrounding the cultural concept that the terms woman and domestic are synonymous.

It seems as though Anna did not pay much attention to this incident in college since it took place within the academic classroom—a context Anna did not associate with her professional identity. However, she perhaps recalls it now because it foreshadowed the dialogue she presently has with mentors and friends regarding what it means to be a post-college woman of color in the workforce. A mentor and fellow woman of color was very candid in the following advice that she gave Anna regarding her first employment position after graduation: “You need to be great and you need to be very careful in what you do because they do not develop the woman of color and they have not developed the woman of color in the past.” Anna worries about applying for management positions within companies that may be deemed boy's clubs and whether her personality and demeanor as a driven and straightforward Latina will be misunderstood as “feisty” and “sassy” both in person and in e-mail exchanges—particularly because she has been told that she presents a “sassy” tone in her electronic communication. Anna wonders if entering the corporate world means that she will need to change how she speaks in tone and intonation, dress more professionally compared to her laid back style, and/or wear her curly hair in a straighter and sleek manner. Currently, Anna is grappling with the thought of having to either wear a mask when in the workforce to hide who she is or if

she could remain true to herself by simply coming with a “disclaimer” so that she is not negatively perceived because of her appearance and personality.

Ultimately, the fact that Anna has to consider having a disclaimer to negate any preconceived notions that the world has revolving her identity as a woman of color is discouraging to both her and I. She said:

I’m going to keep moving forward. But, a lot of times it’s like, ugh, this is so much work. Like why do I have to do so much work? And honestly like that’s kind of exhausting and I’m—and that’s my biggest worry where like I don’t want to be in a job where I have to like put up some type of façade because like that’s gonna get tiring and I can’t be that 24/7. Like we don’t have 365 good days.

While unspoken, Anna and I know that even though we both identify as women, I will never be a part of the group identity for which she refers to as *we*. As a straight, White woman of middle-income background, her aforementioned worries about the future are ones that I will most likely not face; I am in a privileged position, being on the sidelines during the majority of the corporate game. While Anna may believe that her current reflection on gender is based on being in the throes of the professional world, I would argue that Anna was subtly introduced to systemic gender roles in the college environment, but did not notice them as clearly as the commonplace concerns she faced as a person of color in the context of her above average extracurricular engagement.

Fourth Quarter: My Gay Friend Anna

As evidenced, Anna consistently took any obstacles or criticism associated with her first-generation, Hispanic, and gender identities with a “grain of salt,” trying to be void of any emotion and instead persevering toward her professional identity. However, when it came to Anna’s sexual orientation, it was clear from the onset of our

conversations that this was an aspect of her life that was more emotionally charged.

When asked to discuss any other identities that she associates with, Anna matter-of-factly mentioned that she is queer, then quickly moved on to addressing other questions.

Wanting to know more about her experience as a queer woman at Temple University, but sensing that she did not initially want her sexual orientation to be the focus of our interviews and her life, I vaguely alluded to the topic until she perhaps felt comfortable. I came to realize that I am not the only other person to *tiptoe* around the subject—within the bubble of her hometown, Anna came out to her mother, father, and three siblings only six months ago. No other family members nor any family friends know. While people around her neighborhood were suspicious of Anna, she was very cognizant of the fact that she lived in a tight knit community where it was commonplace for individuals to phone her father if they noticed her taking part even in the slightest indiscretion.

Knowing that her father in particular would not approve, she hid her sexual orientation.

Even though Anna associated New York City as a comfortable place for her Hispanic identity, the college context would instead be where she could truly be her whole self.

She said:

I felt like this whole coming to Philly and going to college was such a different contrast than like being at home because when I was home, I had to hide being like you know queer and all that kind of stuff and it was very like so many eyes on me. But, when I got here, nobody cared. Like I was totally free to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, with whoever I wanted and nobody had an opinion...I never had to deal with any kind of bashing when I was here.

Although Temple University became a safe space for Anna to be open and when pointedly asked, she would truthfully answer, Anna never initiated conversations about her sexual orientation. It was only after breaking up with her boyfriend of six years (who

was from her hometown and came to Temple University with her) during their first year of college and getting through the initial conversation with her friend group, that she strictly dated women and was no longer questioned by college peers. Since the college context seemed numb to her sexual orientation, Anna did not feel the need to *flaunt* or bring attention to her queer identity. During our conversation, Anna stated: “I personally feel like it’s not necessarily important and people make it more important than it needs to be” and “I am straight passing so I’m very much like well I’m going to continue to be until it matters.”

To Anna, what is important and what matters most is being successful in her personal aspirations while also making her family proud. For some time, Anna was ashamed of being gay particularly because she associated her sexual orientation with being unprofessional. Therefore, she would maintain a professional decorum in every setting during college and would avoid any type of public activity that would bring attention to her sexual orientation and cause her to be judged. Unlike her Hispanic and gender identities which are more visible, being deemed straight passing, it is seemingly easy for Anna to play the game, be “regular,” and maintain the professional identity that she worked so hard to obtain throughout college. Coming from a place of complete and utter honesty, Anna explained:

I just definitely felt like I didn’t need anything else against me that like. Yeah, I just feel like as a woman of color, you already have it hard enough. I don’t need to be a woman of color and queer...I mean I am, but I don’t need to like tell the world all the time.

In order to balance out her intersecting identities which are seemingly *negative*, Anna believes that she needs to be accomplished, saying: “I have to be like twice as

good...I gotta go twice as hard. I gotta work twice as hard.” Consequently, when describing herself, Anna chooses to avoid mentioning who she is in terms of her identities and instead rattles off from her long list of accomplishments; trophies from successfully navigating the complexity of being a first-generation woman of color who is queer. Therefore, it is no surprise to me that she mentioned that she wanted to: “Just be Anna as opposed to like my gay friend Anna.” While a seemingly simple notion, it more so exemplifies who Anna really is—not just a queer woman whose most talked about quality is her sexual orientation, but an individual with a determination to succeed for her family and herself that transcends the identities that she claims.

Overtime

While many of Anna’s college experiences surrounding her identity dealt with her playing the game so that she would be understood by those in privileged positions, income status is one identity for which the reverse was true. Even though Anna physically removed herself from her hometown where identities went unnoticed and were not discussed since everyone was the same, she eventually created a friend group at Temple University that mirrored its ethnic background. Since the middle school friends she came to college with and her newly acquired friends were all persons of color and mainly fellow first-generation students, it was assumed that their low-income socioeconomic statuses also aligned. With her friends witnessing and/or hearing accounts of Anna’s typical day at college, which included a frantic schedule filled with work at her on campus job in the morning, attending a full load of classes in the afternoon, and then work at her second job until late in the evening, with some additional part-time work in

between, there was no question that Anna was like them. However, while Anna grew up in a low-income household, she identifies as being newly middle-income due to the monetary damages she acquired from a personal injury lawsuit when she was involved in a car accident at the age of nine. While Anna took out school loans with the assistance of her mother as a co-signer, the money that she received assisted in funding her college education and provided her with a financial cushion. Her employment while being a student was meant to supplement her experience, allow her to afford dues for student organizations and leisure activities, and keep her busy.

Anna never mentioned to her friends that she had money for a number of reasons. Foremost, she felt that it was unfair that her friends consistently struggled financially, which required some to take a semester off from college as a means to save money for tuition, while she not only had a mother whose good credit allowed her to take out loans, but she had additional money that gave her financial security. Further, Anna had the means to partake in activities and even participate in a three-week school trip to Paris. Anna's friends were caught off guard when she mentioned that she would be studying abroad and when they questioned how she would be able to afford the experience, her response was simply that her hard work at numerous jobs paid off. In addition, Anna felt that she was unable to discuss socioeconomic status with her friends because she could not relate to them. Since she did have a hefty financial cushion, thus becoming the only one of her friends from middle school to finish their degree in the traditional four years, she struggled with understanding what her experience would have been like if she was a low-income student in college. She mentioned:

Because one I am super ambitious and I feel like I would have made it work regardless. Regardless, if I had to take a thousand loans out, I would have taken a thousand loans out. I would've made it work.

Since Anna has a privileged socioeconomic background compared to her friends, it was simple to allude to the fact that regardless of the cost, she would have completed college. Further, it is ironic that while Anna mentioned that she constantly felt as though she was playing catch up in college, she could be deemed a privileged first-generation student in relation to her peers because she was able to not only attend a college out of state, but complete her degree in a timely manner with no significant financial hardship. However, Anna is able to reflect on the intersection of privilege and oppression associated with her identity as a middle-income first-generation student:

A lot of my friends from high school felt like they needed to stay with their parents like if they had a single mom or something. They were just like, "I can't leave her so I have to stay local." Or it's just like, "No that's too expensive—Like no I can't. Like I wouldn't be able to do that on my own." Like so a lot of people that I know from high school or just from back home stayed home or stayed very local 'cause like that's I guess typical 'cause you have to stay near your family and just like. So that definitely is something that I've realized especially just talking to other people where I'm like, "Why didn't you go away?" Like I'm very like, "You need to go away, you need to live." But, I also have to realize like that's not possible for everyone.

Anna continues on with her thought mentioning:

I feel very privileged and it's hard for me to not think like well if I did it, anyone can do it. Like if you want it hard enough or if you want it bad enough you can do it. So, that's just my mindset—like that's my default mindset. But, I'm trying to be more understanding that like there are different situations.

Even though Anna is similar to her friend group in terms of being first-generation and Hispanic, she very much struggled for some time with understanding how she was able to graduate from college and others were not as fortunate. While she initially thought

that motivation was the driving force, she later understood that the intersection of income status was truly the main distinguishing factor between her and those in her bubble.

Final Score

Throughout our conversations about her playbook in college, Anna would pause to consider some questions and at one point mentioned that perhaps she should reflect more on her experiences and development. However, in my opinion, Anna seems to be extremely self-actualized. She identifies as a first-generation student, a woman, Hispanic, Dominican, middle-income, and queer. At times, Anna admitted that some identities were more salient than others depending on the situation, causing her to wear different hats. For example, and as previously mentioned, Anna's Hispanic identity was more *noticeable* in college when she was involved in her student organizations, but she became quiet and reserved in classes when being a first-generation student was at the forefront. Based on such real life examples, it seems as though Anna associated each identity with a positive or negative point—first-generation student = negative; woman = negative; Hispanic = negative; middle-income = positive; queer = negative. With so many things against her that were obstructing her goal of achieving a professional identity, Anna felt the need to make up for the imbalance by obtaining any and all accomplishments. However, Anna has come to the realization that no matter her accomplishments, she is an individual with intersecting identities. In her typical straightforward approach, Anna stated: “I have to deal with this. This is my life. Like I'm going to be all these things and still kill it and be great.” Regardless of how Anna plays the game, the college experience has taught her to be comfortable in her intersecting identities. By sharing her thoughts

and experiences with me, without a mask, without a façade, and without only speaking about her accomplishments, I was truly able to understand Anna DeJesus as so much more than what I initially imagined her to be simply based on her name.

LAUREN SMITH

Within a minute of my conversation with Lauren Smith, I came to realize that first impressions are deceiving. And after extensively speaking with her, it is abundantly clear that Lauren is no stranger to incorrect assumptions and reconciling the person society views her as and who she really is/how she identifies. To a world focused on visible characteristics, Lauren is a White, 22-year-old, college educated woman whose calming demeanor and soft spoken nature is as noticeable as her eyeglasses—a perfect match to her level of maturity and tactfulness. To those who have been given access to her invisible realities, she is a White Hispanic, first-generation woman of working class background who consciously chooses her words in an effort to not cause offense, as well as to portray an easy going manner when dealing with implicit and explicit personal criticism. By reflecting on her upbringing, college life, and current state, Lauren shines a light on the privileged and disadvantaged experiences she has had as an individual “stuck between identities,” feeling both connected and disconnected to who she is. While the tone and volume of Lauren’s voice is quiet, her story, beliefs, thought process, and the meaning she associates with her experiences rings at a louder decibel. I was privy to the more personal side of Lauren—the side that not even some of her close college friends have met—a person who, based on how she understands society’s standards, looks like an insider, but feels like an outsider.

First-Generation: Disconnect Versus Privilege

Growing up in El Paso, Texas, Lauren was raised by a single parent, her mother—a woman who is so revered for her dedication, support, and love that Lauren’s bond with and admiration for her mother is tangible. Equally as noticeable is Lauren’s relationship with her father(s). For all intents and purposes, Lauren’s *father* is her maternal uncle due to the strained relationship she has with her “biological father” since her parents divorced when she was young and he did not reappear in her life until she was ten-years-old. Given not only the time apart, but the geographical distance (Lauren’s father lives in Kentucky), it came as no surprise that Lauren provided a surface level description of her father—simply mentioning that he is an assembly line worker in the automobile industry after having taken only a few courses in college—and then matter-of-factly stated: “I don’t know him that well.” With the brevity of such a statement and the description of Lauren’s upbringing, I came to realize that her family dynamic represented much more than a simple father/daughter versus mother/daughter relationship, but would have a tremendous impact on her identity development and how she experienced college.

Since Lauren’s mother did not receive a college degree (she only completed a few courses at a nearby college since she struggled with the loss of her mother shortly after high school and then gave birth to Lauren when she was 22-years-old), she moved mountains to ensure that Lauren had any and all opportunities despite her working class background. Lauren was given a strong educational foundation since she applied to and attended a rigorous elementary school and a high school that offered an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Both schools were outside the ones that Lauren was zoned

to based on where she resided—in a small home that her mother still currently rents in a less affluent area of town. Even though Lauren’s mother worked long and hard hours as a telecommunications officer, she drove Lauren to school sometimes 25 minutes away.

Lauren explained:

She would work the night shift so that, you know, she could work at night, but then be home in the morning to take me to school and then sleep during the day and pick me up after school. And I don’t know how she does it to this day.

Going to college was “always a given” for Lauren since her upbringing was heavily focused around her education. To her “small village” of supportive family members and now Lauren, the assumed logical trajectory was to graduate from high school, attend college, gain employment, and consequently be “successful in society’s eyes.” Lauren stated:

I think I had that assumption because my mom was always, um, so supportive in making sure that, um, I had the best opportunities I could. And I think again, herself seeing how hard it was to struggle not having a college degree, um, she always wanted me to have better than she did and in her mind that was a college degree to afford me opportunities. Um, and then in my mind, it was the same thing of she’s taken care of me my whole life and sacrificed so much, I want to be in the best position that I can be, um, to be able to take care of her as she gets older. Um, and the way to accomplish that was, was earning a degree.

Attending a higher education institution and completing college would allow Lauren to directly reap any and all associated benefits that her mother missed out on. In addition, a bachelor’s degree would provide Lauren with the means to financially give back to her mother who selflessly supported, nurtured, and gave her all the tools to succeed regardless of their family’s circumstances and the environment she was born into. In my opinion, a diploma conferred to Lauren Smith was also seen as one conferred to her mother.

Since the pursuit of higher education was a mother/daughter package deal, during the college search process, Lauren's mother was very adamant about her attending a school that would provide her with the most opportunities—meaning Lauren should attend a university anywhere outside of Texas. Aside from one institution, Lauren applied to out of state colleges and universities that would cater to her low-income status, including Ivy League institutions that provided appealing financial aid packages. After learning about Bryn Mawr during a local college night event, Lauren's mother vehemently approved even though Lauren was not seeking out women's colleges:

My mom right away fell in love with Bryn Mawr and was like, “Yep, that’s where you’re going. I love it.” She’s like, “I just have a feeling. I feel like it’s good for you.”

After Lauren visited Bryn Mawr through a program providing low-income students the ability and financial resources to tour campus, she realized that her college choice decision did not have to be solely based on income and whether her and her mother could afford the cost. Instead, she could attend Bryn Mawr because it also made her happy. In fact, Lauren exuded such genuine joy and gratitude when speaking of her experience that it would make even the most severe opponent of women's colleges reconsider. It was not until after Lauren graduated, however, that she realized her four years at Bryn Mawr were a time of identity development.

Although Lauren was consciously aware that she was a first-generation student, especially since she repeatedly claimed this identity with every check of the *first-generation* box on each college application, she did not truly understand the associated meaning until she was in the throes of college life. By making strategic decisions

regarding Lauren's K-12 education, her mother was able to get her to Bryn Mawr's metaphorical doorstep. However, the advantaged education she received was a double edged sword for Lauren in college—causing her to feel both connected and privileged. On the one side, Lauren felt the weight of being a first-generation student when the college related support she received and had grown accustomed to through high school counselors disappeared, was not replaced with direct assistance from Bryn Mawr administrators, and consequently solidified her mother's inability to get her through college. Since her mother could not relate due to her limited experience with college in general and the university specifically, Lauren was hesitant to address everyday issues regarding academics and/or general matters associated with her time at Bryn Mawr with her closest and most supportive ally.

