Experiences of Successful First-Generation College

Students With College Access

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Abstract

A plethora of educational research suggests that first-generation college students (FGCS) are at a distinct disadvantage when attempting to access college. Much of the research on this population examines the struggles these students face. Using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study investigated lived experiences of ten *successful* FGCS enrolled at an historically Black university in southeastern United States. Themes emerged related to the participants' pre-college circumstances, decision to attend college, and experiences accessing college. The results of the study serve as a guide for professional school counselors who aim to develop preventative measures and promote social and cultural capital for prospective FGCS.

Keywords: first-generation college students, cultural capital, social capital, school counseling, college access

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Students With College Access

Postsecondary education is more accessible today than at any point over the past 50 years (Brock, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2019). State and federal governments have continued to offer programs that promote college preparation and provide financial support for postsecondary education. These initiatives include the federally subsidized loan program, Pell grants, Race to the Top funding, GEAR UP, and the First in the World program (Brock, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Low-income students and students of color have utilized these programs to gain access to college. As a result, the percentage of low-income students and students of color, many of which are first generation college students (FGCS), enrolled in college increased by 8% and 18% respectively, from 1996 to 2006 (Pew Research Center, 2019). Of FGCS in the U.S., approximately 38% are Hispanic, while around 23% and 17% are African American and American Indian, respectively; many are from low-income families (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Saenz et al., 2007).

Despite programs that increase access to college, students, especially those who are FGCS, are faced with myriad decisions and factors to consider as they matriculate toward postsecondary education (Falcon, 2015). For example, FGCS are more likely to experience academic difficulties, have lower grades, work more during college than continuing-generation students, have fewer financial resources, and receive less rigorous college preparation (Falcon, 2015; Stephens et al., 2012). While many factors influence postsecondary decisions, school counselors can help FGCS and their families

navigate the college-going process and facilitate the development of pathways to college access and success (Bryan et al., 2017; Warren et al., 2020).

Professional school counselors deliver comprehensive school counseling programs that promote the academic, social emotional, and career development of all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). The ASCA National Model (2019) and the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors (ASCA, 2014) serve as guides for school counselors who aim to support students' efforts to pursue postsecondary education. School counselors are student advocates and change agents who strive to remove barriers and increase access to college by assisting students with decision making and application completion (Lapan et al., 2014; Poynton et al., 2019). For example, Oreopoulos and Ford (2019), described a college access curriculum for high school students that increased college-going rates by 5%. These types of college access-focused interventions are valuable because many students, such as prospective FGCS, have the ability to go to college, yet lack the "social capital and skills to navigate postsecondary education," (McGaughy & Venezia, 2015, p. 2). School counselors play a critical role in helping prospective FGCS build social and cultural capital, thus increasing their access to college. However, many school counselors have reported a lack of preparedness to engage in this work (Brown et al., 2017). This article explores college access experiences of FGCS in their senior year of college and offers recommendations for enhancing college access practices among school counselors.

First-Generation College Students

FGCS are college students whose parents did not attend and earn a degree from a college or four-year university (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). FGCS constitute

one third of all college students, but only 27% of these students earn degrees within four years (Whitley et al., 2018). Greenwald (2012) reported that 90% of FGCS do not graduate with a degree within six years of initial enrollment. These outcomes are bleak and likely are a result of a lack of knowledge and experience inherent to FGCS.

FGCS often have deficits in cultural (Dumais & Ward, 2010) and social (McDonough, 1997) capital, which serve as obstacles to college access. Bourdieu (1977) described *cultural capital* as the ability to communicate and understand the higher education system of operations, as well as a mastery of processes to secure financial resources and academic support. Meanwhile, *social capital* is defined as the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in certain social situations (Bourdieu, 1977). FGCS often come from families lacking institutionalized cultural capital or knowledge of college degrees and credentials, and therefore lack the experience of the college selection and application process (Castleman & Page, 2013). According to Swartz (1997), "A child's ambitions and expectations with regard to education and career are structurally determined products of parental and other reference-group educational experience and cultural life" (p. 197). Many FGCS will forego pursuit of a college degree; they believe that college is not an option and lack the sense of entitlement or belonging of non-first-generation counterparts (Bourdieu,1977).

