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The College Search Process of Rural, First-Generation Students

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THE COLLEGE SEARCH PROCESS OF RURAL, FIRST-GENERATION
STUDENTS

by

Tia M. Miles
MA Minnesota State University Mankato

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Minnesota State University Moorhead

Moorhead, MN

May 2023

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STUDENTS

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Tia M. Miles

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my husband. Without your support none of this would have been possible. I would also like to dedicate this to my mom, Dad, Molly and Lady for always pushing me to do my best and believing in me no matter what. I love you all. I also dedicate this work to all the first-generation students who are pushing through the barriers to succeed in higher education. May this work help the next generation to avoid some of those barriers.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT

First-generation college students (FGCS) continue to be one of the largest growing groups of students across higher education. Being a FGCS comes with a unique set of challenges when facing the choice of a college or university. This research aims to identify barriers that FGCS face in the college search process to provide student support professionals with information and recommendations on how to effectively support FGCS in the college search process. Previous research has often focused on the matriculation, retention, and graduation of FGCS. It is important to understand how FGCS select an institution of higher education to improve retention and graduation rates by providing a more supportive and effective college search process, allowing students to feel fully connected and fit to their institution.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Choosing a college can be a stressful process for any student, first-generation, rural students even more so (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Clayton et al., 2019). First-generation is defined as a student who has come from a family where their biological parents did not complete a four-year college degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). With lack of access to knowledge about college and the campuses themselves, these students often find themselves in a school that is ill-suited to their needs (Liversage, et al., 2018). First-generation college student (FGCS) populations continue to be one of the most rapidly growing populations in higher education (House, et al., 2020; Liversage et al., 2017). As this population grows, it becomes even more important that educators understand the unique situation of students who identify as first-generation (House et al., 2020; Markle & Dyckhoff Stelzriede, 2020; Roksa et al., 2018). Since the literature involving college choice for first-generation students is limited, the topic of how students work through the college choice process and potential barriers associated with the college choice process should be examined.

Although the focus of this qualitative study involves the examination of student choice and barriers in regard to college selection, issues associated with the first-generation college experience, such as retention, will be covered in the literature review of this dissertation to provide both context and connections to the first-generation college student experience and to help broaden the scope of understanding in ascertaining how rural, first-generation students choose a college, which obstacles they face, and what support they receive throughout their college search process. The study was conducted at a rural, Midwestern liberal arts university and the qualitative inquiry consisted of 10 individual interviews.

For this study, rural is defined based on the official Census Bureau classification which

uses specific criteria related to population thresholds, density, distance, and land use to determine whether a space is rural or urban (America Counts Staff, 2017). As purposeful sample participants, interviewees met the criteria of first-generation, from a rural background with a graduating class of less than 100 in their high school, and who were currently enrolled full-time at the university. This is a phenomenological study, wherein the researcher analyzed the interview transcripts for themes.

Statement of the Problem

To be a first-generation student means that the student has come from a family where their biological parents did not complete a four-year college degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Children look to their parents for guidance and support, but when the subject is so far beyond the scope of what the parents have experienced that guidance will likely be limited or nonexistent. College is complex. Imagine showing up to a campus for the first time and not knowing where anything is. This would be intimidating enough, but now add in the lexicon of collegiate terms and it feels like you are entering a different world. Ceremonies such as convocation cement this feeling for incoming students (Stuber, 2011). First-generation parents are outside of this new world, and often do not have the skills or knowledge to prepare their students for this change. For some parents, their student entering college can feel like they are being left behind. This can lead to a lack of support for their student or even contempt for being able to "escape" the life that the parents have never been able to (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Students are left on their own to figure out the system.

Higher education has become more accessible with the percentage of adults in the United States with a bachelor's degree rising from 21% in 1990 to 33% in 2015 (Cataldi et al., 2018). The number of students enrolled in college may have continued to rise across the decades, but the share of those students who are identified as first-generation students remains roughly the

same, about one-third (Cataldi et al., 2018). According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success, first-generation students are more likely overall to be from low-income or minority backgrounds than their continuing generation peers (RTI International, 2019). There are many reasons why these trends appear, but generally income is correlated to how much education one has. For example, doctors make more money than bus drivers, but they also need a lot more education. For parents of first-generation students, their options may be limited due to their own educational attainment level.

