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First in My Family:

Perceived Family Support and Impact on First-Generation College Students within a
Community College Cohort Program Setting

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2014

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Abstract

Given the vast increase in the number of jobs predicted to require a post-secondary credential, it has never been more important to earn a college degree in America. Yet for first-generation college students (FGs), the chances of dropping before reaching graduation hover around 89%. While a variety of factors influence this stark reality, family support plays a central role. By definition, FG students face an identity shift away from the familiar family construct toward a new economic and social class, and yet, family support has been shown to be critical in helping FGs make the college choice. At the same time, once the student enters college, family has a tendency to become a source of anxiety due to lack of academic experience. While many studies have examined support needs of FGs, few have been conducted within a community college setting, and even fewer within community college cohort programs designed for FGs specifically. This study examines the relationship between perceived family support and adaptation to college within such a setting. Participants included 59 students answering a survey based on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) scale, and the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). Findings showed that there was no significant correlation between family support and adaptation to college, which raises questions about the differing needs of FGs at community colleges, and emphasizes the need to conduct research in community college cohort programs specifically. The author discusses these results in light of the nation's "Completion Agenda" call for educational reform aimed at increasing college success rates.

First in My Family:

**Perceived Family Support and Impact on First-Generation College Students
within a Community College Cohort Program Setting**

It has never been more important to earn a college degree in America. While college education has long been considered the primary gateway to economic success and upward mobility in the United States, the number of jobs requiring college degrees has increased markedly in the last half-century (Engle et al, 2006; Engle, 2007). In 2018, more than 63 percent of jobs in the United States are predicted to require postsecondary education credentials – compared to the just 28 percent that were required in 1974 (Friess, 2008). What is more, the gap between high school and college graduate earnings, which has steadily widened for each successive generation in the last half-century, also has a relationship to physical health factors such as obesity, smoking, and patterns of seeking medical care (Hicks, 2006).

Obtaining postsecondary education is therefore a compelling strategy for breaking the cycle of family poverty in the United States. In response, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Governors Association, the Education Commission of the States and more than a dozen other organizations are jointly calling for education reform, sharing a commitment to increase graduation rates framed as “The Completion Agenda.” At the heart of the Agenda is a call to ensure that 55 percent of all 25 to 34 year-olds in the U.S. hold an associate’s degree or higher by the year 2025 (Howard, 2010). The idea is surging with momentum as colleges rush to put new strategies in place, responding to state governments

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exploring the adoption of college funding formulas that are directly tied to graduation metrics (Howard, 2010).

Meeting this ambitious goal may depend on improving success rates for first-generation college-goers in particular (FGs). FGs, defined as students whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Hicks, 2006), comprise about one-third of all entering freshman in the United States, and yet nearly 89% of them will likely drop out without a degree within six years – which is four times the dropout rate of continuing-generation college students (Ramsey, 2010). At the same time, the number of FG students who begin college immediately following high school is 55 percent, compared to 84 percent of higher-income, continuing-generation students. In other words, there are many more first-generation college students who could potentially enter the pipeline for baccalaureate degrees than who actually enroll, and yet those who do face disproportionately steep odds against actually earning a college diploma: In fact, only 12 percent on average succeed each year (Mortenson, 2007; Pliska, 2012).

Challenges to First-Generation College Students

There are many reasons why first-generation college students who start college tend to never finish. First, FGs are highly likely to be low-income students, making entry into college an increasingly difficult prospect as tuition rates continue to climb (Friess, 2008). FGs also tend to be less academically prepared, have lower SAT scores, and lag behind in a number of academic preparation categories including study habits and critical thinking (Orbe, 2004). They also are far more likely to self-limit their college selection to just one option, and have significantly

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lower academic ambitions which tend to translate into decreased motivation for sticking with a college degree program (Jenkins, et al, 2013).