Concerns related to the inability to connect with parents/guardians regarding college is common for first-generation students, in my opinion, so I was not surprised by Lauren's comments. However, it seemed as though there was another reason for Lauren's reluctance to speak to her mother. After dancing around the topic and seemingly internally deciding on whether she wanted to voice the thought that she had most likely not dared to utter before out of fear of potentially hurting her mother, Lauren discussed a sense of "almost guilt." Specifically, Lauren was saddened that she was able to have a fulfilling and positive college experience and graduate, but her mother essentially missed out. While her mother dug and paved a path to college through sweat, tears, and sacrifice, she did not directly experience the fruits of her labor, but instead allowed Lauren to walk

down the road that she initially wanted for herself. Lauren explained such sentiments, stating:

It's just feeling, you know, almost guilt. But, knowing that I shouldn't feel guilty, um, you know, just, I guess more wishing that she had been able to experience what I was experiencing, um, and so kind of leaving out things, or not talking about things, as much as I normally would have, just because, you know, that was, you know, at the back of my mind. And, it wasn't at all because I thought she didn't wanna hear it, um, and I think at the time, I didn't really know why I wasn't saying as much. But, um, that definitely is part it, of just, you know, wishing she had had that experience, and just being aware of the fact that there was a lot of things that she couldn't relate to.

The *guilt* that Lauren refers to may instead actually be a feeling of disconnection.

Lauren has always relied on and had an allegiance to her mother since college was an accomplishment for both of them. But, each step that Lauren-the first-generation college goer took to succeed in higher education and make her mother proud was a potential step away from the bond that they had formed.

Conversely, while Lauren seemed like the *typical* first-generation student who had struggles based on her income status and not being able to connect with her parents about college, she was in a privileged academic position due to her previous education.

Specifically, Lauren explained that:

Because I had access to that IB program, I—you know, if and when I have kids, I'm putting them in IB elementary school and middle school. Um, I think it just, it gave me the foundation I needed, to be successful in college. Um, not so much in content, but in terms—like, it was, IB was such a rigorous program for a high school to complete, I don't know how I did it. But, it gave me um, life skills, almost. Um, one of the biggest things was time management. Um, that a lot of my friends and peers, freshman year, at Bryn Mawr, didn't have. Um, and so, something, you know, a moderate course load, to me, was kind of so overwhelming to them.

Academically, Lauren was confident in and prepared for the rigor of college while non-first-generation students struggled at Bryn Mawr since they did not have the same high school foundation.

With a privileged identity as a first-generation student, I was surprised to learn that Lauren participated in a club designed for students who identify as being first-generation during her senior year. She explained by stating:

It was another experience where I was reminded again of, even though I am first-gen, I didn't have a lot of the struggles that other first-gen students in this club had, which is the reason why they were so passionate about it, and wanted to be in the club.

However, Lauren's motivation to engage in the first-generation organization was not because she was in need of resources, but more so because:

Even though I didn't have those struggles, I know how real they were, um, and I—by that point, in my senior year, I had really become aware of how special my path to college had been and how lucky I was, um, and so, I think it's very similar to my reason for wanting to go into education, is just to try to use the—you know, the experience and the privileged parts that I had, to try to you know, create even more positive change, and get those conversations happening on campus. Um, and so, that really meant a lot to me, during my time at Bryn Mawr.

Participating in the club may have been meaningful to Lauren on two accounts. First, it provided her with a means to connect with her first-generation identity and her mother by extension. It showcased that Lauren was able to graduate from college on account of her mother and not through her biological father who “got to claim all of the pride and happiness without having to do any of the hard work.” Second, it allowed Lauren to reconcile the privileges (i.e., academic preparedness) and disadvantages (i.e., low-income status and inability to relate to family) that Lauren has come to understand as a first-generation college goer.

I am Hispanic versus I Don't Look Hispanic

Similar to her first-generation identity, Lauren did not directly address or process her race and ethnicity until she was in the college context. With a Caucasian biological father and Mexican-American mother, Lauren visibly looks White and others tend to naively confirm her identity given her *White sounding* name. In fact, I admittedly also initially assumed that Lauren identified as White non-Hispanic especially because she reminds me of my sister—with her paler complexion, soft voice, and brown hair.

Being raised by her mother, Lauren has inherited a particular understanding of the ethnic identity that her mother claims. Both of Lauren's maternal grandparents were born in Mexico, but made a conscious decision to Americanize their children and only speak English to them, so that they could "live in a society that wasn't—here in the United States—that wasn't meant for them." Despite their efforts, Lauren's mother did not receive the advantages that her parents were hoping for, but instead was discriminated against because of her darker complexion. As a means to ensure that Lauren did not face a similar future, her mother continued the Americanized tradition by not participating in cultural customs associated with her Mexican heritage and decided that they would both keep the *White* last name of Lauren's biological father. However, Lauren claims the identity because she ascribes to the following definition of what it means to be Hispanic:

Connecting to your ancestry and not so much that I am participating in and living in that culture, but that that's my connection to my grandparents who were 100 percent from that culture.

She continued her thought process by saying:

I've always had like a very, um, mixed relationship with my, uh with that background just because I don't feel like I take part in the identity culture, but

then I claim it so it's this weird kind of mix of um wanting to claim it, but then not feeling like I belong in it.

Lauren's feeling of not belonging to the Hispanic identity group may be strongly based on two integral moments during her college career. Since Lauren checked both the Hispanic and Caucasian boxes on her college application, a Hispanic affinity group associated with Bryn Mawr contacted her at the start of her first year, energetically inviting her to participate. However, at the first meeting, Lauren received an uneasy feeling from group members that bordered on being considered a hostile environment. She explained that:

Because I didn't look Hispanic or have the name, I kind of felt like in the group I was an outsider and they didn't see me as Hispanic and so I wasn't part of their group.

By not having "those more visible identity markers," Lauren felt like she did not belong and ultimately decided to not join the university organization.

If Lauren's outsider feelings were not affirmed from that incident especially since not a single group member contacted her after the meeting in the hopes that she would reconsider participating, she was explicitly reminded of being stuck in between identities during a class discussion. When describing herself as a first-generation, Hispanic woman, a classmate unapologetically posed the following statement and question to her: "Well, you can pass for White. Why would you admit that?" Since the incident occurred during her first year, Lauren admitted that she responded in a lackluster fashion since she was not as confident or vocal in her identities and who she is. In my opinion, by others not *seeing* her as Hispanic, it inadvertently meant that she is not as connected to her ethnically *disadvantaged* mother and is more so a reflection of her racially *privileged*

father. Given the relationship with each of her parents, this may have been seen as a significant blow to Lauren.

However, Lauren has an acute awareness and understanding of her White and Hispanic identities in terms of privilege and disadvantage. Due to Lauren's visible appearance, Lauren admits her advantaged position:

Because for a lot of my friends, who do have the more physical traits, you know, there's no denying that they're this, or they're that. Or, they come from this background, and for me, you know, I've never denied it, or had to deny it. But, it's just not the first thing that people think of, because it's not a physical trait. Um, and so, it just, I think, reminded me that I am privileged to have that, um, ability to, to claim an identity but then, not face consequences for it.

The nuance of Lauren's statement, in which she has both never denied her ethnic background or had to deny her identity, is especially telling of her college experience. While Lauren has always been honest about her identity, being Hispanic and Mexican "never really came out" because she "didn't have a space, really, for it to come out, um, and it didn't uh, come up." Now as a third grade teacher in a public charter school located in Texas and educating a majority of students who are Hispanic and will potentially be the first in their families to pursue higher education, she has continued to feel as though an opportunity has not been presented that would allow her to organically discuss and address her mixed identity. When Lauren initially began her career, she had a bright eyed vision that she would be able to relate to her students and form a trusting relationship with them because she shared her first-generation, Hispanic, and low-income identities with them. However, in a defeated tone, Lauren stated:

Um, they, they look at me, and they don't see someone who's going through what they are. Um, and so, I, I want to be that support for them, and you know, and they do, you know, come to me and talk to me, but it's very different from seeing,

um, somebody that looks like they do, or looks like their parents do, um, who are, are living that reality. Um, and so, it kinda leaves you, again, in that area of wanting to do more, but not knowing how.

With one word—“helpless”—Lauren conveys how every thought, feeling, and experience has led to how she recognizes her identity as a White Hispanic. While the collegiate experience enabled Lauren to acknowledge her identities and privilege in a manner that she had previously never had to, she was also not afforded the opportunity to truly explore how to reconcile being “stuck.” Even though Lauren continuously praises Bryn Mawr to be a welcoming, safe, and inclusive environment, and although the incidents that Lauren experienced were not egregious acts of discrimination in comparison to other historical and contemporary events in our nation, they speak volumes to the implicit microaggressions that frequently go unrecognized especially for those similar to Lauren who have conflicting or intersecting racial/ethnic identities. Whether universities are responsible for fostering discussions regarding students’ identity development is debatable, however, Lauren directly mentions that she could have benefited from speaking with other students who were also between identities—finding a population that she could relate to and feel as though she belongs.

Invisible Income Status

While Lauren tried to establish a first-generation and White Hispanic connection by claiming these identities when describing herself, she rarely outwardly voiced the identity for which she has the most extreme internal connection to. As low-income, Lauren recalls her mother working long hours, taking public transportation or walking when her mother was unable to borrow a car, and noticing the difference between the

homes her high school friends resided in—not only in appearance, but they geographically sat on a higher elevation of land in comparison to where her home was located. However, income status was never a direct topic of conversation amongst her friends or family. As such, Lauren transferred this income code of silence mentality to her college experience. Arriving to Bryn Mawr with a very generous financial aid package given the low-income status of her family, Lauren never had to worry about the possibility of a debt ridden college diploma. In order to cover certain costs, however, Lauren still relied on her mother for financial support and she herself worked four positions while being a full-time student. In fact, Lauren attempted to work a fifth job to earn extra money for incidentals and because it was a position that she would have enjoyed, but she was barred by human resources to do so since they believed that additional work would interfere with academics and her role as a student. Although Lauren felt as though she was better off than some other lower-income students because she had a financial aid cushion, money was still a concern. She would worry as to whether her mother would be able to continue supporting the two of them and with every dollar spent, Lauren would calculate the number of work hours she needed to recoup the amount.

Lauren's lack of economic capital was balanced by the social and cultural capital she was afforded by her mother who ensured that she received above average schooling. Yet, it was not until college and when Lauren was randomly assigned to two vastly different educational contexts for her fieldwork and employment that she realized how

fortunate she was to have an educational advocate as a mother. Lauren explained the two schools by stating:

I was really going from School X, and working with the kids and seeing how under resourced the school was, and how desperate they were for the parent involvement, and um, extra support for the teachers. And, resources for the students to all of the incredible opportunities and resources that the kids I was working with, you know, literally just a few hours later, at School Y had. Um, it was, it was incredibly—it was such a stark difference, and it just kind of inspired me to, to work towards how to mitigate those differences, um, in the best ways possible, and so, that inspired the thesis, as well as my career.

Despite her socioeconomic status and area of residence, Lauren never knew what it was like to be a student in a setting similar to School X—a school that if she attended may not have opened the doors to Bryn Mawr and consequently any of the opportunities she has been given. The eye opening experience led her to pursue a major in Anthropology, minor in Education, and was the topic of her undergraduate thesis, in which she examined the relationship between the geographic location of a student's home and school and the level of parent and teacher advocacy.

While Lauren describes her time at Schools X and Y to be life changing, the experience did not alter how she conveyed her own socioeconomic identity. Given that income is an invisible identity marker in Lauren's case, she did not directly address the topic in the social aspect of her college life, causing her to feel somewhat disingenuous with her friends:

You also just kinda feel like, well, I can't be truly honest, or open about that, um, just because you don't want to—part of you doesn't want to admit that, and then, part of you thinks, like it's not their business.

Lauren continued to describe her experience as a low-income student in college through the following reflection:

I didn't pretend that I had money, but I also didn't admit that I didn't have money, so it was just kind of like, you, you did what you needed to, to fit in, I guess? And not that I felt the need to fit in with my friends, uh, but you kind of went with the flow, you didn't um, kind of identify yourself either way, um, or try to be something that you weren't, um, but it just was something you—not, I didn't hide it, but you know, you just tried to make it not come up.

Her wobbly tone and thought process perfectly mirrors trying to handle a negatively perceived identity and taking the privileged ability to hide it as a means to rid herself of the fear of potential embarrassment. Ironically, Lauren never experienced criticism for being low-income because in my opinion, no one can mock you if they are unaware of what to mock you for. Ultimately, with these thoughts and her experience as a low-income student of privileged social and cultural capital, it is as though Lauren has internalized the comment and question a peer made regarding her ethnicity, but has adjusted it to relate to her socioeconomic status: I can pass as affluent, so why would I admit I am low-income?

Woman Defined

As evidenced, when Lauren discusses her identities in terms of first-generation, White Hispanic, and low-income, much of the conversation oscillates between how she is perceived by others and how she perceives herself—as though she is teetering between self-awareness and self-consciousness. Yet, Lauren's understanding of what it means to be a woman is anything but that: "Being a woman to me is kind of as simple as identifying as one, um, and if that's the gender identity that you have, um, than that's why you are." She continued by stating: "That's the extent of it because I don't feel like I can kind of dictate qualities of a woman, when that's not gonna fit everybody that identifies as a woman."

Her definition is one of such considerable reflection and pointedness, that I initially struggled to understand how her level of confidence in her gender far exceeds that of her other identity dimensions. However, Lauren attributes the saliency of her identity as a woman to her experience at Bryn Mawr. Although Lauren did not apply to the institution initially because it was a women's college, if she had the opportunity to apply to an undergraduate institution again, she would choose Bryn Mawr distinctly because of its status as a women's institution. Of particular note is the associated meaning of being at the College, to which Lauren stated: "It wasn't the perceived absence of men. It was more seeing women in positions of power on campus." For Lauren, it was extremely influential to be in an environment where leadership positions that have traditionally been designed and/or held by men were noticeably filled by women, providing her with not only a space to think about her gender identity since she had never done so previously, but enabled her to do so with a fierce tenacity.

Coming from a high school in which the male voice dominated, Lauren's quiet and shy demeanor followed her to Bryn Mawr. However, once she noticed the level of confidence her women classmates had during discussions, she found her voice. In fact, when men from other universities enrolled in a class at Bryn Mawr, they hunched in silence as women dominated the conversation. With a sense of pride, Lauren explained that being surrounded by women allowed her to fully engage in every and all opportunities, whereas if she had attended a co-educational institution, her gender identity may have prevented her from a fruitful college experience.

Bryn Mawr provided Lauren with a “safety net” of women leaders who were supportive, instilled a sense of empowerment in her, and pushed her outside of her comfort zone. It is safe to say that Bryn Mawr succeeded in providing Lauren with the opportunity to process her gender identity. However, I would argue that the institutional context did not necessarily foster a similar level of confidence in her socioeconomic and ethnic identities. When Lauren justifies her definition of being a woman by explaining that, “I don’t feel like I can kind of dictate qualities of a woman, when that’s not gonna fit everybody that identifies as a woman,” I wonder whether Lauren is cognizant that she has not ascribed a similar mentality to how she sees her other identities. While Lauren believes that there is not one single definition to being a woman, she has essentially taken a peg hole approach in all other regards, trying to *fit* her *atypical* Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation square pegs into a *typical* round hole.

Unstuck

The collegiate experience and Bryn Mawr specifically gave Lauren the space to internally think about who she is—a White Hispanic, first-generation woman of low-income background. Externally, however, Lauren allowed certain dimensions of herself to be noticed or visible depending on the circumstance and whether she associated an identity to be seen as negative or positive in society’s eyes. Clearly, the woman hat was proudly worn by Lauren 24/7. In comparison, her Hispanic hat was tucked away in her bag the majority of the time, only being worn when she was given the direct opportunity to identify herself. And even when she was given this platform, she never truly felt as though Bryn Mawr was a comfortable space to permanently claim her Hispanic identity.

Now as a teacher, Lauren wants her Hispanic students to see her as one of them, but they cannot get passed her *different* visible appearance. Given Lauren’s intersecting identities, she wonders whether she will ever feel as though she truly belongs in every space. In the meantime, however, Lauren has made a conscious choice to use her voice to silence incorrect assumptions, hoping that others, including her students, will hear her coming before they see her.