First-generation students are also more likely to attend for-profit institutions than their peers (RTI International, 2019). With less knowledge of the higher education system, promises made by predatory for-profit institutions disproportionately affect first-generation college students (Riegg Cellini, 2020). Students at these institutions "pay more and benefit less" than students at a not-for-profit institution. This leads to more debt and, in some cases, a net loss overall for earnings versus an earner with only a high school diploma (Riegg Cellini, 2020). Situations such as these lead to the lack of retention of first-generation students. First-generation students are four times more likely to drop out of college in their first year than continuing-generation students (Azmitia et al., 2018). These students are then less likely to return to school to finish their degree. Simply being first-generation puts students at risk for failure to persist in higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018).

Before a student can enter the world of higher education, they must first select a college. College selection sounds simple enough, but with over 6500 options the task can be daunting (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). A college that fits the students' needs is incredibly important for retention and success for first-generation students (Stuber, 2011). Most schools have highly qualified admissions staff that help students make an educated decision, but

when easy access to visiting campuses, technology to connect with college staff, or the ability to know when to ask for help is taken away, as is the case with many rural, first-generation students, the student is again left on their own to make this huge decision (Chang et al., 2020).

The lack of support from parents and lack of access to support from others outside the family can make the college search process a lonely experience. Education is a transformative experience, to which every student should have equitable access. How a student decides to choose a certain college or university can set the trajectory for the foreseeable future. Future income, career choices and more can be impacted by the choice a student makes. Therefore, it is important to understand the process rural, first-generation students undergo to choose a school. Understanding this process will highlight the areas of issue that can be resolved with support services, including academic and non-academic supports, on both the secondary and post-secondary sides. When obstacles are understood, then help can be offered.

Significance of the Study

The pandemic hit higher education hard in terms of enrollment. The College Board reported a significant decline in enrollment across two-year and four-year institutions (Howell, et al., 2021). First-generation students, however, will continue to be one of the largest growing sectors of college enrollment (House et al., 2020). In a world where every student enrollment lost can break an institution, there must be a focus on historically underserved students. Underserved students make up a large population of students that can be mined to increase an institution's enrollment and thus financial stability, but the services and supports available to these students must be strong enough to retain these students. The financial stability of institutions is not this researcher's main concern; however, as student equity is an area that of greater importance in regard to first-generation students. The financial aspect is important to highlight though, as the viability of an institution is directly linked to the initiatives that can be put in place to support

underserved students.

Much of the literature surrounding first-generation students is focused on those who live or go to school in institutions with large populations or urban areas (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Chang et al., 2020; Clayton et al., 2019; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Goings & Sewell, 2019). For researchers, this allows for more students to study and a more diverse demographics of students. This focus, however, leaves out students in rural areas. These students may encounter different challenges in the college choice process from urban students. Urban students will have access to more resources just by the virtue of where they live. Geographic concerns are especially important to study regarding college choice, expressly for first-generation and low-income students, because these students often face inequities because of where they live, such as access to public services and transportation (Jabbar et al., 2017). There is currently a dearth of research surrounding rural, first-generation students, which demonstrates the importance of studying this group.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to highlight and understand barriers that arise for rural, first-generation students in their college search process. Education is often known as the great equalizer, but class differences are not only evident in many institutions of higher education, they are reinforced (Fiske & Markus, 2012). Understanding the barriers associated with the college search process should help higher education professionals focus on the removal of barriers to allow more students entry into higher education and, in turn, the workforce with marketable skills and knowledge.

With a greater understanding of barriers to rural, first-generation students, student support staff across campuses can better recruit and retain this growing population of students. This not only gives more students a more equitable chance at educational attainment and social

mobility, but also allows higher education institutions to maximize their enrollment and maintain their viability. Without viable institutions, students cannot be effectively supported.