FGs also tend to experience significantly more difficulties adjusting to college life than continuing generation students (CGs) do and have been shown to have less commitment to their role as a student overall (Orbe, 2004). For example, FGs are far less likely to engage in college life by participating in college activities or interacting with teachers. Instead, studies have pointed to the need for FGs to gain “academic validation,” or baseline assurances that they are even capable of learning and succeeding, over the need to be validated socially – a phenomenon that is also linked with low self-esteem (Jenkins, et al, 2013). This may also be compounded by the need for FGs to work to pay for school, thus regularly taking them off campus. In fact FGs are much more likely to work over 35 hours a week, or work full-time – which necessitates the need to attend college part-time and results in the creation of fewer social ties (McConnell, 2000). Even when on campus, finances can play a role in hampering social networks for FGs: Imagine the stress of being asked to coffee to study for an exam when you don’t have the money, and you have to catch the bus to get to the coffee shop (Howard, 2010, Pilska, 2012). This pressure of feeling behind academically, as well having weak social networks within college, has been shown to heap enormous stress on FGs – even to the point of depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Jenkins, et al, 2013; Wang & Castañada-Sound, 2008).

Family Support and First-Generation College Students

Family support has been shown to play an important role in the transition to college regardless of family history (Miller, 2007). Parents can be chief advocates in

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the college planning process, helping their children with applications, talking through career choices, supporting financially either by paying tuition or filling out financial aid forms, and serving as emotional resources for students throughout their college journey (Wang & Castañada-Sound, 2008; Miller, 2007).

In some ways, family support is extra important to FGs, because FGs face greater barriers to choosing college in the first place. At issue is the fact that unlike CGs, first-generation students must make a significant life choice to invest in college, even though that choice is *different* from the choices made by family members in the past – they need to believe that opportunities created by going to college are worth the challenge and the change. FG parents can play a very big role in providing the motivation to make this choice by communicating their belief in the importance of going to college. Further, FG families can help mitigate some of the fear and self-doubt that FG students are typically faced with. By expressing joy and pride at the important accomplishment of being the first in the family to go to college, FG families can give students the emotional support needed to step into college with more confidence. Thus, the supportive power of FG families can ultimately make the difference between choosing college or not for FG students, and is much more salient at this stage of the college transitional process than it is for CG students (Miller, 2007).

Researchers have referred to messages that are associated with important life transitions as “Memorable Messages” – messages that deeply resonate with their recipients, and are internalized and remembered over time (Wang, 2012). One Memorable Message common in FG family discourse concerns the American Dream:

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the idea that anyone can be who they want to be through hard work and perseverance. Immigrant families in particular have been shown to echo the American Dream narrative as a Memorable Message for their children who are the first to be admitted to college (Wang, 2012). This is very powerful: Invoking the American Dream frames the FG student's accomplishment as not just one for the family, but one for the larger immigrant population – that going to college is both a signal that the family is “making it” in America, as well as expressed as a point of pride for the native cultural group (Friess, 2008; Orbe, 2004; Wang, 2012).

This expression of communal pride has also been shown to be common to non-immigrant ethnic minority groups who experience a child entering college for the first time. For example, in both Latino and African American populations, Memorable Messages of FG family pride have been shown to be transmitted more widely outside the family than they have for white families (Orbe, 2004). As cited in Mark Orbe's 2004 analysis of first-generation college student struggles, one African American male told this story:

So, now when I go home, my mother is quick to say, “Come to work with me.” I would go to work with her, but I would basically sit in a chair and watch her do people's hair. All the women will say, “Oh you are so-so's boy. You are so handsome. You go to college?” ...They talk to you like you are not a regular person anymore. They talk to you like you are – not a superstar – but like you came back from outer space or something. “So what was it like there?”

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This adds further importance and power to family support for FGs: The community-wide interest and endorsement to choose college can create even stronger and more critical motivation, as well as positive pressure to succeed.

Challenges to the Family as a Source of Support

As supportive as FG parents have the power to be in getting their student to college, and as well-intentioned as they may be in seeing that their child be the first in the family to earn a degree, unfortunately FG families are simply at a major disadvantage when comes to actually supporting the experience of staying in school. FGs are by definition educational pioneers: As the first in their families to go to college, they are blazing a trail in an unfamiliar setting that is unlike any previous academic experience anyone in the family has ever had. FG parents cannot use their past personal experience as guidance, and are unable to tell children what to expect academically or socially in the same way that CG parents can (Hicks, 2006; Orbe, 2004; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Wang, 2012). For example, balancing multiple classes, living with other students, writing college essays, going through finals, talking to professors – even navigating social pressures such as Greek life and other traditional college activities are foreign constructs for which the FG family cannot provide support in the form of first-hand knowledge (Hicks, 2006). Though transitioning to college is a new (and significant) experience for all students (Orbe, 2004), this inability of family to provide predictive clues leaves FGs much more “on their own” when it comes to navigating unfamiliar college life.