CHRISTINA LI

Entering my office for the first time, Christina Li possessed an uncommon level of self-assuredness that lacked even the slightest hint of boastfulness, but was rather extremely endearing especially given the infectious laugh that would continuously resonate from her petite frame. Christina is everything you would expect from a University of Pennsylvania or Ivy League graduate; the epitome of intelligent, poised in both her mannerisms and speech, social, well-travelled, and with an effervescent/bubbly personality. However, I came to realize that the open and genuine individual sitting in front of me is not the Christina Li who entered the esteemed doors of the University during her first few years. In fact, Christina’s college experience of exploration, development, and keen self-awareness is essentially one of the truest forms of hide and seek. Initially, Christina hid behind her “Penn Face”—a mask that enabled her to visibly represent the ideal University of Pennsylvania student who has it all figured out, fits into the campus make-up, and is void of feeling judged. However, she later found her authentic self—an Asian American woman of first-generation and low-income status who learned to embrace instead of avoid both the visible and unspoken identities that made

her feel *different* and self-conscious for the majority of her 22 years. Without reservation, Christina candidly took me through the journey of how she went from strategically painting a “good picture” of herself to later uncovering and showcasing her perfectly imperfect real life portrait; complete with differences, weaknesses, drive, individuality, and most of all confidence.

Portrait One: Investment Piece

As an only child born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by parents who are ethnically Chinese, but emigrated from Vietnam, Christina has consistently walked through life on a tightrope, balancing her Chinese background and the American culture that she has grown up in. The importance of education, however, has remained an unwavering constant, with a college degree allowing her to not only give back to her parents, but to potentially supplement their low income later in life:

It’s always been ingrained in my mind that I had to go to college, no matter where it was or how much it cost. Um. Because getting a high school diploma didn’t really lead anywhere. And for my parents, I think, um a lot of it has to do with they invested so much into me, and it’s time that I, like go to college, I get a good paying job, and I pay them back. That’s always been like my main goal I think.

Throughout our conversations, Christina frequently makes references to her parents as one unit, but is quick to clearly articulate the separate roles her mother and father have played in her educational pursuits. Although her mother completed only up to a sixth grade level of education due to being a refugee with familial and financial obligations and despite the fact that she has consistently been employed in occupations that “cater towards immigrants” (e.g., factory and janitorial work, as well as childcare), Mrs. Li has been the main investor in Christina’s education. Christina explained:

My mom saved up a lot of money so that I can go to a better school. My options were a public school or this Catholic school that had a decent education system that was nearby where we lived. And so, my mom saved up every year to pay tuition, and I would go from, like pre-K to eighth grade. And so, everybody's parents were able to kind of afford this without too much of a struggle, whereas my parents, I noticed, like, it was very evident that my mom had to save up a lot and had to sacrifice, um, things that would make her more comfortable, just so that she can make me comfortable.

In comparison to Christina's mother who she unequivocally credits for funding both her formal education, as well as all interests in informal educational activities, such as karate and piano, her father's participation has been one for which she has continuously struggled to fully understand and in my opinion, is an underlying factor that has influenced how Christina understands her identity as a first-generation student. Specifically, while he himself completed one year of college in Taiwan and did not pursue higher education in the United States because of his inadequate English proficiency level, Mr. Li was focused on asserting his role as a financial provider (as a steel factory worker). It was not until Christina was toward the end of her public high school career, in the college choice process, and he was assured of her investment "potential," that he chose to directly contribute to her education.

As Christina attempted to navigate the unfamiliar college process and the even more daunting task of affording a higher education, she relied on her *where there is a will there is a way* independent attitude and the dedicated assistance of her high school guidance counselors—considering Christina's vocal appreciation for them, simply stating that they moved mountains for her would be an understatement. After applying to higher education institutions in the local Philadelphia area to appease her parents who were adamant about her remaining close to home, "no matter where, like how far [she] would

go in life,” Christina chose to attend the University of Pennsylvania since it was the most prestigious institution that granted her acceptance—despite her father’s skepticism that she would get in. With a fierce determination to succeed in college and knowing that she should take advantage of any assistance available, Christina participated in the University’s summer bridge program due to her first-generation and low-income status. However, the experience, while beneficial in acquainting Christina with the campus and peers, did not prepare her for the emotional and trying times she would endure as a collegian.

Since Christina’s parents were unacquainted with the ins and outs of college, their main collectivistic concern was directing her toward a suitable academic discipline of study that was practical, aligned with her interests, and most importantly, would guarantee lucrative employment opportunities *when* and not *if* she graduated—not completing her degree in a timely fashion would be considered “shameful” to her family. For all other facets of the college experience, Christina relied on her high school friend, Naomi—a daughter of highly educated Ethiopian immigrants who Christina placed on a pedestal and identified as the human embodiment of a map to success in college and life as long as she simply and methodically followed her footsteps. However, Christina’s relationship with Naomi was also the catalyst for the academic insecurities and grade anxieties that would plague her throughout the majority of her college years.

With every judgmental, “You didn’t know that?” that Naomi asked, the more self-conscious Christina became—wondering whether her other classmates also viewed her as naïve and different. Despite the blood, sweat, and tears Christina put into getting to

college, she felt that not only was she not competition against peers who were “destined for something great,” but she was not even in the game. Christina knew she was struggling and without being able to pinpoint exactly why, especially since she did not realize at the time that “first-generation students do face a different set of obstacles,” she attributed her inadequacies to a number of factors. Despite the Catholic school education her parents invested in which allowed her to be “slightly ahead” when she arrived to high school, she noticed that the “gap is much larger” between her college preparatory public high school and the University of Pennsylvania specifically. Consequently, she did not feel prepared, know how to study, nor was able to concentrate on the amount of coursework which was overwhelming at times. As Christina succumbed to the pressure that Naomi was experiencing and her “we must get A’s” attitude, she was “traumatized” when she received a C, causing her internal self-doubts to knock her down. In a raw and unfiltered tone, Christina said: “It was just always my fault that I wasn’t as good as my peers or wasn’t as smart as them.” Without reservation, Christina continued to address her self-consciousness when she explained:

I was terrified because everyone was so smart and they gave all these, like, answers. They were so knowledgeable. Like, I was in my first [major-related] class, um, and it was a lot of—I don’t know. The majority of the people there were very well prepared for college. And I can just tell. And like now that I’ve gone through [major-related courses] with these people, I know that they were prepared for college. Um, they come from, like really good schools, um parents who invested a lot into their education. Um, so, they were international students who went to like international schools, um, so whenever I heard their answers, I’m like, well, that’s what I wanted to say, but they said it in a much more articulate and like eloquent way. And I was just like, wow! Um, maybe I shouldn’t speak out loud. I was afraid of sounding dumb.

Feeling defeated, Christina went into fight or flight mode. As a means to avoid being perceived as unintelligent in front of revered peers, as well as intellectually advanced professors, as the two powerful letters, *Dr.*, in front of their name would suggest, Christina learned to strategically hide her first-generation identity. Initially she retreated into a wallflower existence during her first few years at the University, remaining mute during course discussions so as to not bring any type of attention to herself. As a means to circumvent class participation requirements, Christina would prove her understanding of the material in the secluded office of the teaching assistant prior to the exposed lecture. Similarly, when she found herself in conversations for which she was unfamiliar, Christina opted to simply not engage as opposed to asking questions so that she could contribute to the topic.

Ultimately, Christina consistently aimed to “present a good picture” to exhibit that she was similar to her peers who were seemingly “put together,” that she was capable of keeping up with others and doing well in the environment, to not “disappoint” the advisors who put faith in her abilities as a first-generation student, and essentially *fake it until you make it* so that she could prove her investment potential. Since Christina did not want to be seen as different or *less than*—a consistent concern in her life—she kept an arsenal of paint brushes to ensure her outwardly “Penn Face” presentation remained intact. Unbeknownst to her until her third/fourth year, this was the same “Penn Face” that other peers wore and which she defined as:

How, um, a student on campus would act, um, even though they were, like, doing not so well academically or they were struggling a lot, they would just put on a face and pretend that everything was going well and they knew exactly what they were doing.

Consequently, many of the students Christina was comparing herself to were also portraying the same “good picture.” Yet, in reality they actually mirrored each other in terms of being self-conscious, struggling with the academic rigor and culture of the University, and not wanting to admit having weaknesses. Christina began to wipe off her “Penn Face” when she returned to the University after going abroad to Chile in her third year since she came to the realization that something needed to change if the environment was not going to. First, Christina took action to alleviate her grade anxiety by going to group therapy, which she said was beneficial in “validating [her] feelings.” At the same time, fellow students were “courageous” in opening up about their experiences both with “Penn Face” and their first-generation identity: “They’re speaking up for people like me. So, I think it’s also my turn to, like, speak up about my story.”

After building the confidence to vocally address her personal journey, Christina was met with the following reaction from her boyfriend at the time: “Wow, I thought you were doing so well. You were friends with everyone, you’re so happy, and I didn’t realize that you were struggling.” When reflecting on his comment, Christina described it as “funny.” Perhaps it was amusing that the person who felt different and did not belong was able to hide her struggles as a first-generation student, overcome them through counseling and better study habits, and succeed to graduation just like her “smart” peers (aside from Naomi who withdrew because of the pressure). For this, Christina is proud. And while her parents are also proud of their investment, her father quickly brings her back to reality. During our conversation, Christina candidly reflected: “He also tries to put me in my place and tell me, like, I’m not as smart as I think I am.” While such a

statement would have been crushing to the shy and reserved Christina in her first-year of college (and most individuals, including myself, for that matter), her hard work at the University not only academically, but in terms of her personal development, has given her the confidence to dismiss such comments as fallacies, just like the “Penn Face” she used to wear.

Portrait Two: “Rich Bitches”

With the same swiftness Christina used to cover her first-generation background with a “Penn Face” façade, she also tried to hide her most salient identity from her peers in college: her low-income status. Growing up, Christina had always been cognizant of her family’s financial situation, the “sacrifices” that were made in the moment in the hopes of a return in the future, and the differences between what her family could afford in comparison to her Catholic school friends. Even though Christina did not experience any direct negative backlash in her K-8 schooling due to her socioeconomic status, she was given a reprieve from thinking about her economic identity during her secondary education. By choosing to attend a public high school that was “predominantly low-income” and “everybody was pretty much on the same level” because they received free or reduced lunch, Christina felt as though she could “really fit in.” Yet, the perception that she “lived a comfortable lifestyle” was instantaneously shattered upon her arrival at the University and she was instead hit with the realization that she was without a doubt different in terms of income status.

Wanting to have “something valuable to do in college” since she could not prove her worth in academics, Christina engaged in a number of student organizations, only to

feel even more devalued as she interacted heavily with peers. Not only did Christina explicitly mention that she “couldn’t really quite, um, connect with students who were of higher income,” but I could sense the division between the haves and have-nots widen by a mile with every personal anecdote that she rattled off—with the culmination of experiences representing the degree to which she literally and again felt *less than*. Most noticeably, Christina joined an “Asian American interest sorority” not because it was her first choice for an activity or out of a desire to be a part of her racial/ethnic community on campus, but because peers spoke of the organization in such high regard and it aligned with her desire to present herself as the perfect University of Pennsylvania image. In fact, in an excited tone as though she was speaking from the seat of a throne, Christina described her decision to become a member: “And that’s when I was like, Oh prestige! That’s why I’m here!” However, Christina soon felt as though she could not relate to her fellow sisters especially during conversations such as the following:

Like, I remember one comment someone made. Uh. We were all gathered together. It was just my class of seven, and she goes, “Oh, we’re just like rich bitches.” And I was just like, uh, not really. I can’t afford all your, like, fancy things...I didn’t even know what designer brands were...Like, they would, like kind of rattle off all these name brands. Like, “Oh yea, did you see those Tory Burch, like, flats are so cute.” Or like, this whatever brand person. And I’m like, “Who? That’s a thing? I know Macy’s.”

In addition, Christina lamented that “it’s harder to identify with other students when you are low-income because so many of the activities that you do to bond with each other requires some form of money.” For instance, Christina would decline attending expensive dinners on a mundane day of the week since “that’s usually for a special occasion” and when she feverishly saved money for a Spring Break trip only to decide to instead use the

money toward her semester abroad program in Chile, she experienced a “bitter” climate from a sister when the rest of her sorority also later cancelled.

In my opinion, even though being a member of the sorority allowed Christina to fit in economically by associating with “rich bitches,” she did not claim the income status that their Greek letters represent. By no means did she try to pretend that she was of a different income bracket when she was in college, but quite the opposite. Christina would instead consistently avoid having her low-income status be a topic of conversation since she believed that, “it makes people really uncomfortable.” However, I would argue that it was more so because Christina did not want to feel the self-consciousness associated with her economic identity:

Like, I wanted to interact with everyone um at the same like, socially, at the same level. I didn't want them to think any different of me. Um, so I would never really mention being first-generation or low-income.

To put it simply, Christina perceived a low-income (and first-generation) identity as different. Since she did not want to be judged for receiving a free education based on her family background especially since she thought “there are so few people who actually receive that amount of money,” she shuttered in a Pavlovian response like manner at any reference of being low-income. As such, she tried to keep her socioeconomic status *invisible* and unquestioned.

Aside from a few friends who were privy to her family and financial situation, Christina remained closed off and guarded about her socioeconomic status. However, when she went abroad to Chile, she connected to students due to their “similar background” and because they “would joke around about being broke.” Making light of

her low-income status was a completely foreign concept within the University of Pennsylvania context. Consequently, Christina was slowly learning to remove the stigma that she associated with income. Similar to the on-campus articles written about “Penn Face” and first-generation collegians, students began to address and be empathetic toward the experiences of low-income students at the University. Christina took this as an opportunity to relinquish her feelings of being judged and her judgment of others who are in a higher income bracket. While Christina was able to educate peers and bring understanding, her own self-awareness in terms of her economic identity is one of particular note. In fact, even though Christina deactivated from her sorority due to the associated time commitment and cost, her engagement allowed her to become a “rich bitch”—in a figurative sense. Specifically, she reexamined her definitions of prestige and being different, found the value in understanding herself in relation to others, and learned what it means to be a confident and “outspoken” individual.

Portrait Three: “You see me, I’m Asian American”

When discussing her experiences as a low-income and first-generation student, Christina did so in a quick stream of consciousness manner, as though even a single breath in her speech would forfeit the opportunity to make up for all the times she chose to remain silent in the college context. While Christina was able to quiet the aspects of herself that she most identified with, her “good picture” was blemished by the visible identity that she has struggled to wholeheartedly embrace. Considering her facial attributes, there is no doubt that Christina is Asian and she herself is overly conscious of this fact when she stated: “You see me, I’m Asian American.” However, when I asked

Christina to discuss what it means to be Asian American, her immediate reaction was a caught off guard nervous laughter. Despite Christina never being pointedly asked this question, it is clear from our conversations that she has spent her entire life reflecting on her racial/ethnic identity.

As the daughter of immigrants, it is no surprise to me (a fellow daughter of immigrants) that Christina has been surrounded by her Chinese background—taking part in Chinese customs with her extended family who conveniently live across the street and continuing to speak her first language, Cantonese (she also knows her father’s dialect of Teochew and learned basic Mandarin through college courses). Initially, it was difficult for Christina to “bridge the gap” between the Chinese traditions that she was born into, but could not fully understand having never been to Asia, and the American culture that was enveloping her. She explained her thought by saying: “I didn’t want to be like the talk at the dinner table. I knew that. But, um, I also didn’t want to be so docile that I was bored with my life.”

Even though Christina began to “make friends and understand American culture, pop music, and like, understand the news and politics,” she knew she was not like the Italian immigrants in her neighborhood nor the White students that predominantly made up the school she attended. Christina’s internal thought of, “Oh, I really want to fit in, but I look so different,” would ultimately stick with her and cause her to “resist” her Asian American identity for some time. Desperately wanting to belong, Christina would not bring attention to her Chinese culture and when experiencing microaggressions, such as being told to, “go get a dumpling,” to “speak in English” whenever she was practicing

her Chinese, being called a “chink,” or having teachers “pull their eyes back” to imitate her eye shape, Christina either went along with the “playful” jokes or was told that she was “taking things too seriously” when she tried to defend herself. Even after Christina got passed the tumultuous middle school phase, went to a high school where there were more students who looked like her, and attended college where she said, “people at Penn are very aware of Asian cultures, and there, some of them may even know more than I do,” the feeling of being different “clung” on to her.

Given that Christina’s Chinese American identification was predominantly associated with negative experiences, she came into college assertively thinking, “I didn’t need, like, an Asian American community to support me.” Instead, she took her acceptance letter to the University of Pennsylvania as the opportunity to be a part of a “diverse community” and befriend individuals of various backgrounds, which she became slightly “obsessed” in doing so. Keeping herself an arm’s length away from collegians who looked like her, Christina exerted energy most noticeably toward her interest in Spanish—she was a Hispanic Studies minor, taught Spanish to students in a nearby school, became friends with peers who identified as Hispanic, and as previously discussed, studied abroad in Chile. However, during this time of self-exploration for which Christina rejected the notion that she would always be solely defined by her visible Asian American identity, her first-generation and economic background became drastically more noticeable. Consequently, Christina realized that these two identities made her feel different not only from the majority of her diverse peers, but from the

Asian American community that she belonged to. Specifically, Christina could not relate to the Asian students at the University, saying:

They don't come from the similar background. Like, they're not first-gen, they're not all like low-income. They actually come from very wealthy families and sometimes we'll hear comments like, "Oh yeah, I went to Iceland for a weekend. It was only \$2,000.00. It was no big deal."