The results of this study will not be generalizable to every situation, but the results should help to inform the body of work surrounding first-generation students. Continued research into all aspects of the first-generation experience should be completed. As researchers learn more about the experiences of students, themes across research become evident. It's difficult to fix what one does not understand as broken.

Research Question

As one of the fastest growing subsets of college students, it is essential that rural, first-generation students are studied. Choosing a college is the first and largest step in entering higher education. To understand how rural, first-generation students make sense of this process, the central question is: **What barriers do rural, first-generation students experience during the college search process?** This research aims to identify the barriers that rural, first-generation face and offer solutions through a toolkit for student support professionals. A phenomenological approach, which seeks to discover the essence of lived experience, was used to answer this research question. By looking at individual experiences obtained through interviews, the researcher sought to find common themes that identify barriers experienced by rural, first-generation students during the college search process.

Key Terms

First Generation: "All students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree" (Ward et al., 2012, p. 4).

Rural: "Rural areas are sparsely populated, have low housing density, and are far from urban centers" (America Counts Staff, 2017, p. 1). "'Rural' encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Urban: "The Census Bureau's urban areas represent densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses. The Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas: Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people; Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people" (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Framework

This study is a phenomenological look at how first-generation students from rural backgrounds experience the college search process. A phenomenological study aims to find a common meaning across several individual lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An object of human experience is meant to be uncovered from this type of qualitative research. Themes are generated from the collected data and the essential, invariant structure of the phenomena is reported.

Phenomenology is informed by an interpretivist paradigm. In interpretivism, also called social constructivism, individuals seek to make meaning of their realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each person views the world through their own lens and interprets experiences to make meaning. By reviewing the experiences of rural, first-generation students during the college search process, the researcher hopes to identify college search process barriers and make recommendations that can be used for future research or student success initiatives.

Delimitations

Due to time limitations and convenience, one rural comprehensive liberal arts university was chosen for the site of this study. The researcher chose to focus on first- and second-year first-generation students from a rural background at the exclusion of other students at the university. First- and second-year students were chosen for purposes of recency regarding the college choice experience.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include incomplete information regarding which students are first-generation since this research occurred at a university that is part of a state system of colleges and universities, and this university does not have in place a guaranteed way to identify first-generation students. The university in this study uses a supplemental question on its application as an identifier, but students are not required to answer the question. Data considered to be personally identifiable information are protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). To avoid any issues with accessing data covered under FERPA, students must have self-identified as first-generation and submitted their information to the researcher for review. This limited the number of students available to participate in this study.

As with any group identity, identification of membership in that group may cause the individual distress. First-generation is an invisible identifier meaning it cannot be distinguished from physical means. Individuals may meet the criteria, but they may not choose to participate due to the distress caused by others knowing their group identity. This again limits the number of students available for this study's sample.

Another limitation to consider for this study is that of the applicability of results. Since the study was designed to obtain localized results, the results of this study are localized and not generalizable. Although the findings would be transferable to similar contexts based on the methods used.

The researcher's personal biases are another limitation. As a rural, first-generation student, the researcher will need to be keenly aware of any personal bias they bring into each interview. Bracketing will be used, which is when the researcher "brackets himself or herself out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77). Having others review the interview questions, keeping the interview location the same,

and not deviating from the prepared questions will help to mitigate personal biases.

Assumptions

The researcher held the following assumptions:

- Participants' ages would range from 18-24 years.

- Many would come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, including Pell eligible status.

- Most would be attending school full-time.

- Some would be experiencing negative pressure from family regarding school.

- Participants would be honest when participating in the study interviews.

Conclusions

Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, it was the researcher's goal to reveal the obstacles in the college search process of rural, first-generation students. Highlighting this student experience can help inform student services processes and policies to better serve students. An equitable education, while maintaining viability of institutions to be able to provide supports for all students, is needed in today's higher education landscape.

The literature that exists surrounding first-generation students is often focused on the urban landscape. In these environments there are more students to be part of the sample, which should facilitate participant recruitment. There are, however, many students from rural backgrounds who choose to stay in a rural environment for their higher education experience. It is important that these students are understood as well. The demographics of students continue to show a need for focus on first-generation students, and every student deserves to attend a school that meets their needs. An understanding of what stands in the way of this goal is the first step to eliminating those barriers, and this qualitative, phenomenological study allowed students' individual stories to be heard as themes were gleaned from students' stories that communicated

the essence of lived experience.