Cultural Hurdles

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What's more, FG students face new challenges that go beyond transactional or procedural experience – they also face cultural hurdles as well. College is in a sense, a new world. It is an environment in which cultural norms differ from FG households, who are significantly more likely to be societally marginalized due to low-income or racial ethnicity (Freiss, 2008). This leads to the need for FG students to ascertain and make behavioral shifts. For example, children from working class families have been shown to be much more deferential to adults than those from middle class families (Culver, 2012). Speaking up and questioning authority is discouraged, and the line between adults and children tends to be much more firmly drawn. While there are many speculations why this is so, the end result for low-income students is a poor fit in college classrooms where speaking up is often one of the most basic requirements for getting a good grade. FG student reticence can therefore be mistaken for slowness or incompetence, when that is not necessarily the case (Culver, 2012). At the same time, not speaking up means a compounding unfamiliarity with self-advocating: in Annette Lareau's *Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, the author talks of cases where students did not know how to ask for an extension to an assignment, especially for a "less acceptable" excuse like having to work a shift (as cited in Culver, 2012). When sharing one's own point of view becomes a hurdle, it colors much of the college experience: It is easy to see why even receiving and responding to criticism for FG college students can present a highly stressful situation for which there is no ready script.

Another stress point for FG students is coping with seemingly impractical learning hurdles for achievement in the college environment. Students from FG

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families tend to look at majors as transactions for careers, shying away from disciplines like “philosophy” and “history” – because these majors don’t lead to clear jobs. FGs – and of particular importance, their parents – simply don’t have the luxury of seeing college as a “learning journey” (Greenwald, 2013). A common cultural viewpoint is that the purpose of college is to help one earn a good living, and attending for reasons beyond that goal is “wasteful” (Greenwald 2013). Though of course it can be assumed that most college students aspire to make a good living, the added stress for a FG in completing assignments that do not teach practical skills, coping with the necessity of attending classes based on debate and theoretical exploration, and the slow speed of earning a degree all pose significant changes to cultural values.

Identity Challenges

Perhaps the most significant barrier to FG family support rests with the changing identity of the family itself. By definition, an FG is defined by his or her relationship to the family, and by being “the first,” also defined by a shift away from the family in order to become something new – a person who has a college degree and exponentially more opportunities at life, as opposed to someone who does not. Even though family may be in full support of this shift, the journey to this achievement requires cultural assimilation that family members may not fully understand. Most often, this disconnect appears at home: For example, many FG students have reported that their parents do not understand the study time that college-level work requires, or the pressure of keeping up within a more rigorous academic environment than high school. Often this results in family conflict that

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stems from the family feeling neglected when the student continues to work on college projects at home, fueled by a misunderstanding that “college work is done at college.” The family, who commonly has already made sacrifices for the student to attend college, feels unappreciated and rejected (Friess, 2008). Therefore, students experiencing this situation have to contend with receiving two competing messages: “The family comes first,” and “College comes first.”

For members of ethnic minority groups, this bifurcation in identity is further compounded: FG students have to adapt to a college culture that is predominately white, English-speaking, and middle-income. This often requires culturally symbolic changes on the part of the student that include new dialects and ways of speaking, new clothing and hairstyles, and new interest in subjects that are outside of a the family experience and signal an uncomfortable distance – “the accouterments of social class disorientation” (Miller, 2007). Many Latino and African American participants in studies have reported being accused of “acting white” at home, or “acting like know-it-alls” even despite refraining from discussing schoolwork (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Given that FG students are far more likely to be ethnic minorities, this is a common identity challenge. But even with white FG students, however, the new outward expressions that often come with being a college student can be powerful challenges to maintaining a stable family identity.

As a result, the FG student commonly must decide how to balance personal and collective goals, and decide which is ultimately more important (Wang, 2012). Many students have reported constantly having to choose between two lives (Wang, 2012) and the resulting stress of acting one way at college, and another way at home

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has shown to be a formidable source of anxiety (Wang & Castañada-Sound, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). FG students may therefore choose to censor themselves at home as a means of maintaining positive face with the family, or choose to visit home less frequently (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Miller, 2007). Unfortunately this can lead to a feeling of marginalization in both worlds – college and home – and the pressure of maintaining identity negotiation can be too much for an FG to shoulder while attempting to finish a degree.