Since Christina was guarded about her income status and her parent's educational level, she assumed that she was the only *disadvantaged* Asian at the University. However, during her final year, she came in contact with younger students who were not as self-conscious about who they are and vocally discussed being Asian, low-income and/or first-generation. Finding others who she could relate to on all levels was freeing. Instead of avoiding her Asian identity, she learned to fully "embrace" who she is. Christina described her reflective journey by stating:

I didn't focus on my culture as much until toward the end, until my senior year. When I'm like, "Wow, if I don't learn about myself, like I'm gonna probably lose it all, especially when my parents aren't here anymore to tell me things." Um, so I think like, I didn't participate in too many Asian American activities partly because I wanted a diverse group of friends. But, in the end I realized, like, that's not diversity if I'm not, um, going into different communities. If I'm not going into Asian-American community, either. So that's, senior year is when I kind of started to embrace my identity a little more. And I took Chinese. I started to learn more about the culture and talk to my parents more.

Even though she initially rejected her Asian identity because it made her feel different, she learned to appreciate her Chinese customs and her mother "who is a little bit more overprotective." In fact, she accepted a post-graduate fellowship in Asia purposefully so that she can "learn a lot about [her] own culture while being immersed in other cultures, too," while also being the talk of the dinner table for moving herself and her Chinese family forward.

Portrait Four: A Lady's Place

As evidenced, Christina was acutely attuned to and cognizant of her first-generation, low-income, and Asian American identities in the college context. In stark contrast, when asked about her gender identity, Christina laughed in her typical fashion as she simply and awkwardly stated: “Um, I am female, um, and yeah.” Being a student whose academic focus was in the Humanities, similar to other women, Christina was in a space where she was the norm, belonged, and was not viewed as different. In addition, while Christina recognizes and is sympathetic toward gender stereotypes and discrimination, she has been fortunate to have no direct experiences, but only second hand examples (e.g., representation of women in STEM fields, workplace issues). Consequently, there was essentially no need for Christina to dedicate any energy to her gender in college especially when the majority of her mental strength was being utilized/earmarked to process her other identities. Christina summed up how she understands her gender identity in one blunt reflection: “I wasn’t really challenged to think what it really means to be a woman.”

However, as I was listening to Christina struggle to give thought to her gender, as though she was searching for just about anything to say so as not to disappoint me, I realized that Christina had been discussing her least salient identity in a bob and weave fashion all along, but more so in the capacity of what it means to be a woman *and* Asian American. How Christina understands her gender identity can be best described as trying to reconcile the Asian woman her father sees when he looks at her—as painted by her maternal family’s perceptions of him—and the Asian American or Americanized woman

that she (and her mother) sees when she looks in the mirror. In terms of viewpoint, Christina aligns with her mother who is Americanized, open-minded, more liberal, and understanding. Aside from supporting her in all aspects, Christina is thankful for her undoubtable confidence, saying, “she kind of just believes, like, I can do anything, as long as, like I put my heart to it.” On the other hand, Christina’s father is traditional, reserved, private, and her family believes that he has consistently struggled to find a middle ground between supporting her, while also ascribing to the belief that “a proper lady’s place is, like, at home.”

When her father uttered this quote, it was in reference to a time when Christina was *excessively* taking part in social engagements with the peers that she was desperately trying to fit in with and to which her vehement response was: “No, it doesn’t apply to me. I’m Americanized. Like I’m free to do whatever I want.” However, what could be perceived as a fleeting and/or harmless father/daughter dialogue in the moment, transcends beyond that in my opinion, since it is a memory that Christina has held on to. It is clear to me that this comment was not meant to be taken literally—Christina was certainly not expected to be domestic nor subservient especially since her father contributed to aspects of her educational journey and was dedicated to financially supporting their family in practical matters. Yet, some of her family members would argue that Mr. Li does not believe that Christina—a woman and his daughter—is meant to occupy the same spatial coordinates or *place* as him in terms of hierarchical status/positioning.

Christina made it a point to claim that her father supported her college aspirations—even if he did so only after recognizing that she had potential—and is proud of her accomplishments. And while I do not wish to discredit her feelings, the hesitation in her voice when speaking of how her father feels now that she has completed her degree, was palpable. It was as though she was trying to convince and reassure herself that her father is proud while simultaneously quieting the roar of her extended family yelling that he “doesn’t think like a woman should advance in her career.” Even though she disagrees with her family’s viewpoint, she continues to recall times for which her father would put her in her place:

Now whenever we get into disputes and things like that he will always tell me, like, “Oh, you’re—you don’t have as much experience as me,” or things like that. And like if I try to tell him something or try to correct him, he’ll be like, “Oh, well you think you’re so smart because you graduated from college.”

Being respectful of her father since she values their relationship and is cognizant of the fact that his generosity has contributed to her accomplishments, Christina defended him by stating that it is because of his personality that he speaks that way or she simply does not understand nor have an explanation for such thoughts. Even though there is a sense of hurt, Christina gives off the impression that she took her father’s comments in stride, not giving them any weight to thwart or squander her drive. Given all of her experiences in the higher education context, Christina was most concerned with fitting in with peers regarding her first-generation and low-income identities, while being an Asian American woman in college and whether her father supported that was not a pressing worry. To Christina, her diploma signifies that she was able to overcome obstacles and insecurities to graduate and financially support her parents. To her father, it potentially

means that the return on his investment is a confident woman who is superseding his intelligence and potentially showcasing his insecurities for either not receiving a degree or having a daughter who has a higher level of formal education than him. However, *all I see* is an independent and ambitious woman, who is driven to obtain any and all opportunities thrown her way, and eager to propel herself forward regardless of what others think or what her father views as the proper place in this world for an Asian or Asian American woman in relation to himself.

Picture Perfect

During our conversations, Christina walked me through her metaphorical art exhibit, showing me all the portraits along her journey to self-discovery. The first snapshot was Christina on the front of a University of Pennsylvania brochure since when first arriving at the University of Pennsylvania, she questioned whether she was admitted because she was a first-generation student *and* low-income *and* Asian American—implying that the University hit the jackpot with her because she, with her combination of *different* or *disadvantaged* identities, would not only allow the institution to meet an admissions quota that year, but is the *perfect* person to exhibit an image of diversity on campus. The following frames, *Investment Piece*, *Rich Bitches*, *You see me, I'm Asian American*, and *A Lady's Place* were “good pictures” that Christina painted to hide the aspects of her identity that were different and to which she thought would allow her to belong and fit in, not only in the college context, but in life. At the end, we stopped to reflect on her current portrait—authentic, exposed, and unfiltered. Christina is no longer the shy and reserved person who was unable to articulate her insecurities in her first few

years of college. She is outspoken, confident, and the most self-reflective person I have ever met, proudly embracing her intersecting identities for everyone to *see*.

CHELSEA JONES

As I walked through an office building on Cheyney University's campus, I was struck by Chelsea Jones' defining qualities of independence, straightforwardness, and genuineness. Equally as noticeable is Chelsea's lively expressiveness both seen and heard through verbal communication, hand gestures, and facial expressions. While I had no expectations of Chelsea prior to our meeting, aside from my assumption that she identifies as Black considering my knowledge of the racial makeup of this and other HBCUs, I came to realize that Chelsea has spent a considerable amount of time reconciling the expectations that others have of her in an effort to become the confident person she is today. Whereas I had to simply open a door to meet Chelsea, her personal journey to self-discovery was not as simple nor linear. In fact, her college experience can be described as finding her way through a "mental maze"—blindly, quietly, and on her own. While done in an unconscious manner, Chelsea walked me through the diverging paths she took in her quest to find her full self and become her own person, not just as a self-identified first-generation, heterosexual, Black woman, but as the Chelsea Jones who lives by the words: "Nobody is Chelsea. Nobody can ever be Chelsea."

Figure it Out

In terms of upbringing, Chelsea grew up exclusively with her lower-middle-income parents and two siblings, saying "it's always been just five of us." With such a nuclear family structure, Chelsea developed a contradictory sense of autonomy and

codependence which she has continued to struggle with. Specifically, Chelsea's parents refused to let them be "latchkey kids" and encouraged them to use their hometown, Brooklyn, and the rest of New York City as their playground. Consequently, Chelsea attributes her general open mindedness and independence to exploring the diverseness that they were surrounded by. However, since Chelsea confined her level of dependence to the parameters of her Jones family pentagon, she spent the majority of her time in her older sister's shadow. By participating in any and every activity that she was engaged in, Chelsea never had the opportunity to be her own person.

Going to college was a way *out* for Chelsea, in two senses of the word. Foremost, Chelsea's father gave her two options after high school; either work or college. Fearful that she would be stuck in a job that she did not care for, she chose college as this was the path that would enable her to follow her parents' advice and the saying of *do something you love, and you will never work a day in your life*. Although Chelsea chose to major in Communications since it aligned with her loquaciousness, her true occupational passion became evident during an integral phase of her identity development. Secondly and most importantly, attending a college or university, and specifically one outside of New York City, was the only way Chelsea believed that she could find herself.

Consequently, Chelsea developed a razor sharp focus on this trajectory and spoke about her desire to pursue higher education ad nauseam, repeatedly saying as she snapped her fingers, "I'm going, I'm going, I'm going, I'm going." Because both of her parents did not complete college after taking perhaps one or two courses in a community college since "life always got in the way," they were unfamiliar with and ill-informed about the

process. Chelsea was also unable to reach out to her high school guidance counselor who was preoccupied, explaining: “It was maybe 300 of us that graduated. And all 300 of us got a personal recommendation letter from her.” Therefore, Chelsea took it upon herself to research potential colleges and universities, saying “CollegeBoard.com saved my life” and took GreyHound buses to every “college fair in the Tri-State area”—either alone or with a friend.

After a marathon like college search process that was filled with “trial and error”—and made even me feel fatigued simply hearing about it—Chelsea made the decision to attend Cheyney University when she received an on the spot acceptance at one of their open houses, which she attended with a first-generation friend. While Chelsea kept her promise of enrolling in a college that was not in the area (a two-hour drive from New York), she chose Cheyney University because of the “vibe,” which she described as:

It almost felt like you were home, but not really at home. Like you have all these new relatives that you never met before and they’re like super hyped up. Like that was. Seriously. But, that was, um, that was the vibe. And I loved it.

Cheyney University provided her with a feeling of comfort as she embarked on her journey of proving that she is her own person and can accomplish the goal of receiving her bachelor’s degree. However, when her parents moved her into college, she felt the sense that she was truly in this alone. She described the experience as:

It didn’t hit me that I was first-generation. It didn’t hit me that they were leaving me. It didn’t hit me that I was on my own and that this was a new experience until my mom closed my door, my dorm room door...And she took her hand and she prayed over my door. And I was like, “What are you doin’, like crazy lady?”

In my opinion, while Chelsea's mother was saying a prayer for her safety in college, Chelsea unconsciously took her mother's general fear to mean that she was afraid Chelsea would be unable to handle the experience without her immediate family to rely on. To ameliorate any inkling of doubt, Chelsea inherited a failure is not an option mentality—even though her parents never uttered the sentiment. With a sense of anxiety, Chelsea explained: "I felt like I had to pass everything. I had to be extra exceptional. I had to make sure that I got my degree. And that was hard. And it was a lot of pressure." Not only did Chelsea believe that she could not fail in her academic courses and when she did receive a failing grade she "didn't tell anybody," she even "refused" to return home during her time at the University if she was homesick since she equated that to admitting defeat.

Fixated on a college degree since she said, "we were paying for this goal," and "there needs to be a piece of paper" to show for it, Chelsea was "focused and determined" to succeed "by any means." Due to her family's unfamiliarity with the college context, approaching them for guidance and support (aside from financial and some emotional support) was out of the question. Given her "it's just five of us" outlook, the only solution was to rely on herself. Even though Chelsea indicated that professors and administrators at the University were available and "genuinely invested" in students and there were fellow first-generation collegians on campus that would understand her struggles, she was steadfast in her "figure it out" mentality. So much so that Chelsea's plan of attack could be described as a solo mission. She described her strategy as:

We gotta figure something out. We gotta do some extra studying or we gonna have to find a student who used to take this class and give me a cheat sheet or something. In college, you do anything to pass. I promise you do.

While her approach was successful for the most part, it backfired when Chelsea decided to moonlight as her own personal academic advisor, causing her to misjudge her remaining graduation requirements and had to stay for an extra semester (which turned into an extra year since Chelsea then decided to take the time and boost her GPA for graduate school).

During Chelsea's college experience, she was aware that she was a first-generation student especially since she spent a considerable amount of time "jumping hurdles that nobody else even knew existed" and was exhausted for doing so. However, she did not reflect on what it truly meant to be the first in her family to have graduated until she received her diploma in the mail and her sister—who she describes as unemotional—responded with a heartfelt congratulations. She described how she and her family felt when she said:

My original goal was to get my degree. To do what I know my parents wanted me to do. Essentially even if they haven't done it and to do something that nobody else has done. This is what I wanted to do. And I did it. For them, I know it means like the world. Like, it, it means everything. My mom always says it, "You're the only child that do what she say she gonna do." Um. But, it means everything to them. Um, for me, it just means what you kinda should already know. Is that you can do anything you put your mind to.

The piece of paper that Chelsea was so focused on receiving signified that she was able to forge her own path and become her own person outside of her sister. In fact, her family began to look at her as Chelsea Jones, the college graduate. For Chelsea, being viewed as though she was atop a "pedestal" meant that if she was able to meet their expectations of

being “perfect” and graduating from college, something that her family did not do, then that must mean that she can accomplish anything on her own in life.

But, as Chelsea transitioned out of college and is now dealing with the difficulties of her adulthood, she questions whether she is truly the independent individual she claims to be. In a sense of panic, Chelsea wonders if the maze she went through to find herself was filled with smoke and mirrors and being able to graduate from college as a first-generation student was a false sense of independence. However, I would argue that while the college environment felt like a “safety net” and perhaps depicted post-college life through rose colored glasses, she did become her own person; inquisitive, thoughtful, and self-assured, especially as reflected in the paths she took to understand her other identities.

Finer Woman/Full Circle Woman

While the path that Chelsea took to become her own person as a first-generation student may have been the one she was most mindful of given the time sensitive nature and tangible trophy/diploma she received for getting to the end of the maze/graduation, she was simultaneously traversing her path as a woman. How Chelsea understands her gender identity as a Black woman can be best described as a maze of visible expectations. Starting when she was younger, Chelsea had a heightened awareness of who she was expected to be as a Black girl. She explained:

Being a little Black girl, there’s a lot of stuff that you have to learn to do. So, of course learn how to take care of the home and go to school. Learn how to be in public, dress in public. Learn how to speak in public...Learn how to adjust to turning on and off, if you will, the hood side of you. Like you know, you’re around your Black friends and then when you get out in public, speaking like

what my momma would say, like you got some sense. Like, not really putting in the slang.

Although she mentions that more is accepted today, having to uphold these standards so as not to embarrass her parents or “another Black person in a crowd,” caused her to feel the “pressure to be a little bit better or to act a little bit better when that’s normal for everybody else.” Chelsea continued to understand her identity through her intersecting group associations when she tagged along as her sister participated in a girl’s empowerment group—which transformed from a step group after the founder noticed that the diverse girls who were participating were eager to discuss home life issues. However, since she was surrounded by other girls of color, she did not have to display a public persona representing a *positive* image of her membership group. Instead, she felt “comfortable in that common space” causing her to forcefully state that she did not have a clue about who she was: “I didn’t even think about it because they were there and I could just bounce off of that. Like it was nothing about me transitioning into my own. It never, it never slipped my mind until I got to college.”

As discussed, Chelsea was adamant about attending college so she could become her own person and not always be viewed as “the eight year old that followed my sister around all the time” especially since “you don’t know as a girl how you’re going to be your own woman until you kinda get in a space where you’re by yourself and you gotta be alone.” Yet, when she first arrived at Cheyney University, Chelsea was not exactly *alone*. Since based on her description, half of the student population is comprised of Black women, Chelsea was surrounded by peers who looked like her and made her feel “comfortable.” As such there was no reason for her to intentionally process or give

additional thought to her gender identity. Even though the college context allowed Chelsea to be removed from the public expectations of being a young Black girl, she was still drawn to her participation in the girl's empowerment group, which became pivotal in how she processed her gender identity; both unconsciously and consciously.