Most research suggests that FGCS are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of academic preparation, cultural knowledge, and access to hidden rules of college success, and socioeconomic status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992; Bui, 2002; Falcon, 2015). According to Pascarella et al. (2004), FGCS face challenges in three major areas: pre-college characteristics, persistence, and graduating from college. Regarding

pre-college characteristics, FGCS often are less prepared academically and have lower high school grade point averages and lower college admission standardized test scores. FGCS are more likely to attend high schools that lack a rigorous college preparatory curriculum needed for college level coursework (Zalaquett, 1999). Additionally, FGCS often enter a college environment that is drastically different from their previous experiences which leads many to feel unwelcome and marginalized (Falcon, 2015). An institution's diversity of student body, parents' level of education, peer groups, academic readiness, and family income also are examples of factors that impact access to higher education (Stephens et al., 2014; Wilkins, 2014).

Whereas there is a wealth of research available that outlines the obstacles and challenges of FGCS, literature that describes assets these students possess is limited. According to Garrison and Gardner (2012), FGCS possess personal assets and strengths including proactivity, goal direction, optimism, and reflexivity; their lived experiences tend to influence the development of these assets. Additional research may further explain the assets and capital possessed by successful FGCS. The current study explored the lived experiences of successful FGCS in their senior year of college. The purpose of this exploratory investigation was to gain insights from the direct accounts of FGCS about their college access experiences. One central research question was explored: What are the lived experiences related to accessing college for successful FGCS? To answer this main question, three sub-questions were explored: (a) What are the pre-college experiences of FGCS who achieve success in higher education? (b) What factors influence FGCS decision to attend college? and (c) What and who helps FGCS obtain admission to a college or university?

Method

Design Overview

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was employed in this study. A phenomenological study was conducted because this type of research is discovery-oriented and aims to clarify the meaning of the experience for the individuals living the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Phenomenology emphasizes a person's construction of their everyday life and their world. Hays and Singh (2012) noted that a main goal of qualitative research is to assess a participant's intentionality, or internal experience of being conscious of something. This study aimed to garner a fresh, unbiased perspective of the ways successful FGCS accessed college through the eyes of participants who had direct, immediate experiences related to the phenomenon.

Participants

The purposeful sample in this study included 10 successful FGCS in their senior year at a public, historically Black university in the southeastern United States. A successful FGCS was defined as a student who met the criteria of a FGCS designation, had an above average grade point average (equal to or greater than 3.0), and was classified as a college senior. The participants' grade point averages ranged from 3.0 to 3.9; the average was 3.36. The participants included eight female and two male students aged 20 to 25. Eight African American students, one White student, and one multi-racial student participated in this study. Participants' academic majors included social sciences, communications, and biological sciences.

Procedures

A protocol outlining the research was reviewed and approved by the university's institutional review board. An email that included an explanation of the study and an

invitation to solicit participation was used. The email was sent by the university registrar's office to all students who met eligibility criteria. Interested students were asked to email the researcher (first author). In-person interviews were conducted in an office on the university campus.

Each interview was recorded using an audio recorder that did not have Internet capabilities. Interviews ranged in length from 31 minutes to 64 minutes with an average length of 44 minutes. During each interview meeting, the researcher reviewed and discussed the research study and informed consent. During and after each interview, the researcher recorded written memos to describe findings as they developed. Writing initial thoughts about the research experience and the participants' responses in the research notes are important parts of the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Memos were used with other data during the analysis stage of the study.

Research Team

The primary researcher in this study was a 37-year old, White male who identified as a FGCS and served as a school counselor for seven years in a rural, low-wealth community where he supported a large percentage of prospective FGCS. The researcher also worked as an academic advisor at a public university where he served several FGCS during their first two years of college. The coding team included the primary researcher and two other counselor educators who held doctoral degrees. Both counselor educators identified as White and female and had completed coursework in qualitative research methods and had previously engaged in qualitative research. One had a background in school counseling, the other had expertise in addiction counseling.

Data Collection

A semi-structured, open-ended interview and a demographic questionnaire were used to capture the lived experiences of the participants. This type of data collection was chosen because interviews: (a) allow participants to describe what is meaningful or important in their own words, (b) may help the researcher understand the participants' story, and (c) allow the researcher to probe for more details while ensuring that participants are interpreting questions correctly (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Demographic Questionnaire

Hays and Singh (2012) suggested utilizing a written background or demographic questionnaire to get basic participant information because the answers to these questions are concrete and superficial. A written demographic questionnaire was administered to obtain the participants' gender, age, ethnicity, and current college grade point average.