FG Cohort Groups Can Complement Family Support

Researchers have suggested a number of strategies for bridging the family support hurdles presented for FG students, so that FG students are more likely to make it to graduation. To begin with, college administrators should realize that FG students must seek on-campus resources to fill in first-hand knowledge support of how to “do college” (Wang, 2014). This means creating avenues for academic and social integration that may not naturally occur on their own, such as cohort and peer-group programs (Hicks, 2006). Because FG status is a hidden identity construct (you cannot spot an FG student simply by appearance), it may be more difficult for FG students to find fellow students who are in the same boat, and to self-disclose their personal differences (Wang, 2014). The social capital that can result from peer support has been shown to significantly aid FG students in feeling more secure, and fill in gaps that family support may not cover (Wang, 2014; Friess, 2008; Jenkins, et al, 2013). Cohort strategies also place FG students in-line with professional mentors and teachers, who can serve as coaches for navigating unfamiliar college processes (Jenkins, et al, 2013; McConnell, 2000). One of the most basic – yet powerful –

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strategies is simply to use the existence of FG cohort groups as a signal that going to college is a formidable transition: By openly communicating the enormous gains to be made by going to college, balanced with the significant feelings of cultural loss that may commonly occur, colleges can help FGs be more successful in their navigation (Miller, 2007).

The Role of Community Colleges

Community colleges are well-positioned to serve FG students, and to play a critical role in the Completion Agenda, for several reasons. First, because community colleges are closer to home and lower in cost, they offer more accessible entry points for students from all walks of life. In addition, the commuter nature of community colleges can lend FGs a greater feeling of belonging to a community that does not require long stretches of time on campus, and in which many people work outside of school (Friess, 2008). Community colleges have also long been leaders in developing programs that are aimed at underserved populations, supporting federal partnerships like TRIO, Upward Bound, and Educational Opportunity Centers to name a few, that have made advances in national student retention (Engle, 2007; Grant-Vallone, et al, 2004). Yet, there exists a large gap in the research literature concerning FG students and family support in the context of community colleges, and community college support programs (McConnell, 2000). Most FG studies have been conducted at four-year institutions – which leads to significant questions about studies that do not control for financial cost, part-time status, living on campus and other higher-education constructs that are experienced much differently at community colleges (Dittman, et al, 1994; Engle, 2007).

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The purpose of this study is to extend what we know about the importance of family support to FG students, by examining its relationship to college success when a student is enrolled in a community college support program. This leads to central questions of the study:

RQ1: For first generation college students, to what extent, if at all, is perceived family support related to academic adjustment?

RQ2: For first generation college students, to what extent, if at all, is perceived family support related to social adjustment?

RQ3: For first generation college students, to what extent, if at all, is perceived family support related to personal-emotional adjustment?

RQ4: For first generation college students, to what extent, if at all is perceived family support related to attachment?

RQ5: Is there a significant difference between males and females in their academic adjustment?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were enrolled in a support program aimed at first-generation and low-income college students within a large community college setting in the northwest. Participants were informed about the survey by the program director. If they were willing to volunteer, they were directed to an online survey; 59 students chose to take part. The sample consisted of 71% females and 29% males. Latino or Hispanic students comprised the slight majority of participants (33%), followed closely by White or Caucasian student (31%), then

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Black or African American (16%), Asian (13%), Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander (5%), and American Indian / Alaskan Native (2%). Nearly 80% of participants reported living with at least one member of their immediate family. All of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 25.

Procedures

Approval was obtained from the University of Portland's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for this study. A 64-item, author-generated online survey was administered via Survey Monkey and contained three measures: one to assess perceived family support, one to assess adaptation to college, and a third to assess demographics (See Appendix A for the complete survey).

The first measure was based on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), developed by Zimet et al., (1988). The MSPSS is a 12-item questionnaire; the author adapted the questionnaire to inquire specifically about the perception of support from family members. Sample statement-prompts included:

- *There is a special person in my family who is around when I am in need.*
- *My family really tries to help me.*
- *I can count on my family when things go wrong.*

This section consisted of items using a five-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (Don't agree) to 5 (Agree). All 12 items were scored in the same direction.

The second measure was based on the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), developed by Baker and Bohdan (1989). The SACQ is a 67-item questionnaire designed to measure the effectiveness of student adjustment to

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college, and containing four subscales: Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, and Attachment.