        Chapter two will focus on a deep dive of the literature surrounding first-generation students. Major themes will be discussed regarding their connection and impact on first-generation students. Each section will look closely at the theme and the related literature available at this time. The literature will help to inform the background of this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Spend any time with staff on a college campus, and you will start to understand why first-generation students matter. First-generation college students (FGCS) are a vulnerable population of students, which continues to grow in numbers across the United States (Chang et al., 2020). FGCS bring unique challenges to higher education professionals. Many studies have been done on the various facets that impact a first-generation student's experience, but few researchers have taken the experience of rural FGCS into consideration. One in five Americans live in a rural setting (America Counts Staff, 2017). With such a large proportion of the students in the country coming from a rural environment, this type of experience cannot be discounted. The following review provides an overview of the existing literature, albeit limited, regarding FGCS barriers associated with the college search process. In addition, this literature review provides expanded coverage of items, such as retention of FGCS for purposes of FGCS description and context and factors, such as race and culture, place, socioeconomic status, communication, college search and transition, resilience and persistence, and educational policy, which may play a role in the college selection process.

Identified Barriers Associated with the College Search Process

Financial Considerations

Paying for college is a significant hurdle for any prospective college student. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), total tuition and fees for first year college students rose 10% for public institutions and 19% for private institutions between the 2010-11 and 2019-20 school years. This puts the average cost of attendance for a first-year student living on-campus at a public institution at over $25,000/year and at over $54,000/year for the same

students at private institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). These rising costs mean that price is the top consideration in choosing a college for an increasing number of students.

First-generation college students are especially influenced by the financial aspects of the college search. According to Harvey (2014), "Fifty-four percent of first-generation students said the cost of attendance was very important in choosing their current college, and more than 60 percent said that of financial aid" (p. 12). This increased influence can be attributed to the fact that first-generation students are more likely to be low-income than students from continuing-generation families (Stuber, 2011). Four-year institutions are also more likely to actively recruit students that have the financial means, or financial aid opportunities, to cover the cost of attendance (Heilig et al., 2011).

Financial aid can be beneficial for students to cover the costs of college, but rising costs also mean that the impact of a financial aid package is not as strong as it once was. The average net price a first-year student at a public institution would need to cover after grants and scholarships is nearly $15,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This means taking out loans for many students, which FGCS tend to be more skeptical of (Harvey, 2014). Scholarships are not guaranteed either, often having very competitive pools of applicants. This leaves FGCS with limited options for covering the cost of college and can lead them away from the best fit college for them to a lower cost option.

Counseling and Support Services

A lack of guidance in the college search process can leave first-generation students at a disadvantage, especially in key areas such as financial aid literacy (Harvey, 2014). School counselors are a crucial part of the college search and application process, providing guidance and technical knowledge to students (Holland, 2020). This influence can also be detrimental

when counselors limit the scope of available colleges to students (Holland). Intentional or otherwise, this limiting of choices can reproduce inequality and lead minority groups, such as BIPOC or FGCS, to have diminished access to quality higher education (Holland).

Diverse perspectives are essential to the first-generation college student (FGCS) search process. Without access to differing views on college and the college search process in their everyday environment, students may choose to forego higher education entirely (Smith, 2008). Smith (2008) posits that kinship and familial influence leads into school influences, which can cause a "predetermination" of the students' college success (p. 149). This means that without positive support at home and at school, a student is more likely to struggle in choosing and maintaining attendance at a college.

Once in college, FGCS reported higher rates of distress than continuing-generation students (Garriott et al., 2017). Lack of knowledge regarding the services and a lack of connection with the campus community have been cited as reasons for this increased level of distress in FGCS (Garriott et al., 2017; House et al., 2020). In the college search process, FGCS may not know to look for on-campus support options. The school they choose may be lacking in the services they want or need, even when they come to know that those services are what they require for a successful college experience. First-generation students can also be prone to feeling regret or guilt regarding their choice of school, especially if there was little support for the student during the search process (House et al., 2020). Feeling disillusioned of the campus experience can lead to feeling disconnected with the campus community (Covarrubias et al., 2015). All students can benefit from support throughout higher education, from search to graduation, but first-generation students especially so.