Interview

A semi-structured, in-depth interview was conducted because it allowed participants to have more say in the structure and process of the interview. Creswell and Poth (2017) reported that a semi-structured interview is the most culturally appropriate method for capturing the participant's voice; it provides a richer picture of the phenomenon under investigation. The interview consisted of five open-ended questions and one introductory request to provide background information. Examples of interview questions include: When did you realize you wanted to go to college and what helped you make this decision? and Describe any obstacles you faced in planning, applying, and paying for college?

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the in-person interviews verbatim. A member check was conducted by emailing the transcript of their interview to each participant; they reviewed their transcript for accuracy and provided additional information. After receiving the transcripts from the participants and addressing any discrepancies and new information, the coding team reviewed the transcripts.

The research team developed a list of significant statements from the participants' transcripts. Each statement was evaluated as having equal importance. The team developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. Additionally, the research team performed data reduction and elimination by checking each significant statement for its applicability to understanding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The team then took the statements and grouped them into larger units of information called themes. After this open coding procedure, the team evaluated the coded statements for patterns to determine which experiences occurred most frequently (Miles et al., 2020). The team negotiated the themes found from each member and consensually agreed on major themes to include as findings of this study.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used in this study to enhance trustworthiness of the research process, data interpretation, and presentation of findings. It is important for researchers to use multiple strategies that address the research process and use strategies that are appropriate for the research tradition guiding the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this study, the researcher used field notes and memos, persistent observation, member checking, triangulation of research methods, thick description, and

bracketing to strengthen trustworthiness. The opinions and thoughts of researchers are part of the research process as it provides a "lens into the research process itself" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 137). Due to his personal identity and his years of supporting FGCS, the researcher (first author) took efforts to bracket his experiences and beliefs throughout the study by keeping a personal reflexive journal during data collection and analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012). These strategies are appropriate and aid in maintaining the integrity of phenomenological inquiry.

Findings

Seven themes emerged as findings of this study: (a) students' family-related circumstances, (b) participants' education-related circumstances, (c) participants' personal and environmental characteristics, (d) internal influences to the decision to attend college, (e) external influences to the decision to attend college, (f) supports in obtaining college admission, and (g) challenges faced in accessing college.

Family-Related Circumstances

Participants specifically provided information about their families including their relationships with relatives and the role they played in the participants' educational journey. One participant said, "I went to three different high schools because my mom got remarried. I think that, that takes a toll on you but I made it through."

Another participant stated that even though her mother did not attend college, she valued education and helped her prepare for college. She stated, "I went to a private Catholic school for middle school and high school. We grew up low-class where most of the families were battling drug problems." Another student said, "I ended up in foster care because [of] some things that transpired. I recently aged out at the age of

21." One participant stated, "I'm really family-oriented. Even though my family's two and a half hours away, I speak to, um, everybody in my family almost every day." She mentioned not being able to go a day without communication with her family.

Education-Related Circumstances

The participants described their pre-college educational experiences in detail. One participant described her high school by stating, "The only people that went to college [where] if you played sports and got a scholarship. The school I went to was sort of a sports school so everybody got scholarships." She further described her lack of preparation in high school. "In high school, you know your coach dealt with everything for you. He was like, 'Oh let me see, let me talk to your teacher and see if I can help you with this. I was more spoon fed."

Another participant described a high school teacher. She shared, "I struggled in high school with math. And so coming from a little bitty county, I don't think that the teachers put as much effort into the students as they should. They really didn't care."

One student was strong academically in high school. She stated, "I always kept good grades. That's [are] just my personal values." She explained that this played a factor in deciding to attend college. Her mother also reinforced her efforts. "I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities and my mom supported a lot of those."

Some participants attended high schools that had a strong focus on college preparation. One participant's high school graduating class had a large number of students enrolled in college:

> Um the high school I went to is very college bound. It was 132 students in my graduating class and 131 went straight to college and 1 went into the work field. So it was somewhat of an expectation to keep on going to college.

Another participant's high school provided opportunities for college-preparation. She stated, "My high school was like a college prep school. Either you were in AP or IB classes." In addition, her school offered a technical preparation program for students interested in the criminal justice field. She credited these experiences in determining her college major.