The Academic Adjustment subscale measured how students feel they are doing when it comes to adapting to the academic demands of college by asking for reactions to the statements such as:

- *I have well-defined academic goals.*
- *I am motivated to study.*
- *I am satisfied with my academic performance.*

The Social Adjustment subscale measured how students feel they are adapting to the social demands of going to college by asking for reactions to the statements such as:

- *I fit in well here.*
- *I'm involved with college social activities.*
- *I have several close college friends.*

The Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale measured how students feel they are adapting to college on a personal and emotional level by asking for reactions to statements such as:

- *I feel tense and nervous about school.*
- *Being a college student has not been easy.*
- *I have trouble coping with the stress of college.*

The Attachment Adjustment subscale measured how students feel about their decision to continue to pursue college by asking for reactions to the statements such as:

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- *I'm glad I decided to go to college.*
- *I plan to finish my bachelor's degree.*
- *I'm glad I'm making progress at this college.*

For all items in the SACQ scale, participants rated their agreement with the statement on a five-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (Don't agree) to 5 (Agree). Items that were presented negatively were reverse-coded.

Results

Primary Findings

The researcher proposed five research questions regarding the relationship between two main variables: perceived family support and adaptation to college for first-generation college students. Within the adaptation to college variable, four sub-variables were examined: Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, and Attachment. A Cronbach's alpha reliability test confirmed that all variables were reliable. Coefficients are as follows: Family Support Scale (.93); College Adjustment Sub-Scale (.80); Social Adjustment Sub-Scale (.79); Personal Adjustment Sub-Scale (.79); and Attachment Adjustment Sub-Scale (.56).

To test RQ1-4, Pearson bivariate correlations were then conducted between the Family Support Scale and all other scales, however no relationship was found in any of the tests. The nearest correlation was seen between Family Support and College Adjustment ($r=.712$; $p<.056$), however findings still did not reach statistical significance.

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To test RQ5, an Independent Samples T-Test was run to assess the relationship between gender and academic adjustment, however no significance was found.

Qualitative Findings

The survey asked one open-ended question: “*Whose personal support is most important to you in terms of your success in college? Why? Please explain.*” Results point to a fairly even distribution of themes:

Theme	Percentage of Respondents
“My parents’ personal support is most important.”	31%
“Other family members’ support is most important (not my parents).”	25%
“My college instructors and counselors’ support is most important.”	22%
“I am doing this on my own – it’s my own will that is helping me to succeed.”	22%

The narratives provided along these thematic lines ranged quite markedly in tone and sentiment. Some followed patterns of discussed in the literature review, revealing both positive and negative influences of family. For example, one respondent remarked:

“My mom's personal support matters the most to me. My mother went through many rough times just so my brother and I could have a chance at the American Dream. She is the one who matters the most to me in this world so if I didn't have her support I don't know if I would even be in school right now.”

While another respondent remarked:

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“Because neither of my parents have been in college they don't really know what to do or [how to] help. That's just how it's been. I couldn't take my homework home as a kid and ask for help – I either knew it or I didn't. Same thing now. I feel that now anytime I need help my boyfriend [who is going to college too] can help me and if not his other roommate.”

Both narratives mirror the literature review's predictions about the positive motivation family can provide for choosing college, but also the vacancy of family support often experienced once a child begins her studies.

However, beyond theme of family, participants in this study also brought to light several additional thematic nuances. In particular there existed a number of narratives addressing the **importance of college success coaches**, as in the following example:

“Based on my experiences, the college coach is the most important to me in terms of my success in college because she seems always available to help me, to give advice and even to listen to my personal problems.”

Support of **other family members (not parents)** was also addressed:

“Personally, I feel like support from my older sister is the most important for me because she is someone who helps me through all the mistakes I make and holds no judgments when I make those mistakes. She helps me ensure that I get over my problems and continue with my college career.”

Finally, a number of narratives indicated that **no outside support** was as important as self-motivation:

“I guess it would be my own support. I want to be successful in college, so that in the future I'll be able to take of my family and that's all I want. I am the only one doing the work and getting the job done.”