Most noticeably, its impact led Chelsea to join a sorority on campus, however, she would not settle for just any Greek letters. It was imperative that she be a part of the same sorority that her mentor, the founder of her empowerment group, was a part of. When a chapter was finally established during her fourth year, she sprinted to become a member. To Chelsea, her mentor and other sisters from the sorority carried themselves in such a way that exuded a level of confidence that was innate rather than being “written on [their] forehead” and made her say: “This is something that I wanna be. If this is what—if all these women are Zetas, I want to be a Zeta.”

How Chelsea understands her identity as a woman is rooted partly in the guiding principles of the sorority, which are focused on the conception of “finer womanhood.” While the meaning of a finer woman differs slightly from each member, Chelsea formulated her definition based on her experiences in the college context, the expectations she continues to value from her group membership, and using her mentor as a gold standard. She stated:

A finer woman's just somebody who is, they embody everything that they believe in. Whether it be scholarship, whether it be service. For me, it's specifically somebody who is grounded within themselves, who knows what they wanna do, who believes in themselves, and also believes in others, and tries to help them at all costs. Um, help in terms of educate. There is nothing better on this planet for me than education.

Throughout college, prior to and when she was officially a Zeta, Chelsea aimed to demonstrate the qualities of being a finer woman, saying that she learned to “work hard for my grades and everything in scholarship” and “be a sister to people who’s not my blood.” However, the value that most resonated with Chelsea was being of service to others: “You don’t have to be a teacher to do it, but it’s just somebody who takes that time out of their day to invest in somebody else and could—because they want them genuinely to be better.” Specifically, as a resident advisor at Cheyney University starting in her sophomore year and now as a higher education administrator, Chelsea developed a nurturing presence, typically being referred to as “mom” by peers and students.

However, mirroring her mentor and other sisters only allowed Chelsea to develop an understanding of who she *expects* herself to be as a finer woman. While membership in her sorority afforded her the right to be “one on paper,” Chelsea did not believe that she became her own woman or what she refers to as a “full circle woman” in college.

When asked to describe what it means to be a woman within minutes of us first meeting, without hesitation Chelsea explained:

Female, woman is two different things for me. Um. Female is my sex of course. Um. I have very large breasts. I am just a female. I have basic female issues, the body type issues. Um, but to be a woman, um, is not something that you just are based on your sex. To be a woman for me is kinda the evolution of stuff that you go through, stuff that you accomplish through life. Just me personally. I feel that you become full circle of a woman when you do become a mom. Not even just giving birth or having that type of experience. Just kind of that maternal taking care of, um, taking care of or kind of just molding another human being because I’ve had a lot of women in my life who haven’t necessarily had children, but have had that experience of kind of molding and raising children that aren’t theirs. So I think that’s what makes a woman a woman, just kinda just evolving and coming into their own experiences. Um, but definitely that molding and raising or nurturing somebody to become like who they are.

Ultimately, it was only at the end of our last conversation when Chelsea confided in me that she is expecting a child, that she began to see herself as a full circle woman.

In my opinion though, based on her definitions of being a woman (finer and full circle), molding minds and being of service to others only comes when you are grounded in yourself. Chelsea's experience in the sorority was integral in solidifying who she is expected to be based on her gender identity. However, I believe that it was through her romantic relationship in college or her heterosexual identity that Chelsea truly understood what it genuinely means to become her own woman.

Respected, Not Expected

As Chelsea was speaking of her sexual orientation, stating, "I am heterosexual, um, of course," I instantaneously noticed the Freudian slip that would come to foreshadow the significance of her heterosexual relationship in the college context. To Chelsea, being a straight woman was "of course" who she is because the most integral experience that Chelsea had in the college context surrounded this identity and specifically the relationship she had with her "second real boyfriend." Not only did Chelsea admit that her ex-boyfriend was pivotal to how she understands herself, but it was evident in our conversations given the frequency and emotion with which she spoke about him.

Entering college was filled with transitions as it related to "if you're not sexually active to having sex" and "if you don't have a boyfriend to having a boyfriend." When Chelsea met John during their first year, she began the relationship wanting to "experience a real kind of love" and was able to find that as they enjoyed each other's

company, at one point lived together as their residence halls merged, and had many mutual friends. However, Chelsea was ill prepared for the transition from having a boyfriend to dealing with a boyfriend who cheated on her. In response, she repeatedly asked the question: “Am I good enough for this person?”

Given that Chelsea’s father preferred that she wait until after college to date, she had never discussed romantic relationships with her parents nor siblings, and has not witnessed a healthy marriage, she “wasn’t too interested in speaking to anybody about it.” Not surprisingly, Chelsea was also uncomfortable seeking counsel from friends and peers at the University regarding her issues with John since due to the small campus size “anybody could be overhearing in a corner.” As a result, Chelsea remained silent and attempted to utilize the same “figure it out” model that she was accustomed to as a first-generation student. Unfortunately, however, she was unable to traverse the “mental maze” that she was going through and instead “floated around.” The emotional toll that her relationship issues were having on her were noticeable since the Chelsea who was typically cheerful and willing to help others was replaced with a person who was quiet, not eating sufficiently, experiencing some hair loss, and engaged in nervous habits, such as biting her nails and scratching.

As this version of Chelsea confined her daily activities to a triangular path—only going from class, to work, to her residence hall to sleep and then back again—she was approached by her supervisor in residence life. Noticing the changes in Chelsea but not wanting to be “nosy” and directly asking her to confide in her, she provided her with an internship opportunity that allowed her to put “all of that energy whether it’s negative,

proactively into something.” To Chelsea, her supervisor and that experience was the turning point for her and made her truly believe the words her mother preached: “When you need somebody, God makes them appear.” Not only did Chelsea develop a love for higher education, which has now turned into her career, but she was able to process her heterosexual relationship.

With a level of maturity, confidence, and wisdom that some older women are even incapable of reaching (in my opinion), Chelsea, at 23 years young reflected on the lessons she learned. The most critical was her understanding of her father’s sentiments which she recalled verbatim as though she had repeated them in her head as a memorization task during her years of struggle: “The woman that you are, will be dependent on the kids that you create and be dependent on the man that you bring into your life.” Chelsea realized that she did not want to be a woman who allowed her ex-boyfriend or any other man she is in a relationship with to compromise the values and expectations that her father has for her, which include being a strong, educated Black woman who is “able to accept who you are, but find it, as well.” Initially, Chelsea’s nurturing personality caused her to be “emotionally codependent” and “think about him and what he wanted,” which jeopardized what she wanted and why she came to Cheyney University. However, she came to the conclusion that she should be someone who is “respected” and not “expected.” She explained:

There’s a difference between somebody you expect—if you kind of always expect somebody to be there and expect them to do the same things—be nurturing, be caring, be understanding—if you expect that all the time, they’re kind of gonna lose a little bit of respect for you, and the respect that you deserve. So, I went into being that expected person to being the respected person.

Ultimately, Chelsea was able to understand what it means for her to be in a “healthy” heterosexual relationship: “One, having my back no matter what. Two, specifically and wholeheartedly not changing somebody, but accepting who they are.” Finally, Chelsea was able to become her own person within her heterosexual identity—a person who deserves to be accepted and respected for finding confidence in herself, knowing that she is enough, remaining true to who she is, and not letting anyone deter her from her path.

Look Left, Look Right

In contrast to Chelsea’s first-generation, Black woman, and heterosexual identities, understanding who she is as a person of color in college was not considered a “mental maze.” Rather, Chelsea felt like “home” at Cheyney University, especially since she was surrounded by friends who she described as “homie.” That is, the campus environment provided Chelsea with a sense of familiarity considering that “everybody here is Black; well 90 percent of people here are Black.” She further explained that:

When you’re in the same place where everybody looks how you look, you’re in the same place where everybody likes what you like, um, whether it’s culturally or whatever the case, no matter where you come from, you don’t think about what you are. You are comfortable being what you are because everybody else is.

For this reason, Chelsea admitted that race was not seen as a “big deal.” Yet, since race “did not cross [their] minds,” and “it is what it is,” students at Cheyney University, as well as Chelsea were the “most accepting in terms of diversity” and are open to learning about anyone and anything that is not “homie” or similar to them in terms of race/ethnicity. For example, Chelsea mentioned that with the majority of the teaching staff at the institution being White adjunct professors, “they adapted to campus culture and we adapted to them,” especially due to the small classroom sizes that allowed for

“personable conversations.” Further, defining the campus culture as “chill, relax,” professors would typically switch from a suit and tie to a more business casual dress code after noticing the “slides” and comfortable attire that students chose to wear to class. In turn, students became interested in “weird stuff” including the serial podcast that their professor introduced them to:

After he left, and he was here for maybe a semester, I listened to this thing every day. So he brought that into us and, and we was a whole team, like, “Girl, you hear that podcast last night?” Everybody. Like, we were a whole team of people that were just listening to podcasts.

While such examples may seem trivial to some, it speaks to the “organic” nature of the institutional context that empowers students to become individuals in a space where the majority of peers “look how you look.” For Chelsea, she realized that the intersection of her race and hometown identity is what set her apart from her peers and not make her feel like a “number.” While her friends were “homie” given that they identified similarly in terms of race, they lacked a comparable cultural awareness. Being from New York City where she was “on the train with different races all day,” allowed her to “not make a big deal about race,” but more importantly it exposed her to diverse foods, making her a self-proclaimed foodie. In fact, Chelsea mentioned that she was “creeped out” that her peers had a standard palette, with racial groups eating the “same things,” reluctant to expand their horizons and try for example, knishes.

Chelsea explained that it may be difficult for students at HBCUs to “discuss diversity when they look left, they look right, and there’s no diversity.” However, she recognized that cultural awareness is not only accomplished by understanding differences between races, but within groups, as well. Instead of allowing her comfortability in a

“common space” to stifle her self-reflection, Chelsea was able to understand what it means to be her own person at a HBCU—a person of color who can be different and independent while still remaining tied to their racial group identity.

Become My Own Person

When Chelsea told her parents, “I’m going. I’m going. I’m going. I’m going,” she did not simply mean that she was going away to college to solely receive a bachelor’s degree, but that she was planning to pursue a journey much for meaningful. Cognizant of the expectations that are tied to her, Chelsea was focused on becoming her own person outside of her immediate family and group associations. In order to do so, she tackled an internal “mental maze,” that made her question herself and those around her. At the end of her college career, Chelsea had a better understanding of who she is as a heterosexual, first-generation, Black woman. However, her path to self-discovery did not end the day she received her college degree. Instead, Chelsea realizes that personal growth and identity development are ongoing processes and the only way to become her own person and full self is to continuously evolve and reflect, while tackling each maze with the same tenacity.

TYANA BROWN

Tyana Brown and I are both first-generation women. Stating that this title is one of the only commonalities between us, would be a gross understatement. In fact, while I can recite Tyana’s story with ease, as a White non-Hispanic of middle class background I am painfully cognizant of the fact that I will never truly know the Black American of low-income status who shared her life and college experiences with me in a no-holds-

barred fashion. For the last 26 years, Tyana has lived a “fishbowl” existence. Not only have her identities made her feel “stuck” in the oppressive world that she grew up in, but a spectacle to be examined and judged by others outside of her glass confinement.

Although filled with missteps and setbacks, Tyana’s journey to college has allowed her to reflect on who she is—independently and in comparison to others, break the stereotypes associated with her identities, and free herself from the constraints of those she shared a fishbowl with.

Fish Out of Water

Growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, the only life that Tyana knew was that of her fishbowl or public housing project where everyone around her was also poor and Black. She described her upbringing as “difficult” and “tough” since she was living in a “crime infested” neighborhood plagued with drug addiction. As such, when Tyana mentioned that her father died from a heroin overdose when she was eleven years old and her mother battled a crack cocaine addiction for an extended period of time, she did so in a cavalier attitude—not in the sense that she has no emotion in regards to her parents, but showing that the prevalence of such struggles in her upbringing were so commonplace that they have become the norm and for which she is practically no longer fazed by. With home life issues such as these, it could be assumed that education was not a priority, but Tyana stated: “Even though my mom and dad were like, um, addicted, like to drugs or whatever, they would like really push us, to like, get an education.” During their K-8 schooling, Tyana and her older sister excelled and heeded the calls of their mother who would threaten punishment if they did not receive good grades. But, it was specifically because

of critical teachers and her paternal grandmother (who frequently gifted her books), that Tyana recognized the importance of an education even though her extended family (maternal) did not see the “value.”

Given her academic and intellectual aptitude when she was younger, Tyana was able to choose the high school that she wanted to attend. However, after enrolling in one of the more prestigious secondary institutions, she felt “really out of place” in an environment where her poor background was noticeable even though she aligned with the racial makeup. Lashing out because she did not feel comfortable or that she fit in, Tyana found herself getting into trouble, which ultimately led to her dismissal. She was quickly transferred to the high school she was zoned to and greeted by “a bunch of neighborhood, like, knuckleheads.” While being with individuals who were similar to her in all aspects of her identity made her feel comfortable, they “weren’t academically as serious as [she] was trying to be,” and were a negative influence in terms of drug and alcohol use, causing Tyana to transfer to an alternative high school. Recognizing that she had gotten involved in the wrong crowd and succumbed to the pressures in her area, she was determined to find her way: “I had made up my mind that I was gonna like finally like get myself together, like graduate.” Tyana was able to get back to the “good student” she once was and graduate even though it had taken her six years—during that time she was essentially homeless; living with her cousin after her mother’s cocaine addiction had “spiraled, like, out of control,” and she herself was dealing with her own excessive drug and alcohol use. However, receiving her high school diploma was the first step. Tyana “always knew” that

she wanted to pursue higher education, but recent events made her realize even more that she did not want to have the same fate as her extended family, mentioning:

I feel like a lot of them are just like stuck. You know, I think they don't even realize they're in a fishbowl. You know, and, um, so, for me, coming back to school was like, um, was just like me like desperately trying to like get outta that fishbowl.

Initially, Tyana had long term plans of taking courses at the local community college and eventually transfer to a four-year institution, however, she quickly realized that it would be an “uphill battle” to be a student while also working two jobs so that she could financially afford to continue to live alone, outside of her cousin’s home. If she was going to get out of her fishbowl she needed to take a leap of faith and not a hop. Tyana decided to leave Baltimore behind and follow her mother to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania after seeing her mother’s transformation—from the woman who lost their home because she used their rent money to purchase drugs, to a clean and sober woman who was employed and resided with her boyfriend after successfully completing a drug rehabilitation program. Tyana described the conversation with her mother, that led to the best decision she ever made for herself, when she said:

So um I spoke to her about it, and she was like, you know, like, “Yeah, sure, come here,” you know, “We got an extra room, you can live here, which means you don't have to work so much and all that and you can just, you know, start your college career now.” You know, they says it's never too late, you can go now, and that's what made me come here.

Aside from knowing that the goal when going to Philadelphia was to pursue an academic or professional/technical avenue, Tyana did not have a specific plan of action. After sorting through her potential options, she settled on attending the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) and pursuing an associate’s degree instead of a four-year

institution or professional program, due to its financial feasibility and her self-conception of academic preparedness. However, not having any first hand experiences of how college worked, Tyana felt like a fish out of water:

Like I didn't really have, like, the resources to really, um. I didn't know anything about college at all. Like, you know, a lot of people who have family members who came to college, they understand, like the college process. They understand, like what credits are or what credit hours are. Or they understand, like, um, I had to get financial aid, they understand how that works. I had no idea, like, how financial aid worked.

While Tyana compares herself to non-first-generation students, she has never once felt bad for herself. And when she explained that she was not familiar with the higher education context because her father chose to join the army directly after high school as opposed to college and then passed away after being honorably discharged, and her mother received her GED due to familial struggles and her addiction, Tyana does not want me or anyone else to pity her. Rather, the manner in which Tyana openly shares her story further exemplifies that she was not going to settle for a fishbowl life—surrounded by extended family who are content with food stamps and public housing. Instead, Tyana wanted to thrive and knew that in order for her to do so, she would need to rely on herself—full of independence and grit.

Tyana took it upon herself to become familiar with the logistics of college and only requested minimal assistance from college administrators to assist her in choosing a suitable field of study with promising employment opportunities; Paralegal Studies. When it came to academics, Tyana was apprehensive about her capabilities when she first arrived, but far exceeded the scholastic preparedness of her peers, finding coursework to be “easy.” Proving herself to be self-sufficient at CCP, Tyana came to recognize that the

type of assistance she was actually in need of, but not looking for (as a first-generation student) was peer support.