Another participant described her high school as a helpful experience in her life during a turbulent adolescence:

> During my sophomore year in high school when I lived with my aunt, uh, they was [sic] like really crazy, so my outlet was school and reading. With everything that was going on at home, I channeled that into my schoolwork. I always thrived in school.

High school courses energized one participant and sparked her passion for the sciences. She remarked, "I took AP Biology in high school and I really enjoyed it. And so I pretty much, from that point on, took every science class my high school offered. I took a few continuing education classes like a CNA class and a pharmacy tech class to see if I want to get in the health field and to expose myself to different things."

Personal and Environmental Characteristics

Several participants described personal attributes or experiences that occurred prior to enrolling in college that were influential in their lives. One of the participants had to work part-time jobs during high school. She shared, "When I first turned 17 the first job I had was at a theme park. It was fun at first because I got a job but then you realize, 'oh, I have to go to work.'" She also described an obstacle, "I was heavily in sports, I actually had a sports scholarship to go here and I tore all of the ligaments in both of my ankles my senior year."

Another student described the community in which he grew up as frightening, but it fueled his determination to earn a college degree:

> In my neighborhood all you heard was shots firing and people going, "Go back inside. Get back inside." Go from like never seeing a fight in middle school to seeing a fight damn near every day in high school.

Internal Influences on the Decision to Attend College

The participants described many personal characteristics, emotions, and concerns that had major impacts on their decision to pursue higher education. Participants explained personal factors that were useful in deciding to apply and enroll in post-secondary education.

One participant admitted, "I just never imagined, like really being a college student." Even though she worked hard to earn above average grades, she did not think attending college was a possibility for her. Later she described experiencing indecisiveness about leaving home to attend college.

> I never really planned for it. I'm like, I know I want to go. Do I want to go? It was like a bunch of questioning, too. Actually, I applied to a college and I'm like, well, I guess I'm going.

Another participant also was unsure about attending college and did not feel ready to leave her home. She stated, "I didn't really want to go… because I wanted to stay home because I didn't feel like I was ready to go off to college just yet, but things kind of turned out okay." She also described the impact her religion had on her decision by stating, "This college isn't, not too far from home. There is a church here that my pastor was recommending. He let me know that I would be okay spiritually."

Similarly, another participant was uncertain about attending college. She described not making definitive plans to leave home or enroll in higher education as she was interested in pursuing police academy training at age 21. She explained her decision to pursue college, "I really hadn't planned on going and my parents aren't the type of parents who try to make my decisions. But when I got accepted, I decided to come."

Another student reported a "personal determination to improve" was important in his decision to attend college. He explained, "You've got to take responsibility because everybody has their own decisions and their own choices to make, so I basically just used things that happened in my past to try to better myself in the future." He further shared, "I think I always wanted to go to college because I always thought I was going to be a basketball player or football player." Even though he did not play for any athletic teams in college, he still possessed an internal drive to be successful in college. He said, "I want to impact the world. When I leave this world I want people to be able to say, oh man, I want to be just like him. So that's my motivation to be great."

Lastly, another participant stated that her lack of ability to excel in athletics was important to her in deciding to attend college. She said, "I realized I wanted to go to college when I was in middle school. We lost our championship and it was my fault, (laughs) and I let that motivate me to do better with school in general."

External Influences on the Decision to Attend College

External influences included things such as family, friend, and school-related influences. A participant's parents encouraged her to attend college and they

emphasized how important further education was to her success. She said, "My dad always said, you want to go to college. And I want you to be better than me."

Another participant stated "I knew I wanted to go to college just because no one else has went to college in my family. My mom kept the expectations for me high, so, it just happened that way." Still, another participant said her parents set the expectation for her to attend college. She said, "Before high school, I was kind of preparing for it by visiting colleges."

One participant reported the impact of witnessing her mother's various jobs throughout her childhood as important to her personal decision to further her education:

> When I was in middle and high school, I used to go to work with my mom and work. She showed me that this is what happens when you don't have a college education, you have to do something you really don't enjoy.

Another participant stated, "So I have to finish it [college] and set the bar high because other people ... If I set it high, then it'll show my little brother and my cousins." One participant said, "My friends played a big part in me actually going to college. When I went to my parents and said I want to go to college, they did as much research as they could to help me out."