One respondent further underscored the feeling of being on his/her own by discussing feelings of both sorrow and determination:

“I believe family support is important, and it was for me for a while as I started college, but once I realized that I was in it for myself in college and nobody in my family was in it with me anymore, I stopped caring, and started looking at

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things in a different perspective to help me succeed in college. I started thinking about how life would be for me if I didn't get the memo that my parents simply didn't care, and asked myself, "Am I really gonna let someone who doesn't care bring me down? Or am I gonna work hard and achieve my goals for a better future with my own family?" I basically had a lot of thinking going on and dealing with depression as new college student was even harder, but it got me thinking a whole lot, and I got used to doing things on my own. All my life I've felt that that's the way it has gone, so support or no support from my parents at age 21, I've managed to stay in school and succeed in college and get good grades that help me determine how well I am doing in school. I can do it all by myself."

Taken together with the statistical analysis, this range of narratives further contributes to a study in which results were insightful, but not clear-cut.

Discussion

This study was designed to assess whether a relationship existed between perceived family support and successful adaptation to college of first-generation students enrolled in a community college cohort-based program. Though the scales used were shown to be reliable, results revealed an insignificant relationship between the Perceived Family Support scale, and each of the subsequent subscales that comprise Student Adaptation to College (College Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal Adjustment, and Attachment Adjustment). This was an unexpected outcome: While the research literature points to both positive and negative influences of family on adaptation to college for FGs, most studies do point to a significant relationship in either direction. Based on previous findings, for example, a logical pattern for this study might have pointed to family's positive influence on Attachment (i.e. encouraging a student to choose college), but a weaker (or even negative) influence on other aspects of adapting to college, promulgated mainly by the lack of experience FG families have in navigating the "college world."

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However, there may be several reasons for these particular results – and the unexpected outcome may in itself be a testament to the need to shine a light on an important educational construct that is currently underrepresented in the body of research concerning FGs. First, community college culture may be different. Because community colleges are commuter in nature, do not typically involve less on-campus living, are comprised of a mostly working student base, and attract less affluent students due to drastically reduced tuition prices when compared to private four-year universities, the shift between “worlds” may be less abrupt than it is in other higher education settings. In addition, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire was created with university students in mind (as noted in questions pertaining to dorm life and bachelor’s degree attainment for instance). Though the SACQ was somewhat adapted for this study, it may be that the questions were not as salient for this particular audience. Questions constructed with community college students in mind might reveal more accurate information.

In addition, the same can be said for studying cohort programs: If community college culture is different from four-year universities, how much more so is the culture of cohort programs designed specifically to support FG student success *within* a community college setting? Cohort programs for FG students are a relatively new strategy for combatting low success rates for low-income students. It may be that researchers have not yet had the benefit of program legacy to develop appropriate testing instruments. For example, the program that served as a basis for this study involves a process in which students are identified as low-income, first-generation college students with high potential, while they are seniors in high

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school. Program administrators then recruit these students to join the program. Once enrolled, students receive full tuition remission to earn their associate's degrees – and also have to agree to participate in a cohort program which involves fulltime mentors (“college success coaches”) who are dedicated to helping provide the support that typically FG families are unable to provide... this may involve everything from assisting with homework to helping navigate public transportation and childcare. The program is highly successful with a nearly 90% completion rate...and it is this success that may point to evidence of the diminished influence of family for students involved in similar programs. In other words, these programs may do much to supplant the need for family support throughout the full spectrum of adapting to college, from deciding to attend to navigating college life once enrolled.

Limitations

This study has several potential limitations, with implications for future research. First, 59 students completed the survey, which may have indicated a voluntary response bias – those who may have felt more secure in their adaptation to college as an FG student may have been the same ones who chose to respond. A larger sample size may have yielded more students who were less secure in their adjustment to college life, and thus a greater reliance on family (rather than the cohort program) to fill in the gaps. In addition, while the survey sample included a range of ethnicities, the majority of respondents were female (70%). A greater sample with more gender balance may have improved data collection (particularly for RQ5) and revealed more information overall.

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Another potential limitation involves the insular nature of this particular cohort group. Students participating in this program discuss issues of college support and challenges regularly as part of the adaptation to college process. They also are introduced to other FG students to facilitate peer support. It may be that a more comparative study between two different cohort programs, or a community college and a university cohort, may reveal unique aspects that make this particular program less representative of others around the country.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Study