Since the majority of her classmates were also the first in their families to attend college and claiming the first-generation title at CCP was “normal,” Tyana was able to find a community of like-minded individuals who value education, self-improvement, and expanding their horizons. Tyana mentioned that, “it was really good to have people that you have that commonality with,” not because they would “dwell” on their past, but because they were all focused on the future. Since Tyana did not want to repeat the missteps she made in high school and for which she regrets, being surrounded by such peers in the classroom and the many organizations she was a part of, kept her on the “right track,” so that she could complete her associate’s degree and transfer to Temple University for her bachelor’s.

Initially feeling like a fish out of water as she was trying to acclimate to being a college student, Tyana is proud of how far she was able to swim:

For me to come here and just stick it out and figure everything out on my own, and do everything on my own and not really have like the biggest support system, it made me even like proud that I even, like, accomplished it.

Both Tyana and I know that especially given her upbringing, her accomplishments are ones that should be given tremendous praise. However, I could not help but notice the hint of disappointment in her voice, to which Tyana candidly explained:

I regret just like not making the right decisions back then, and then sometimes, I mean, I just really wish that I just would’ve done a lot of things differently. And, um, yeah, I just think about it all the time. Like, where would I be right now if I wouldn’t of made like all those unnecessary mistakes that I made? Even – even though I didn’t have like the support back then that I would need to, like, um, go straight to college from like high school, I wasn’t financially supported and I

wasn't like emotionally supported by my family or my friends or whatever like that.

Given Tyana's independent nature, she has and never will need to have her hand held in life, however, with every *what if* scenario that she creates in her mind, she becomes more aware of how vital emotional support was to her first-generation identity and will continue to be as she moves toward her bachelor's degree. Further, Tyana's CCP experience and the peer support she received unveiled just how stifling the one track mentality of her fishbowl environment was to her formal education, intellectual growth, and identity development.

Teach a Person to Fish

As discussed, Tyana identifies as poor and given her upbringing, there was never any doubt in her mind that she was of a low socioeconomic status, stating:

Like I understood that we were like poor, and I understood that like, most of the people in our neighborhood were poor, and like everybody at the school was poor. I just understood that. I just it is what it is. Like, we were all poor.

Given Tyana's myopic view when she was younger, she equated her racial identity with her income status, believing that Black = poor. However, when she reached high school, the income disparities within her racial group were noticeable. While Tyana was not the only Black student of low-income status, she felt as though she was "too poor," especially compared to more affluent Black peers. Perceiving herself as a "joke or something," Tyana felt uncomfortable and like an outsider. The associated stigma that she felt because of her income status consequently resulted in Tyana choosing to stop attending and instead be in an environment with "people who understood where I came from, or understood why I, I was the way I was, why I dressed the way I went to school."

At the time, Tyana's desire for belongingness superseded all others on her hierarchy of needs. But, the closer she felt as though she belonged, the more she felt "stuck":

They're, in like, in this fishbowl and they don't even realize – that they're in here. You know. And I try to explain to them also, like, you know you think that you got it, you have an okay life here because you're like, bein' taking care of by like, the government or whatever – but, you don't realize that the price that you're paying for that is to, like, you have to be poor your whole life. Right, like, you can only get these government things if you remain poor. It's like a deal with the devil in a way.

If Tyana were to remain in her fishbowl, she would settle for the life she has always known—struggling financially while being employed in a job paying “nine dollars an hour for the rest of your life” and mirroring “people 60-years-old still working on like minimum wage.” For Tyana, there was only one option and that was out.

As a low-income individual, one of the primary motivations for Tyana to attend college was to become financially secure through a career. That being the case, Tyana put all of her effort into choosing a major with lucrative employment opportunities and saw participating in each student organization as incremental pieces in her game of “resume builder.” However, Tyana also gained a better understanding of her economic identity through her college experience. Based on the fact the Tyana is older and is no longer concerned with the “complexity” of being of a low socioeconomic status (i.e., “eviction notices on the door;” “no food in the refrigerator”) whilst dealing with “family issues,” she does not identify as being poor. Although she still considers herself low-income, she finds herself to be on the “same level” as her fellow peers at CCP: “It's just a bunch of hardworking people who just don't have money.” By finding individuals who were

similar to herself in that they live by a *teach a person to fish* mantra, instead of being content with a “deal with the devil,” Tyana was able to shed the *personal* insecurities she associated with her income status and the title of being poor.

Though Tyana describes the low socioeconomic makeup of CCP as “normal,” she is cognizant of the fact that her particular status is anything but that. Whereas for many students at CCP, school is not their priority because they have familial, work, and financial responsibilities, Tyana is in an advantaged position. Although she does work part-time and also had a work-study position in college, she was fortunate to have a mother and stepfather who provided her with some financial support (specifically housing). In a tone of embarrassment, Tyana said: “How many, like, people over 25, their parents are gonna like help take care of you while you try to go to school?” Ultimately, Tyana credits her parents for the ability to be “consumed” by school, complete her associate’s, and actually engage in the college context.

However, Tyana knows all too well the struggles and failure of trying to balance work and school. As such, when Tyana saw the enrollment of her classes drastically diminish every semester, she was understanding and sympathetic toward her peers: “It’s not like you’re being lazy, or you don’t have work ethic. It’s, like, you literally just can’t.” The respect and admiration that Tyana has for them is palpable. To her, the fact that her CCP peers are trying to propel themselves forward is praiseworthy. Ultimately, her college experience and being around like-minded peers has given Tyana a better understanding of her economic identity and seeing herself as a hardworking low-income individual and not simply poor. To Tyana, the difference is clear and as such she

vehemently opposes the thought of being associated with her fishbowl. She no longer belongs with individuals who are resistant to even the thought of trying to change their economic situation, but instead surrounds herself with those who are supportive of her future.

Staring at the Black Fish

In stark contrast to her income status, Tyana never thought about her identity as a Black American when she was younger. Growing up in an “all like Black neighborhood,” not only did everyone look like her, but race was not a topic of conversation. Tyana would mostly hear her family jokingly make comments, such as, “Oh, Black people don’t do that,” and “That’s what White people do,” and when “racially charged” incidents were brought up, they were discussed briefly amongst the adults and not with her:

And a lot of times like when you’re like a Black child growing up in a big family, like you’re not, like privy to that anyway. They’re like, go be a child, like mind your business um, “It’s grown folks talkin’,” is like what they would say and like. So, you were really weren’t introduced to like, kinda like grown folks conversation or language or nothing like that.

Tyana is still unsure as to why her family has a racial code of silence, but without this dialogue, she was left to formulate her own conceptions of what it means to be White or Black, which came to a head when her family was relocated to a subsidized home in a suburban area. Moving into a diverse neighborhood and middle school was a “culture shock” for Tyana. Not only would this period in her life be the first time that she ever “had a conversation with a White kid,” but it was an introduction to the racial stereotypes that she continues to evaluate.

Most noticeably, Tyana remembers the skepticism and curiosity that came with her being one of the few Black students in an advanced middle school class. Since “the students, you know, expected that Asians and White were like smarter than like the Black people in the class,” Tyana was aware that she was always on display. As students continuously made it a point to pay attention to the grades she received, Tyana remained silent—similar to when she was called the “N word” by a White male friend (a story that she has only shared with one person, myself). While Tyana internalized these overt and covert microaggressions—trying to inherit the same state of obliviousness as her family when it comes to racial issues—her experiences did make her more attuned to the stereotypes associated with her Black identity and how she is viewed in comparison to others; especially when she is the only person of color in the room. Tyana explained:

...Growing up like poor, and like— and from like poor, black communities. Like, all you hear a lot is negative things about, like, Black people. You hear that people, Black people aren’t as smart. Or you hear that you know like a lot of stereotypes about Black people being like criminals, or um being lazy, and stuff like that, and it kinda does like break your confidence. Like, as a child, to like always hear that, like, every time you turn on the TV or news or something like that, you get these like negative um aspects of like being Black or whatever.

When Tyana made the decision to leave her fishbowl, she was fearful of coming to college and confirming these stereotypes. But, when Tyana arrived at CCP, the diverse population allowed her to put her guard down. In college, Tyana was a student and not a Black student. She could focus on her academics without having the conscious or unconscious stereotypes associated with her race impede her progress. She mentioned:

You can have the same amount of like Black students, as White students, as Asian students, as Hispanic in one classroom here. So I think that um it helps you to feel comfortable, and it um helps you uh feel confident, too. You know? Because like, you know, everyone’s not like looking at you to see how well you’re doing.

There's a lot of times people have a low expectation of Black people, so people always wanna know like what you got on your test, or how well you're doing, or how smart are you. Or people are trying to um evaluate, you know, how much you fit a stereotype. You know? So I think that it's good bein' here because you don't have to worry about that as much because it's--it's a lot of diversity here, which is like really great, and it's really like comfortable.

While Tyana did not worry that a peer and/or faculty member at CCP would question her intellectual abilities based on her skin color and therefore she did not have to give much thought to her racial identity in the college context, she has reflected more on being Black as it relates to the professional world. Tyana recognizes that she has been fortunate to not have experienced any acts of prejudice or racism at CCP since everyone is at the "same level," but based on the experiences of others in her fishbowl, Tyana is aware that such injustices could await her in the future. In preparation, Tyana has given careful consideration to choosing a major field of study and asking critical questions such as, "How often do people hire Black people in this field?" She continued this thought when she stated:

I always think about the challenges of like that race present just because it can prohibit you from just like getting ahead simply like because somebody doesn't want to hire you just because like, you're Black. Also people don't want to have like too many Black people working at their law firm, or something like that.

As Tyana said, "a lot of people have the privilege not to have to think about that, but like, I did," I could not help but realize that while she started college with the goal of thriving independently and overcame more obstacles in her 26 years than many students will see in their lifetime, including myself, she will continue to be defined by the racial identity of her fishbowl. However, the difference between her former self and the person in front of me is that Tyana found her voice—deciding to no longer remain silent and instead break

the stereotypes associated with being Black. By continuing to further her education and consequently her career, Tyana hopes to “add to like the positive statistics of being a Black person,” change the stereotypical views that even she had when she was younger that to be White is to be “more successful,” and attach a speaker to any conversation where “grown folks talkin’” so everyone can hear.

Privileged Fish

The fierceness with which Tyana discussed her racial identity was noticeable, especially in regards to how she would deal with the same White peer who called her the “N word” if the incident occurred now, saying: “I would go to the end of the earth right, to make sure that you feel some kind of ramifications for that.” However, her typical subdued tone returned when speaking of her gender identity. Tyana initially claimed that she has not given much thought to what it means to be a woman, which she affirmed with the anatomy lesson she provided me. In the college context, Tyana was constantly surrounded by women given her field of study and the overall woman to man ratio at CCP. Even though Tyana specifically chose to pursue “something different” since she believed that “every woman does nursing,” her choice in Paralegal Studies was nevertheless a popular major for women. Ultimately, with a “noticeable” woman presence in college, Tyana stated: “I don’t feel like I had any advantages or disadvantages from being a woman, or any benefits, or any non-benefits. It’s just like, I don’t think it mattered here.”

However, her identity as a woman did matter when we discussed the intersection of gender and race. Similar to there being stereotypes associated with being a person of

color, Tyana shared the assumptions that are made of her as a Black woman, such as “every Black woman is like on welfare, sitting home, being lazy, not doing nothing.” Considering that Tyana left her fishbowl to remove herself from a life of welfare, housing projects, and extended family who are not motivated to “break the cycle,” such judgements are offensive and disheartening to her. Yet, they have also been a motivating force as Tyana repeated the sentiments of wanting to “be that person that adds toward the positive statistic that like Black women go to college and are educated.” As a means to not only be a role model, but continue to break down stereotypes, Tyana’s ultimate goal with her associate’s degree in Paralegal Studies and a planned bachelor’s degree in Social Work is to create a non-profit organization or group home specifically for homeless women with the requirement that participants pursue and complete a college degree. Given that she was a single homeless woman who had limited access to assistance because she did not have children, Tyana hopes to provide help in a “pay it forward” fashion so that women can advance themselves by seeing that others who have come from similar backgrounds were able to change their circumstances and thrive.

Even though Tyana is focused on the advancement of Black women, including herself, she recognizes her current advantaged position in comparison to Black men.

Tyana explained her viewpoint when she said:

I think that um Black women are more accepted in some of the professional—the professional world than, I would say like Black men. Um because it’s like kind of evident. When you—when you um go to like professional buildings, or office spaces, like I think you just see more Black women than you see Black men. Um and there’s just like a lot more derogatory like, stereotypes about Black men. So I think that it’s harder for people sometimes to let go of like those stereotypes when you have like a good candidate in front of you. And um it, it causes a lot of um

Black men to lose out on opportunities because of that. So I think that um it's easier for Black women, than I would say it is for like Black men.

While Tyana stated that “a Black woman would probably get hired before like, a Black male in some situations,” she does not believe that she can feel privileged when it comes to the professional world. Instead, she has spent more brain power considering the very real scenario that she may be denied career opportunities because of her intersecting identities—being a Black person, who is a woman, comes from a poor neighborhood, and is not “as polished or refined as lot of other people.” So while Tyana has been given a reprieve from thinking about her gender in the college context and she may be more “accepted” in an occupation compared to a Black male, she is not throwing caution to the wind just yet. Instead, she is bracing herself for the disadvantaged professional position she believes she will be in due to the combination of her negative identities.

Seeing Outside the Fishbowl

For Tyana, the college experience allowed her to understand who she is in relation to and independently from her fishbowl. She explained the impact by stating:

It kind of like opens your eyes up to like the whole world out here that you have not been a part of, that like your family has not been a part of, that your neighbors have not been a part of. People just – like I said, I think I told you before, I feel like a lot of people are just like in this fishbowl, and they think that this fishbowl that they are in is the life, and there's just all this life happening outside of the fishbowl that people just don't even know it's existing. Right? Like, you know it's existing, but you're not a part of it, and you don't care to be a part of it. And I think that for me, coming to college, I really had opportunities to like get out of the fishbowl, to see outside of the fishbowl, to see like how the world is run.

By seeing outside of the fishbowl, Tyana has expanded her way of thinking. While she still finds it difficult to understand those who have settled into their fishbowl existence, she no longer wishes to detach herself completely from them especially since regardless

of the physical distance, Tyana will always be similar to them in terms of being Black and coming from a poor background. Instead of watching her family “drown,” Tyana realizes that she can use her formal and informal education to bring about change, be a positive role model, and break the stereotypes that she is associated with. Even though Tyana knows that she may continue to be judged in life and the professional world for being seen as a person of color, who is a woman, comes from a poor neighborhood, and is not “as polished or refined as lot of other people,” she wants to be a part of the bigger picture and support other persons of color as they overcome adversity to pursue higher education.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, & IMPLICATIONS

Provided in this chapter is an overview of the study including a summary of the narratives of first-generation women, with particular attention given to nuances within their lived experiences as intersecting and complex individuals. Key findings in the study are then discussed in relation to published research and theoretical perspectives, with consistencies, inconsistencies, and new insights being addressed. Following implications for future practice and research, the dissertation concludes with final thoughts on first-generation women and identity intersectionality.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the lived experiences of recently graduated first-generation women and understand how they made meaning of their intersecting identities within unique institutional contexts. The central research questions included: 1) How do undergraduate women situated in particular postsecondary contexts make meaning of being first in their families to attend college, and; 2) How do intersecting identities shape first-generation undergraduate women's experiences within specific college and university contexts? Utilizing a qualitative methodology in which five participants took part in three separate semi-structured in-depth, face-to-face interviews (one participant took part in video calls due to proximity), I was able to meet Anna DeJesus (Temple University), Lauren Smith (Bryn Mawr University), Christina Li (University of Pennsylvania), Chelsea Jones (Cheyney University), and Tyana Brown (Community College of Philadelphia). Through a narrative inquiry approach, the

experiences of each first-generation woman was adequately and extensively reflected allowing for their “complex individuality” (Harper et al., 2011) to be seen; defined as an understanding of who an individual is, their stage of development, and what is needed for them to process identity conflicts or reflection so that they can have a self-actualized and productive post-college life. While generalizations cannot and should not be made across the participants, particular nuances and distinctions amongst and between them as they pertain to first-generation identity, race/ethnicity, gender, and intersectionality are noteworthy and are highlighted in the sections below.

First-Generation Identity

Foremost, first-generation status was an integral aspect of participants’ identities, impacting their understanding of themselves in relation to and independent from others. The women had varying degrees of interdependence toward their familial structures, which shaped their motivation to pursue higher education prior to entering the college or university context and also propelled them to continue to degree completion throughout the experience. Given participants’ unmistakable connections to their families, whether positive or negative, being the first to attend and graduate from college was an accomplishment that instilled a sense of pride.