Similarly, one participant described a high school classmate that was very excited about going to the university and encouraged her to attend. She stated, "There was a girl, um, in my JROTC class who wanted to be my roommate here, so um, she already had her room picked out and everything, so that's when I decided to go"

Another participant described the impact of tragedy on his decision to attend and complete college. He said, "Well a lot of people who've passed away in my life have

impacted my life, my friend passed away in 2013." He further said, "He was supposed to graduate last year but he obviously couldn't. So, I dedicate my senior year to him."

One student made the decision to attend college based on her experiences with athletics and the confidence she felt from her coaches. Another student also explained how his desire to be a college athlete fueled his decision to apply to college:

> My main goal was to go to college and play football and so that's what I did and I had friends. I talked to coaches about college because I couldn't get any of that from my family.

Three participants explained how high school teachers encouraged them to attend college. They attributed this encouragement to their final decision to pursue college. One participant had no intentions of applying to college until two teachers and a college advisor at high school stepped in. She explained, "My teacher told me to take something to the office. When I did, there was a college planner that I was avoiding all year. She was like, just apply. So I did."

When asked if anyone encouraged her to consider attending college, another participant described a teacher and support professional at her high school. She said, "My science teacher was the greatest, not because of his teaching style, but just because of his compassion and empathy outside of class. And so that really meant a lot. He and the librarian encouraged me." Another participant also said a high school teacher sparked her interest in higher education and suggested she attend college. She stated, "My teacher told me I would do great in law school and that I should probably try to go to a school with a great law program, so that is honestly when I started looking into this school."

Supportive Factors in Obtaining Admission to College

The participants described their experiences with accessing college and specific factors that helped them in the admissions process. Internal support factors included the participants' personal characteristics that aided the navigation of the college application and admissions processes; external support factors included support from institutional services and other people in the lives of the participants. Participants described positive, personal characteristics when asked specifically about their responses to stressful situations.

One participant's self-confidence and independence helped her access college education. After seeing her sister attend college, she recalled feeling confident that she could be successful in college. She completed the college application without any help. She stated, "So I like to figure things out on my own." She further commented, "I was just at home one day on the computer and I filled out the application." Another participant also indicated that he applied to college without any help. He remarked, "The application part wasn't really hard. It's kind of like a job application."

Some of the external support factors included family, high school educators, and financial support. One student said her family was helpful in her accessing college by encouraging her to attend an institution in which several family members had attended. She also indicated a family visit to campus helped her determine the best college fit. The same student also described being confused with applying for financial aid and receiving support from an educator in her high school. When asked if she experienced any difficulties, she explained, "It was very confusing but the guidance department had

these FAFSA people come in to help students. It was really good because a lot of the students that I graduated with had parents that hadn't been to college."

Even though he applied to college independently, one participant stated that his parents were instrumental in helping with more complicated issues like financial aid. He said, "My parents were doing most of the leg work. They were calling and talking and helping with my financial aid and my applications."

Another participant had a mentor in high school who was a lawyer and encouraged him to attend college and pursue law school. Still, another participant described a supportive college advisor in her high school that helped her determine which colleges to consider. She discussed her advisor's support:

> The college advisor and I first looked at my SAT scores, and then we compared them to the requirements for colleges and she was very encouraging. She said, Look, you can get in. You have everything you need; you just have to do it.

Two students described scholarship awards as being beneficial to their college access by helping provide financial support during the first year. One stated, "I did get a scholarship where I didn't have to take out any loans being an out-of-state student. I don't have any loans, which is great."

The university reached out to some students and helped with the admissions application fee. One participant explained, "The university sent me an invitation to apply because of some of my academic achievements and then my SAT. They waived the application fee for me. So, that's how I actually applied. And it was easy to apply." Another participant experienced a similar simplification of the admissions process by the university. She described her application process by stating, "I never applied to school

because the university let me send in my GPA and my transcripts and they accepted me. I didn't look at any schools or anything."

Challenges Faced in Accessing College

Challenges faced by participants included family-related issues, trouble finding a college, and a difficult financial aid application process. One participant experienced a combination of these factors during her senior year in school. She was faced with a complicated access issue that involved selecting a college and satisfying her mother:

The biggest obstacle was I didn't want to come here but my mom wanted me to. So it came to an ultimatum of either you're going to go here or you're going to stay home and go to community college.

Another participant also experienced some difficulty with family-related access issues. He described, "It was a problem with my mom, [she] kept threatening not to do my financial aid. My mom got really mad at me and she was like, I'm not paying for you to go to college."