Across the country, state governments are calling for reform of public colleges and universities in order to mitigate an alarming dropout rate – one that is occurring alongside a heightened critical need to have a college-educated populace available to fill the jobs of tomorrow. This study raises more questions than it answers, but it also underscores the need for more research within one of the most promising new directions in first-generation college student support: community college FG cohort programs. Today, community colleges enroll nearly half of all college students in the country, and enrollment is only increasing as tuition rates continue to become prohibitive in other institutions (Freiss, 2008). Cohort programs are an innovative way to help combat low graduation rates by proactively identifying potential FG college students (rather than waiting for FGs to make the first move), and then offering a program designed to provide a high level of personal and financial support throughout the college journey. To best support this movement, it is important to learn more about communication factors influencing success, both positively and negatively. One primary way of addressing this head-on

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is to reengineer a student adaptation to college questionnaire that is specifically designed for this community college population. Moreover, many more studies that contribute to the understanding of community college cohort programs can help reveal their power, influence, role, and areas for improvement at a time when community colleges may be the only pathway that is open for hundreds of thousands of people who seek to start college each year.

Finally, it is important to note that whether community college cohort programs *can* supplant family support or not, families remain a centrally important building block of society, and a powerful frame of reference and personal identity that should be nurtured rather than ignored. In the case of FG college students, the prospect of going to college can feel like turning your back on your family's way of life. Future studies should therefore seek a way to retain the positive influence of family support, and look for avenues for not just helping to facilitate an FG student transition to college, but an entire *FG family* transition to college as well. Identity change does not solely have to rest on the shoulders of the college student. By sharing the change with his or her family, and by making the higher education choice an evolving part of shared family history, college may hold even greater power for transforming whole families toward more hopeful futures.

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APPENDIX A: Testing Instrument for study

PART A: SCALE FOR PERCEIVED FAMILY SUPPORT

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

There is a special person in my family who is around when I am in need.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

There is a special person in my family with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

My family really tries to help me.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have a special person in my family who is a real source of comfort to me.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I can count on my family when things go wrong.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I can talk about my problems with my family.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have family members with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

There is a special person in my family who cares about my feelings.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

My family is willing to help me make decisions.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I can talk about my problems with my family.

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Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

Please indicate how important receiving personal support is from the following groups / people:

*My **family's** support is important to my success as a college student.*

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

*My **friends'** support is important to my success as a college student.*

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

*My **instructors'** support is important to my success as a college student.*

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

*My **fellow students'** support is important to my success as a college student.*

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

Whose personal support is most important to you in terms of your success in college? Why? Please explain:

[Open-ended answer.]

PART B: SCALE(S) FOR STUDENT ADAPTATION TO COLLEGE

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

[Academic sub-scale:]

I am definite about my reasons for being in college.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have well-defined academic goals.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I consider a college degree to be important.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I doubt the value of a college degree.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I enjoy academic work.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

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Most of my interests are not related to my school work.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I keep up to date with my academic work.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I do not work as hard as I should.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I am motivated to study.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I go to class regularly.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I find academic work difficult.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I'm satisfied with my academic performance.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I sometimes don't feel smart enough for course work.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I like writing papers for classes.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have trouble concentrating when I'm studying.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I don't do that well academically, considering the effort I'm putting into school.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have trouble getting started on homework.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I like my classes.

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Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I like my teachers.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I like the program I'm involved in at this college.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I like going to this college.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

[Social sub-scale:]

I fit in well here.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I'm involved with college social activities.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I am adjusting well to college.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have several close college friends.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I'm meeting people and making friends.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have regular contact with my instructors.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have good friends to talk about problems with here.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I feel different from others in ways I don't like.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have difficulty feeling at ease with other students at this college.

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Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I'm happy I made the decision to come here.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

[Personal-emotional subscale:]

I feel tense and nervous about school.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I feel depressed and moody about school.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

Being a college student has not been easy.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

Being independent has not been easy.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I worry a lot about college expenses.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I have trouble coping with the stress of college.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

[Attachment subscale:]

I'm glad I decided to go to college.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I think about dropping out permanently.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I think about taking time off.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I plan to finish my bachelor's degree.

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Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

I'm glad I'm making progress at this college.

Don't agree Disagree somewhat Neutral Agree somewhat Agree

[PART C: DEMOGRAPHICS]

What is your age:

18-25

26-30

31-35

36-40

40+

What is your gender:

M

F

What is your ethnicity:

American Indian / Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African America

Latino or Hispanic

Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander

White or Caucasian

Prefer not to answer

Are you the first in your family to go to college?

Yes

No

What is your living situation with respect to your family:

I live with my family (or some members of my family)

I do not live with any members of my family

I am currently enrolled at PCC this term:

Yes

No