Consequently, each woman’s self-concept exclusively as a first-generation collegian was initially formulated in relation to her family. Based strictly on this contextual influence, how the women understood their first-generation identity is analogous to the various conceptions of a pedestal. In one sense of the term, Anna, Christina, and Chelsea felt explicit and implicit pressure from their families to not falter

or fail within their higher education institution and to be an unwavering image of success with no other option but to graduate. Yet, Lauren, Christina, and Tyana also mentioned that being the first to receive a college diploma was critically revered and met with residual resentment from family members who were not given the same opportunity, or others equated their conferred degree to signify a superior or elite status in comparison to them.

Regardless of the manner in which the families exhibited their reverence, such associated cues led the women to perceive their educational status in high regard. However, how participants understood what it meant to be the first in their family to attend and graduate from a higher education institution was different from how they viewed being a first-generation student in relation to their peers at their college or university. To put it simply, participants viewed their first-generation status differently in the familial and collegiate contexts. Participants seemed to quickly realize that a first-generation label was based on a deficit framework. Depending on their experiences in the college context and their relationship with peers on campus (first-generation and continuing-generation students), the participants either perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage—just like their first-generation status would suggest—or at an advantage, despite their first-generation status. As a means to process or reconcile the influence the college environment had on their identity, each first-generation woman utilized specific mechanisms.

To exemplify, due to Anna's unpreparedness in the academic realm of Temple University in which she felt like an "outsider," she quieted her first-generation identity,

opted against playing “catch up” with peers, and instead focused her attention on extracurricular engagement, an aspect for which she had more control over and could be successful. Feeling similarly disadvantaged academically, Christina avoided the topic of her first-generation identity by presenting a “perfect” image in the hopes that she would not be associated with the group membership and instead fit in with typical and advantaged University of Pennsylvania peers. While Chelsea also believed that being a first-generation college goer put her at a disadvantage in the higher education arena, she did not feel the need to disassociate herself from her identity at Cheyney University, especially considering that she was surrounded by numerous peers who were also the first in their families to attend college. However, since Chelsea could not seek counsel from her family with whom she developed an ingrained interdependence, she formulated a steadfast independent mentality that continues to plague her in the professional world. Conversely, Lauren perceived herself to be in an advantaged first-generation position at Bryn Mawr University based on her academic competency. She chose to utilize her privilege to support other first-generation collegians who had hindrances in the context. Finally, while Tyana felt at a slight advantage at CCP due to her more advanced academic capabilities and ability to work less hours in comparison to her peers, she felt comfortable in the environment since the majority of students also identified as first-generation and she was finally surrounded by like-minded individuals who valued education.

Not only did the identity conflicts that each participant traverse allow them to understand and reconceptualize what it meant to be a first-generation student in both the

family and college contexts, but conflicts also provided them opportunities to find themselves as independent individuals. While the women were and will continue to be interconnected to their family units, Tyana entered college with the cognizant goal of dissociating from her family, Chelsea and Anna consciously aimed to become their own persons while staying connected to their familial ties, and Christina and Lauren found themselves by consequence. Although first-generation status was a more salient self-concept for some participants than others, it was an integral identity dimension for all women in this study. To clarify, by processing their first-generation status, participants were challenged to understand and/or reconcile other identity issues surrounding an interdependence toward group memberships and their independence as individual selves. An understanding of their first-generation status seemingly influenced their awareness of their other dimensions and ultimately their holistic identity development.

Race/Ethnicity

While participants entered college with an understanding of their race/ethnicity based on their family context, they developed a more complex awareness within their college environments—similar to first-generation status. In one regard, the women became more cognizant of what it meant to be a member of their racial/ethnic group as it compared to other groups. Depending on their level of comfort being associated with their respective racial/ethnic groups and how tightly they held on to the hegemonic beliefs and stereotypes associated with those groups, the women either experienced an identity conflict or reprieve in their college or university. More specifically, Anna, Christina, and Lauren struggled with being understood as individuals of their

race/ethnicity, choosing to use varying defense mechanisms as a means to reconcile their internal conflicts. While Anna initially negotiated contexts in which she could explicitly display her Hispanic identity and Christina avoided bringing attention to her Asian identity at all costs, they were both able to develop an established self-concept, embracing their racial/ethnic identity despite the associated stereotypes. Although Lauren was also able to reflect on her identity as a White Hispanic student in the college context, she was unable to resolve her feelings of being stuck between her privileged and disadvantaged identities, which caused her to enter post-college life with residual identity confusion. Conversely, Tyana and Chelsea did not experience an identity conflict in their undergraduate experiences given that they not only had a strong racial awareness prior to college, but also shared a similar racial identity with the majority of peers in their institutional contexts, which allowed them to feel comfortable as opposed to uneasy within the environment.

Regardless of whether participants experienced identity conflicts, interactions in their respective college contexts allowed them to understand their racial/ethnic identities in comparison to other membership groups, as well as establish a more attuned awareness of within-group differences. For example, Christina was able to dismantle the ingrained beliefs she held regarding her racial/ethnic identity, recognizing that an Asian American identity does not unquestionably intersect with non-first-generation and high income statuses. Moreover, Tyana and Chelsea were able to remain connected to their Black identities and while they have grown accustomed to the racial stereotypes society has

assigned to them by default, they acknowledged and appreciated the individuality and nuanced experiences of others who claimed the same racial group.

Gender

When discussing their lived experiences as undergraduate students at their respective colleges or universities, participants exhibited a high level of introspection in regards to their identity development, especially the aspects that are of particular salience to them. Gender identity, however, was one category for which the majority of participants did not directly address or discuss on their own volition, but instead had to be prompted. In fact, Lauren was the only participant who specifically thought about her gender identity during college, formulating a definition that may be attributed to her institutional context. Attending a women's college influenced Lauren's conception of gender predominantly due to the presence of confident and esteemed women. Conversely, some participants found it difficult to articulate what it meant to be a self-identified woman, with Anna, Tyana, and Chelsea initially confirming their gender by referencing the female anatomy. As such, it can be assumed that Anna, Tyana, Christina, and Chelsea were not challenged to process their gender identities in college classrooms or elsewhere on their campuses.

Upon further reflection, the perplexity that some women felt when asked to define what it meant to be a woman was due to the fact that they did not view themselves strictly on the dimension of gender. Instead, the women's self-concepts were based more so on the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity. Participants did not view themselves only as women, but Black, Hispanic, or Asian women. Being a woman of color was more

impactful to participants and an aspect of their self-concept that they gave considerably more attention to than their gender identity in isolation. Further, having experienced minimal or no direct discrimination or stereotyping as women in their higher education institutions, they did not necessarily associate gender issues to the college context. Instead, Anna, Chelsea, and Tyana in particular, were more focused on mentally preparing for the post-college challenges that they anticipated facing as women of color in the professional world.

Intersectionality

Ultimately, the college experience was influential in participants' identity development and understanding of themselves as complex individuals with intersecting identities. Initially, they reflected on each aspect of their identities, associating a positive/privileged or negative/disadvantaged meaning to their first-generation status, race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and/or sexual orientation based on context, their experiences, and how they viewed themselves in relation to others. Consequently, their nascent self-concept was the sum of their compartmentalized/siloed identity dimensions. However, through identity crises and/or reflection, the participants were able to establish a more holistic conception of self. In fact, while particular social dimensions were either avoided or considered more salient in relation to others, participants were eventually unable to disentangle their identities. For example, it seemed impossible for Christina to understand herself simply based on her race/ethnicity, but instead recognized her full self as a first-generation, low-income, Asian American woman.

It is important to note that each participant viewed and interpreted her development based on a number of factors, contextual or otherwise, that were unique to her. Therefore, while some participants may have similar social dimensions, the intersection of their identities and how they understood themselves in relation to and independent from their group memberships has established them as complex individuals. As such, while all participants identified as first-generation women, similarities between them could not be assumed especially considering that certain identity dimensions were more salient to one participant than to another. To clarify, Chelsea's heterosexual relationship was integral to how she traversed the college context, yet Tyana, Christina, and Lauren barely mentioned their heterosexuality nor found it particularly impactful on their overall conception of self.

Discussion

Higher education researchers have heeded the calls of institutional stakeholders and policymakers who aim to increase degree attainment rates in the nation, particularly for underrepresented students. Scholarship on individuals who are the first to attend college has been included in this endeavor (e.g., Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Radwin et al., 2013), however, limited research has focused on the experiences of first-generation women and how they make meaning of their intersecting identities within the higher education environment. Instead, an abundance of literature has explored first-generation students, undergraduate women (e.g., DiPrete & Buchman, 2013; Sax, 2008), and identity intersectionality (e.g., Brunn-Bevel et al., 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009) as separate topics. Provided in the following section is a discussion of

the present study's key findings in relation to previous research and identity development literature. While similarities exist, additional insights into the collegiate experiences of first-generation women and their identity intersectionality have also emerged and are subsequently addressed.

First-generation students have been categorized as a homogenous population, given that they are predominantly from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (Bui, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al.), experience difficulty in the collegiate context, and are less likely to persist to degree completion compared to traditional collegians (Pascarella et al.). Although some participants in the present study had similarities with the first-generation peers represented in quantitative research (e.g., Choy, 2001), their narratives illustrate the more nuanced experiences of college goers assigned to the first-generation category. Of particular importance is the manner in which the first-generation women in the study made meaning of being first in their families to attend and graduate from a college or university. The motivation for first-generation students to pursue higher education has been attributed to familial responsibility (Bui, 2002), with the women in the present study also abiding by such interdependence. Consistent with Bui's (2002) findings for both first-generation and continuing-generation learners, the majority of participants in my study stated a parental expectation to complete college. The first-generation women I interviewed described the pressure to excel or succeed in higher education regardless of whether or not they viewed successful completion of their college degree as a means to financially assist their families. Other women in the study aligned with Covarrubias and Fryberg's (2015) finding that first-generation college goers

experience family achievement guilt since their families expressed either jealousy for being unable to pursue college or viewed the college graduate as self-important in comparison to those of them who did not or could not choose a higher education path.

Ultimately, each participant's initial self-concept as a first-generation student was formulated through the familial context and then reassessed after entering her respective higher education institution. For those participants who felt as though they aligned with the generalized experiences of first-generation students—being academically underprepared (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004), with lower levels of self-efficacy (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007), and/or self-confidence (Inkelas et al., 2007)—they perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage in relation to their peers. As a means to reconcile the incongruent perceptions between familial and collegiate contexts, they chose to avoid their first-generation status and the associated negative stigma. Since a first-generation status is capable of remaining invisible and undisclosed unless explicitly made known, some participants did not enact the identity in the college environment depending on the climate. Such findings are similar to those presented by Orbe (2004) in his study on first-generation identity. In this instance, participants in the current study chose to focus their attention on extracurricular engagement in an attempt to find a space for which they were not negatively perceived and felt a sense of belonging. Coincidentally, while such engagement could be seen as a defense mechanism, researchers (e.g., Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al.) have found that the first-generation population reaps the most benefits from extracurricular and peer engagement. In contrast, participants who did not mirror the facets indicative of the

“typical” first-generation student felt they were at an advantage in comparison to other peers (both first-generation and continuing-generation learners). It is important to note, however, that they still identified with a first-generation identity and found it salient to them.

Consistent with Orbe’s (2004) findings, participants varied in the degrees to which being the first in their family to graduate from college was central to their self-concepts. Yet, while the first-generation identity may be more salient to one individual than another, I would argue that it is nevertheless an important aspect of their core self since it triggered identity development reflection. As the women reconceptualized what it meant to be a first-generation student based on their experiences in the higher education context, they were also catapulted to understand who they were in relation to others as it concerned their other identity dimensions.

Identity development theories, especially the reconceptualized frameworks of the Multidimensional Identity Model (Abes et al., 2007; Jones and McEwen, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991) emphasize the impact that sociocultural conditions, family background, and experiences have on an individual’s core sense of self. Further, theorists (e.g., Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes et al.) have emphasized how interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive realms influence multiple identities. As evidenced in the narratives, contextual influences (e.g., interaction with peers, faculty, and/or higher education administrators both inside and outside the academic classroom) both made identity dimensions salient and shaped how participants viewed and interpreted their first-generation identity, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and/or sexual orientation. The women in the

study assigned meanings to each identity dimension, viewing them as either positive or negative. In a nascent stage of identity formation during the start of college, the women processed their self-concepts by combining each isolated and salient social dimension, resulting in a core identity that was either not fully reflected upon if the participant felt comfortable within the environment or was in conflict especially if she was unable to reconcile disparate perceptions of her identity. Similar to Stewart's (2008) findings on multiple identity development in Black students, some of the women in my study avoided aspects of their identity (e.g., income status, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, first-generation identity) depending on whether they deemed the situation or context supportive.

Through additional experiences in the college or university, more robust reflection, and/or identity conflict resolution, the women were able to understand themselves as complex individuals with intersecting identities. Consistent with theoretical understandings of intersectionality (Brunn-Bevel et al., 2015; Dill & Zambrana, 2009) participants in the present study integrated their identity dimensions by critically analyzing the hegemonic beliefs associated with their group memberships. By assessing their identities through a lens of privilege and oppression, each woman was able to process the generalized experiences associated with their group memberships, as well as the individual differences between her and those who belong to the same social identity group. Ultimately, as the participants reflected on their identities at the present moment, they were unable to disentangle them, similar to Winkle-Wagner and McCoy's (2013) findings with Black first-generation students.

Whether deliberate or otherwise, women in my study graduated from their respective higher education institutions with more established identities than when they arrived to campus. However, it is important to note that having an awareness of their intersecting identities does not mean that identity conflict and/or reflection was behind them. Identity development has been shown to be an evolving process (Torres, 2011); participants confirmed this truth as they anticipated situational and temporal contexts to influence their identities in their post-college years. Specifically, women in the study mentioned that how they make meaning of their gender identities may alter as they progress into their careers.

As previously discussed, gender identity was one social dimension on which women in the study were not particularly challenged to reflect on in the higher education context (with the exception of the participant who attended a women's college). Gender differences in college have been well documented (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Sax, 2008) and researchers (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) have consistently examined the negative impact microaggressions and stereotype threat have on college women's experiences. Although the institutional context has been found to influence women's gender role attitudes (Sax, 2008) with one participant who attended a women's college denouncing traditional gender beliefs due to her experience, the other women did not necessarily confront the socially constructed gender beliefs with which they entered college because there was minimal or no impetus to do so. Instead, the women believed that how they made meaning of their gender identities will alter as they continue into the post-college years.

Gender identity theories including Josselson's (1987, 1996) provide insights into contextual influences on women's gender roles as they traverse adolescence and adulthood. Those theories are not seemingly or especially poignant to the women in the present study. While being a woman was an ingrained dimension of identity for all participants, gender was a muted identity in the college context for the majority of them since they did not view themselves simply as women. Instead, gender was tied to other social dimensions of their identities. Therefore, the theoretical approach of intersectionality provides a more comprehensive examination of what it means to be a multidimensional woman. Consequently, such an understanding can better equip women in handling gender identity conflicts in the future.

Ultimately, while research on the first-generation student population has provided insights into those who are the first in their families to attend college, it assumes they have generalized experiences and the first-generation identity is the most defining aspect of who they are. However, the women's narratives in my study reveal how their first-generation status intersected with their race/ethnicity, gender, income status, and/or sexual orientations. While researchers (e.g., Stephens et al., 2012) portray first-generation students to be at a disadvantage within the higher education context because of their strong association with the norm of interdependence, I contend that the women in the study embraced an independence that allowed them to deliberately or unconsciously traverse their identity development and understand themselves as complex individuals with intersecting identities.

Conclusions

Given my participants' narratives and experiences in unique institutional contexts, I offer the following conclusions:

1. First-generation women are complex individuals. Although all participants identified with the first-generation status, their experiences, meaning making capacities, and reflections were not identical and at times were in stark contrast. Further, the participants did not define themselves or want others to define them solely by their first-generation identity, but by their multiple intersecting identities.
2. The saliency with which individuals associate with a first generation identity varies considerably. While all participants recognized they were the first in their families to attend and graduate from college, the manner in which they understood their first-generation status and the impact this had on their college experience differed. Participants initially understood their first-generation status as a deficit, but were able to later ascertain their privileged or disadvantaged position in relation to college peers.
3. The initial identity conflict that participants experienced in the college context was related to their first-generation status, which subsequently catapulted their understanding of and ability to process other social dimension issues. As first-generation students, participants made meaning of this identity by reconciling influences from their familial and collegiate contexts. By finding themselves in

relation to and independent from others, participants were able to utilize a similar mechanism to assess and reflect on their other salient social dimensions.