Another participant also experienced challenges in accessing higher education. He described the financial aid process and selecting a college as difficulties he faced:

The hardest part is financial aid. It was stressful. Another obstacle I had was trying to find a college because I didn't know what to look for. I didn't look at curriculum or anything like that. I was just going with the flow.

Finally, one participant struggled to obtain financial aid to help her afford the expenses of attending college. She described unique family circumstances that impacted her ability to receive financial support:

I had a lot of financial aid obstacles because my mom didn't have any information for FAFSA. I couldn't qualify for a Pell Grant or anything. So that was really tough for me to figure out how I was going to go school.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of successful FGCS. The students who participated in the study identified several personal, social, and environmental factors that influenced their ability to access college. These factors led students to apply to, enroll, attend, and persist through their senior year of college. The students reported various points during their educational journey in which they decided to attend a 4-year college. Four of the participants stated they knew they would attend college throughout their elementary, middle, and secondary schooling. Of the remaining participants, six students realized in high school that they would pursue higher education. Two of the participants had no intention of attending college.

Participants reported a wide variety of family-related, educational, and personal or environmental circumstances they experienced as a K-12 student that influenced their postsecondary pursuits. Familial experiences did not appear to significantly impede or foster the students' persistence and determination to access higher education. The participants leveraged a variety of resources to acquire admission and gain access to college. Personal resources included perseverance and self-confidence. Students from historically underrepresented backgrounds who possess noncognitive factors such as those noted by Warren and Hale (2016, 2020) are best positioned to enhance their social networks (Vickery, 2014) to achieve college access and success. As such, the participants' drive remained unwavering regardless of differing levels of parental support and structure received. These characteristics, along with goal-orientation and maturity, also were noted by Garrison and Gardner (2012) and Wilkins (2014).

Alternatively, the education-related circumstances that the participants experienced may have set the stage for future, postsecondary success. Students who are engaged in high school and connected to school staff and students with similar aspirations are more likely to experience success in college (Bryan et al., 2017; Hudley et al., 2009). Support, high expectations imposed on self and by others, and extra-curricular activities all contributed to the success of the participants. This finding supports a prior claim by Pascarella et al. (2004) who suggested that these experiences foster motivation, degree plans, intellectual development, and personal growth. Several participants also described the opportunity to enroll in rigorous high school coursework. According to Warren and Goins (2019), FGCS who complete honors and advanced placement (AP) coursework are more likely to gain access, persist, and experience success in college.

Participants described a variety of internal and external factors that influenced their decision to attend college. Many students explained the ambivalence they experienced when considering attending college. Participants were uncertain about leaving home and fitting in, among other concerns. Rural, African American students are often faced with the arduous decision to stay or leave their community in hopes of expanded postsecondary opportunity (Means et al., 2016; Oliveri et al., 2018). Other students described the drive, motivation, and personal obligation to attend college that resulted from lived experiences. Family and friends who valued education offered support and encouragement. According to Sommerfeld and Bowen (2013), FGCS with greater familial support and social networks are more likely to succeed. Furthermore, teachers and coaches appeared to play significant roles in the participants' decisions to

pursue postsecondary education, a finding consistent with Bryan et al. (2017). These educators offered mentorship, guidance, and encouragement that empowered the participants. However, it is likely that these students did not have adequate school counselor support nor were provided a clear pathway to accessing college, as described by Means et al. (2016). As noted by Longmire-Avital and Miller-Dyce (2015), FGCS often need tangible forms of social capital to gauge their status.

The supportive factors provided by family and high school educators appeared to extend into the admissions process. Parents participated in college visits with students and assisted with applying for financial aid. School-based advisors and community mentors helped guide participants toward colleges and academic programs/majors. These factors contribute to the way students transition to college (Conley & Seburn, 2014; Ra, 2011). A few students indicated that the university reached out to provide basic support during the application process. Similarly, Warren et al. (2020) found that universities offered minimal support to high school students attempting to access college. This lack of university outreach may lead many FGCS to opt out of pursuing a college degree because they do not have the same sense of entitlement or belonging as their continuing generation counterparts (Bourdeiu, 1977).