Academic Reputation

Academic reputation has historically been one of the most important factors to

prospective students when choosing a college (Harvey, 2014). There is limited evidence to show that this is a strong factor in college choice for FGCS within the literature. There is, however, strong evidence to show that the ability for social mobility is a strong motivating factor for FGCS to choose higher education (Banks-Santilli, 2015; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Stuber, 2011).

While academic reputation may not stand alone as a strong factor for choice for FGCS, it is connected to the desire for upward mobility. A school with strong academics can be seen as a fitting choice for a student that wants to make sure they can help support their family financially after college (Banks-Santilli, 2015). Parents of first-generation students may also discourage attendance at a more selective institution, as it does not guarantee future career success (Goings & Sewell, 2019).

<center>**Established Descriptors, Factors, and Themes Associated with FGCS**</center>

Race and Culture

Race is often an intersection point for first-generation students. Minority students are more likely to come from low-income households and be FGCS (Vega, 2016). The relational processes and values of this type of household often differs from the Eurocentric version of family values that most would consider "normal" (Chang et al., 2020). Students from minority backgrounds often navigate their relationships differently and culture plays a much larger role in identity development than in non-minority students (Chang et al., 2020; Liversage et al., 2018). Entering a college campus provides access to a whole new social group and the opportunity to develop new ways of interacting with the world (Liversage et al., 2018). Students are able to try out different ways of being. For our average majority student, this experimentation period stabilizes as graduation approaches, but for students managing more complicated identity issues, including cultural identity, this process may take much longer (Killiam & Degges-White, 2017). This can affect

motivation to graduate or complete their education. For example, Latino students are 8% less likely to complete a bachelor's degree in six years than their White peers (Clayton et al., 2019). This trend is visible among other minority groups as well (Bhopal, 2017). Many states have enacted policies regarding college attainment with the idea that a more educated citizenry leads to more economic stability (Kelly & Torres Lugo, 2017). This trend is an issue for those required to enact those policies on the ground level as the implementation of such policies is often not as straightforward as the policy may imply and funding is often lacking. This leaves out groups such as first-generation students since more resources need to be devoted to at-risk groups.

Cultural Capital

A factor that can also greatly impact the amount of FGCS that reach degree attainment is that of cultural capital. Individuals with cultural capital know more about the world and are comfortable in new situations (Stuber, 2011). Students without the cultural capital regarding college life will find it harder to acclimate to this new world and run into more barriers just from this lack of knowledge. Visiting a new country for the first time can be comparable to how students without the necessary cultural capital feel entering the world of higher education. Cultural capital used in higher education is cultivated within a student's family life, and when family does not have the capital to share students are left at a disadvantage (Acevedo-Gil, 2019). Stuber (2011) uses the idea of cultural capital to highlight a problem that FGCS have with communication in college. Students with little background in higher education do not have the vocabulary to ask for the support they need. With terms as intimidating as FAFSA, academic advising, or orientation, students can be overwhelmed easily.

Family Structure

There are many reasons that minority FGCS face more iniquities than their White peers, including the Eurocentric view of parental involvement schools employ. The "mythical normative"

of family life in a White-centric view is not representative of other minority family structures and is, in fact, harmful to students that do not meet the standards of the Anglo norm (Smith, 2008). When minority students or their parents perform in ways that differ from this norm, they are considered to be deficient or inferior, further widening the gap between racial groups (Smith, 2008). Bradbury (2021) warned educators to be mindful of this mindset, and to remember that multiple factors determine the success of a student. Family composition is just one factor, one support system, one facet of life for students.