4. Based on experiences, context, personality, and stage of development, participants transitioned from a nascent self-concept in which they processed each identity in isolation to an integrated and intersectional conception of self. Through reflection and/or identity conflicts the women in the study were unable to disentangle their intersecting identities.
5. Identity development is an evolving process and while participants had established themselves as complex individuals with intersecting identities, the saliency of specific social dimensions possibly fluctuated depending on temporal and situational contexts. For example, while income status was salient to a participant's self-concept in college, it may not be of critical importance to her in relation to other social dimensions of her identity when she enters a different life stage or income bracket.
6. Depending on the college context (demographic makeup and culture of the institution) first-generation women were not adequately challenged to reflect on their gender identities. While being a woman was an ingrained part of who they were, they had not necessarily reflected on what it meant to be women. Instead, they understood their gender based on its intersection with other social dimensions, particularly race/ethnicity.
7. Participants in the study came to the realization that they were capable of having strong connections to their family and group memberships, while also finding

themselves, becoming independent individuals, and being understood by others despite their complex and intersecting identities.

Implications for Practice

With a critical finding of the study being that first-generation women are complex individuals, I am proposing several implications for practice in this section. Given that the women I interviewed related in some ways to their first-generation peers in terms of unfamiliarity with college and/or academic unpreparedness, institutional resources that have been created specifically for the first-generation student population may continue to be impactful in retaining and graduating students who are the first in their families to pursue college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, not every first-generation student is in need of such assistance. Therefore, higher education administrators should consider directly asking first-generation college goers what types of support would be most beneficial to them as they progress in college not only as students, but holistic individuals.

Based on the findings of this study, identity development programming that allows for identity reflection, inquisition, and dialogue may be the most integral and beneficial to first-generation women in particular. Although incorporating identity exploration in already established institutional programs may seem like a simple solution, additional considerations must be given. Since identity development is an evolving process (Torres, 2011), including resources on intersectionality in a summer bridge or transition program, for example, may not provide students with the time and dedication needed to truly reflect on themselves and their identities; especially if they are not yet

dealing with identity conflicts. Further, since the start of college can be a daunting time for first-generation students, they may be more focused on the moment aspects of college and not identity exploration. Living-learning communities could consider utilizing identity programming, however, not all first-generation students partake in this residential resource if and when they are given the option. Some novel suggestions for identity development programming include conferences specifically geared toward identity intersectionality and/or incorporating faculty/staff led conversations about identity during orientation programs or in student organization meetings. For these recommendations to come to fruition, institution type should be considered especially in terms of the amount of funding that can be allocated for such programming and the feasibility of incorporating identity development across a college or university.

While it may seem unrealistic to include identity exploration in all aspects of an institution, students need more spaces for identities to be directly discussed and processed. Given that college goers are already enrolled in academic coursework, professors could incorporate identity reflection through the use of readings, assignments, and/or informal journal writing activities. As such, students will have the opportunity to identify their social dimensions, as opposed to having ones assigned to them based on visible appearance and preconceived conceptions. Further, since it cannot be assumed that certain identities are more salient to a student than others (Orbe, 2004), educators should give particular attention to diversity issues, understanding privilege and oppression, within and between group differences, and identity intersectionality. By allowing peers to engage meaningfully with each other in identity reflection exercises,

they will critically examine their hegemonic beliefs and understand themselves in relation to and independent from others.

Since students participate in co-curricular experiences, higher education institutions should ensure identity intersectionality is addressed in spaces that are typically compartmentalized and dedicated to one social dimension. For example, cultural centers should not only discuss issues related to race/ethnicity and the generalized and nuanced experiences of those who identify with a group, but also what it means to perhaps be a Hispanic woman of first-generation status from a middle income background who is queer. While the student could in effect seek counsel from each compartmentalized center at her college or university that addresses an aspect of her identity, this may be too daunting. Further, the student may be more likely to confide in peers and administrators at one center for which she feels comfortable and supported. Thus, administrators should be knowledgeable of intersectionality and how to assist the student in all aspects of either identity conflict or reflection.

The implications thus far have addressed the need to utilize an intersectional approach in assisting students with their identity development in the college contexts. When doing so, it may be prudent for educators and administrators to make a conscious effort to ensure that discussions about gender identity are included. The majority of women in this study indicated that they were not challenged to process their gender at their colleges or universities. While some women were informed of gender-related concerns to be aware of as they enter post-college life and professional contexts, forewarnings do not necessarily mean they will be prepared or equipped to combat such

issues. Since research has consistently shown that women are in some ways advantaged in college contexts, but continue to be disadvantaged in the workforce (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013), it can be assumed that women have not been prepared for the professional culture. Educators and higher education administrators should incorporate teachings on gender role attitudes, salary negotiation, work-life balance, and stereotypes as they pertain to the intersection of gender. However, any discussion that allows students to critically reflect on women's experiences would be a step in the right direction, bring attention to issues surrounding gender in any context, and empower women to voice their opinions.

Ultimately, whether it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to assist in developing the whole student will continue to be contested (Evans et al., 2010), yet findings in the present study indicate that students aimed to find themselves in college. However, their identity development was a quiet and individual endeavor that at times negatively impacted their well-being. Professors and administrators therefore must offer structured dialogues and other engagement opportunities focused on identity intersectionality.

Implications for Research

Although there is great utility in quantitative research, findings from such previous studies (e.g., Choy, 2001; Saenz et al., 2007) do not address first-generation identity and other aspects of development among students who are the first in their families to attend and graduate from college. By employing a narrative inquiry approach, the present study shows complexity within the first-generation student population.

Additional qualitative studies are needed to provide additional insights. Researchers should consider a longitudinal study as a means to more adequately understand the impact the college experience has on students' conception of self. While the first-generation women in my study evolved in their college contexts, their identity development was not completed upon graduation. Participants' identities will be influenced by experiences not only in their personal lives, but as they continue to be a part of our constantly changing world. By examining how the women view and interpret the intersection of race/ethnicity, income status, gender, first-generation identity, and/or sexual orientation during adulthood, higher education institutions can determine which resources may have been beneficial and impactful during the formative years of college. Further, findings from such a longitudinal study can also determine the impact having a more established intersecting identity has on post-college outcomes.

As a means to provide more timely information on first-generation student identity development, researchers can simply consider replicating the study with a larger sample size and including additional higher education institutions across the nation. While other qualitative methodologies could be utilized, narrative inquiry is suggested. The approach I employed in this study has allowed for the nuanced lived experiences of participants to be examined instead of being concerned with themes and generalizations that are counterintuitive to understanding collegians as complex individuals.

In addition, with a key finding of the study being that participants were not challenged to reflect on their gender identities within the college context, additional research regarding gender is warranted. By utilizing purposive sampling to study women

with a range of intersecting identities from various institutional contexts, a more comprehensive examination of how experiences in college impact students as gendered individuals can be understood. With women making up the majority of the college student population (Baum et al., 2013; NCES, 2004), a quantitative research study could add to the current research on women in college contexts especially if the main objective was understanding gender as an isolated social dimension.

Closing Thoughts

As I began to explore the lived experiences of recently graduated first-generation women from unique institutional contexts, Anna DeJesus (in the first interview of my study) made a statement that would come to resonate with other participants, and in my opinion, other first-generation women for that matter: she wanted to be understood. Although higher education institutions purport an appreciation for diversity within their campuses, especially as the student population is becoming more diverse, some college goers may not truly feel as though they are understood by administrators, faculty, and/or peers. Therefore, the first-generation women in this study represent the overarching problem addressed in this dissertation and higher education generally; referred to as muted intersectionality or the awareness that individuals have multiple dimensions, yet the true conception of how identities intrasect and intersect is at times unacknowledged.

The college experience was indeed considered a formative time for first-generation women in this study and allowed them to develop holistically. As they discussed the assumptions and preconceived notions typically associated with their identities, they brought five distinct voices to first-generation scholarship and identity

intersectionality. Whether their newfound voices will continue to resonate in the post-college realm and amidst our ever changing world remains uncertain, yet one point should not be contested. Identity development and the intersection of social dimensions, including but not limited to, first-generation status, gender, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity both influenced and was influenced by participant's collegiate experiences. Although the women in this study entered the esteemed doors of their college or university as first-generation students, they graduated as Anna DeJesus, Lauren Smith, Christina Li, Chelsea Jones, and Tyana Brown; complex individuals with intersecting identities who gained a better understanding of their self-concepts and what it means to be reflective, "advantaged" women/persons moving through adulthood.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Consent for Participation in a Research Study

Title of Research Study: First-Generation Women and Identity Intersectionality

Protocol Number: cajhfc

Principal Investigator:

Shaun R. Harper

St. Leonard's Court, 3819 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia PA, 19104

sharper1@upenn.edu

(215) 898-5147

Co-Investigator:

Georgia Kouzoukas

255 S. 36th Street, 515 Williams Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19104;

kgeorgia@sas.upenn.edu

(215) 898-7839

Emergency Contact: University of Pennsylvania Office of Regulatory Affairs (215) 898-2614

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This is not a form of treatment or therapy. It is not supposed to detect a disease or find something wrong. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do if you decide to participate. The research team is going to talk with you about the study and give you this consent document to read. You do not have to make a decision now; you can take the consent document home and share it with friends and family.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you. Keep this form, in it you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the college experiences and identity development of women who were the first in their families to attend and graduate from a

college or university (also known as first-generation students). Special attention is given to how such individuals understood their first-generation status, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of their identity while being a student at their postsecondary institution. The study is being conducted for a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

Why was I asked to participate in the study?

You are being asked to join this study because you identify as being a first-generation woman who graduated from one of the following types of colleges or universities in 2015 or 2016: a highly selective private research institution; a large public research institution; a community college; a Historically Black College or University; or a small, yet highly selective liberal arts institution. For this study, first-generation is defined as an individual who enrolled and graduated from a higher education institution, with neither parent (biological or otherwise) or guardian having attended a college or university upon the start of when the individual entered college.

How long will I be in the study?

The study will take place over a period of approximately six weeks. This means you will participate in three separate interviews, with a week separating each interview. Each session will last approximately 90 minutes.

Where will the study take place?

The study will take place at a location of your choosing, which is secure and enables our conversations to remain private. Collaboratively, we will determine the time of each interview, aligning with your schedule.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in three separate semi-structured interviews. After the interviews have concluded, you will then be given a written synthesis of your experiences composed by the Co-Investigator, Georgia Kouzoukas, and asked to provide any clarification and/or justification.

Audio Recording

Your initials _____ indicate your permission to have your interviews audio recorded. At any point during the research process, you have the ability to refuse to be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be password protected and then later destroyed after the transcription process. The transcription process will be done solely by the Co-Investigator, Georgia Kouzoukas. The transcriptions will not include any identifiable information.

What are the risks?

No physical risks are associated with participating in the study. However, some interview questions could potentially cause discomfort. Further, we will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during the course of this research study will be kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy.

How will I benefit from the study?

There is no benefit to you. However, your participation could help us understand the experiences of first-generation students and collegiate women, which can benefit you indirectly. In the future, this may help higher education administrators in providing resources for first-generation women.

What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?

You may choose to join the study or you may choose not to join the study. Your participation is voluntary.

There is no penalty if you choose not to join the research study. You will lose no benefits or advantages that are now coming to you, or would come to you in the future.

If you choose to participate, you have the ability to halt the study at any point and for any reason, as well as to refuse to answer any question throughout the three interview series.

When is the study over? Can I leave the study before it ends?

The study is expected to end after all participants have completed all interviews and all information has been collected. The study may be stopped without your consent for the following reasons:

- The Principal Investigator and/or Co-Investigator feel it is best for your safety and/or health (you will be informed of the reasons why)
- You have not followed the study instructions

You have the right to drop out of the research study at any time during your participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to do so.

If you no longer wish to be in the research study, please contact Georgia Kouzoukas at kgeorgia@sas.upenn.edu or (215) 898-7839. You may decline your participation in the study through oral or written communication.

How will confidentiality be maintained and my privacy be protected?

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during the course of this research study will be kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. If information from this study is published or presented at higher education conferences or meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

All responses throughout the three interviews will be held in confidence. Only the researchers involved in the study (e.g., Georgia Kouzoukas and Dr. Shaun Harper [Primary Investigator and Doctoral Advisor]) and those crucial to overseeing institutional research, including the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania, will have access to any identifiable information. Your interview responses will be designated a pseudonym (which you may choose if you would like). Your pseudonym and real name will be stored separately from your transcribed interview responses and protected both electronically and in a locked filing cabinet. The data may also be shared with other researchers in an attempt to verify any conclusions made, but will be done in a manner that ensures the protection of your confidentiality.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

By participating in the study, you will receive a \$25.00 gift card after the entire study has concluded. You will receive the gift card even if you or the researchers end your participation in the study before the entire research project has concluded.

Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I'm concerned about my rights as a research subject?

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with the Principal Investigator listed on page one of this form. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any questions, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614.

When you sign this document, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document. Your signature below is the only document in the study that will have your name attached to it and it will not be linked to any other information in the research study.

Signature of Subject:
Print Name of Subject:
Date:

APPENDIX 2

Dear [Insert Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I am a Doctor of Education student in the Higher Education program at the University of Pennsylvania and I am conducting my dissertation under the supervision of my advisor, Dr. Shaun R. Harper. The purpose of my research is to learn more about the college experiences and identity development of women who were the first in their families to attend and graduate from a college or university (first-generation students). I have received IRB approval from the University of Pennsylvania for this research and have attached the informed consent form, which provides more detail regarding the research process.

I am hoping to interview a self-identified first-generation woman who graduated from [Insert Institution Name] in 2015 or 2016, with neither parent and/or guardian having attended a postsecondary institution. I would sincerely appreciate if you could provide any assistance in locating participants for my research or perhaps guide me to other University staff/faculty who you believe may be appropriate to contact.

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Georgia Kouzoukas

APPENDIX 3

First-Generation Women & Identity Intersectionality Interview Protocols

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on first-generation women and identity intersectionality. You have been selected to participate based on your experiences, which I look forward to learning more about. I appreciate your time and willingness to be involved in the study.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the college experiences and identity development of women who were the first in their families to attend and graduate from a college or university (also known as first-generation students). Special attention is given to how such individuals understood their first-generation status, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of their identity while being a student at their postsecondary institution. The study is being conducted for a dissertation in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the Ed.D. in Higher Education program at the University of Pennsylvania. Please feel free to share your experiences and thoughts as you feel comfortable.

Guidelines

Based on the informed consent document, the interviews will be audio recorded and all information will be confidential. Please let me know if there is a specific pseudonym that you would like used. Also, it is suggested that you try to avoid, to the best of your ability, mentioning other individuals by their name. Instead, please consider using pseudonyms or simply saying for example, “my friend.” During the interview process, please let me know if you would like to take breaks, halt the interview, or refrain from answering any questions. You are able to add or clarify any experiences throughout the interview process. After the final interview, you will be presented with my synthesis of all of your interview responses, which you may review to provide further clarification.

Note: The three interview series is semi-structured. While the following questions will be used, they are seen as probes. Questions will be adjusted or additional follow-up questions will be asked depending on how each participant discusses their experiences and thoughts.

Interview One

1. How would you describe your racial identity?
2. How would you describe your gender identity?
3. How would you describe your other identities (i.e., socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, etc.)

4. Please provide me with some information about how you understood these identities prior to coming to college.
5. Please provide me with some information about your upbringing and family.
6. What is the educational background of your family members (specifically parents and/or guardians)?
7. What were your parent's reasons for not attending college?
8. Why did you decide to attend college?
9. Can you please describe the path you took to attend college (college choice process etc.)?
10. When did you become aware that you were a first-generation student?
11. What does it mean to *you* to be the first in your family to have attended college?
12. What does it mean to *your family* to be the first to have attended college?

Interview Two

1. Please provide a typical day in your life when you were a student at your college/university.
2. How would you describe your relationships in the college context? (Who did you interact with and/or befriend?)
3. How would you describe your interaction/relationship with peers in college?
4. How would you describe your interaction/relationship with professors and college administrators while in college?
5. What was your experience like as a first-generation student at your college/university?
6. What was your experience like as a woman at your college/university?
7. What was your experience like as a (insert other social dimension) at your college/university?
8. What was your experience like as a first-generation woman of (insert other social identities) at your college/university? (probe: Did you see your identities as integrated or separate?)
9. Can you please provide me with some information about how you understood these identities while you attended college?
10. What did it mean to be a first-generation student with multiple identities in college?
11. How has your college experience impacted you and your aspirations, if at all?

Interview Three

1. What experiences or thoughts would you like to discuss related to being a first-generation woman in college that you do not believe we explored in our other conversations?
2. Do you believe that your college experience has impacted your understanding of your social identities?

3. How did your intersecting identities shape your experience as a first-generation woman in college?
4. What resources or services would you suggest being implemented at your alma mater to positively assist students' identity development and/or first-generation experience, if any?

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