Despite the support that participants described, they did face barriers when gaining access to college. Financial concerns and related familial stress were challenges faced by the participants. According to Castleman and Page (2013), FGCS often struggle to understand college-related processes and tasks. These challenges were echoed by Means et al. (2016) who suggested FGCS are uncertain about financial aid and how they will pay for college. Due to the frequent lack of cultural capital and

inconsistent social capital, FGCS often feel overwhelmed when attempting to navigate the nuances of accessing college (Brinkman et al., 2013). According to Perna & Kurban (2013) and others, limited access to college information is a common inequity FGCS face.

The findings of this study suggest that the participants acquired cultural and social capital over the course of their K-12 educational experience. They did not find "ease and familiarity" with several confusing elements of college access and enrollment. (Bills, 2005, p. 90). However, the students were motivated and confident, and had acquired cultural and social capital via a variety of lived experiences.

Limitations to the Study

Limitations of the current study include the reliance on self-reported data, the time elapsed between the phenomenon under investigation and data collection, and the researcher's positionality. As with most qualitative research studies, self-reported data are limited by the fact that they are rarely verifiable. Since the college access experience was the phenomenon of interest and the data were collected during the students' last year of college, the participants may not have remembered all the details surrounding their experience. Finally, the findings of this study are not generalizable, but in conjunction with other related studies, do provide additional context for the experiences of FGCS and college access.

Implications for Practice

School counselors are positioned to provide targeted support to prospective FGCS. Using the results of this study, school counselors may improve the services they provide directly to prospective FGCS, expand their services to parents and schools, and

advocate for prospective FGCS. By offering support services that foster cultural and social capital, school counselors may influence the discouraging statistics of FGCS.

ASCA (2019) encourages school counselors to assist *all* students in their academic, career, and personal/social development. One method of accomplishing this task is through direct services to students. The findings suggest that the successful FGCS in this study had many influences that contributed to their decision to pursue college. Additionally, counselors may work with students as suggested by Warren and Hale (2016) to develop noncognitive factors that have been helpful for the students in this study: self-determination, optimism, and self-confidence. School counselors are encouraged to identify prospective FGCS and conduct needs assessments to determine gaps in assets and capital.

School counselors may plan programs for prospective FGCS to prepare them for the myriad tasks and processes related to pursuing college. These programs would allow counselors to teach skills or develop college-going cultural capital necessary for prospective FGCS. The questions raised and confusion experienced by the participants in this study serve as ideal topics for inclusion in these programs. School counselors may provide information on the application process, financial aid procedures, and the housing application requirements.

Another strategy for improving the preparation of prospective FGCS is to deliver outreach to students' parents and the community. Parents who did not attend college may have many questions about how to help their child access college. The findings of this study reveal the importance of family in students' decisions, college access, and transition. Counselors may provide workshops or meetings to present this information

and empower and engage parents in this process. It is important for parents to know that they are very influential, and their children look to them for guidance when making postsecondary decisions.

School counselors also should advocate for prospective FGCS to teachers, school leaders, and other educators. Many participants in this study described efforts made by teachers, coaches, and advisors that helped them access college. School counselors may help *all* educators realize the power and influence they may have on prospective FGCS. They also should understand the importance of encouragement and high expectations during high school and the harmful effects of non-constructive criticism. School counselors may assist school staff with developing creative ideas for building a college-going, capital-enhancing culture.

School counselors have an opportunity to identify and support the prospective FGCS they serve. They can also provide leadership for programs that assist these students' efforts to pursue postsecondary education. Through various school counseling services, parent and community outreach, and advocacy, prospective FGCS are most prepared for potentially making the biggest decision and transition of their lives.

Future Research

Researchers are encouraged to explore the positive characteristics FGCS possess and how they develop capital and assets. Future qualitative research endeavors may include similar studies that collect data from multiple sources including observations and focus groups. Obtaining a greater understanding of the experiences of successful FGCS from various backgrounds, including race and ethnicities, and geographical location will be valuable. Researchers also are encouraged to engage in

experimental research designs focused on measuring outcomes related to specific college access interventions school counselors use with FGCS. Researchers may want to explore ways of integrating social and cultural capital-building in elementary, middle, and high schools so students are best prepared for college and social experiences.

Summary

FGCS are at a distinct disadvantage; however, some still successfully access college. School counselors are in a position to offer intentional, targeted support services that promote cultural and social capital among FGCS. The themes identified in this study may guide school counselors and researchers' efforts to support FGCS.

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