As non-Anglo family structures are threatened from outside forces, the desire to entrench existing structures strengthens. In many instances this is a positive in creating strong familial bonds or intergenerational continuity; however, it can also cause a unique psychological challenge for FGCS guilt (Banks-Santilli, 2015). The average continuing-generation, majority person probably does not think about feeling guilty as being part of the college experience. The normative view is that parents want their kids to go to college and get good jobs when they finish. In minority families, role assignments and cultural expectations can cause a "cultural mismatch" and break in identity for FGCS (Banks-Santilli, 2015; Chang et al., 2020). There becomes an identity for home and an identity for school. The guilt plays in when students start to break away from their family's mold. The feeling that their student is "better" than the rest of the family is a common one and one that can hugely affect motivation and persistence in college (Chang et al., 2020). FGCS are entering a transitional period where they are experiencing things outside the reach of their family members consigning a feeling of leaving them behind (Nichols, 2020). For parents, their student leaving home for college can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, they want their child to succeed, and they want the upward mobility that a college education offers for their family. On the other hand, it can be a struggle to be a consistent support system for their student when they

themselves do not understand the concepts or terminology with which their student needs help. Most parents of FGCS do want to support their students but run they into some of the same problems their students do.

Place & Location

A sense of place is an important factor in identity development, and with FGCS it is no different. Without a clear foundation representative of environmental objectives, students will have trouble moving through the different vector of identity development and, in turn, not have the tools to be successful on campus (Killiam & Degges-White, 2017). Identity development is an essential component of the college experience and for becoming a well-rounded person (Killiam & Degges-White, 2017). The location a student resides in is going to have lasting impacts no matter the student's background or home life. Students in urban or suburban areas are more likely to have access to more options for class choices and extracurriculars than students in more rural areas. Classrooms are more likely to be diverse in these areas as well (Goings & Sewell, 2019). More people are naturally going to bring more options.

Even with options, it is still a struggle for some students to find themselves in a place that meets their needs. Goings and Sewell (2019) found that minority, first-generation, and low-income students were less likely to be involved in programs such as gifted and talented programs. A large part of this was because of lack of access to such programs. The location a student finds themselves in is going to dictate what opportunities they have access to (Stuber, 2011). Even a wealthy, continuing-generation student cannot be a part of programming that does not exist. These inequities are compounded for FGCS, however, and restrict higher education opportunities for these students (Jabbar et al., 2017). Restricted options for schools lead to a less than perfect fit for the student, which impacts some of the negative trends surrounding recruitment and retention of FGCS (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Jabbar et al., 2017).

Within the general category of first-generation students, rural and urban locations can make a world of difference to a student's overall educational trajectory. Sims and Ferrare (2021) found that FGCS support programs benefitted from place-based awareness within their structure. Students from rural backgrounds were more likely to accept geographic-based help because they tended to hold their place of origin as more a part of their identity than their urban counterparts (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). Rural students allowed location to have more sway on their decisions than students from more urban areas. Disregarding this fact could be detrimental to the college search process. Students, especially FGCS, are more likely to attend and retain at a school with which they feel connected. If a large part of a student's identity is disregarded in the college search, enrollment, orientation, or any other college process, it is less likely that student will attend or continue attending that institution (Killiam & Degges-White, 2017).

A student's sense of place can also influence the cultural capital they obtain. Gaining cultural capital comes from being exposed to different ideas, concepts, etc. Location is a limiting factor for exposure, as many rural areas are more disconnected from the rest of the world than urban areas are with less housing density and distance form city centers (America Counts Staff, 2017). Compound that with limited funds to leave that area, or fear of the unknown, and many FGCS run into what can feel like an impenetrable force to overcome.

Socioeconomic Status and Social Class

Socioeconomic status (SES) and social class are closely linked with first-generation status. First-generation college students are more likely to be low-SES than their continuing-generation peers (Stuber, 2011). As the increasingly apparent divide between the top one percent, that hold as much wealth at the bottom 90%, and the rest, it is more important than ever to consider the impact of socioeconomic status (Yeskel, 2008). Low-SES, first-generation students were found to be less successful in higher education overall than their continuing education peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Institutions, like colleges or universities, are rife with opportunities to make this distinction known as well as reproducing privilege and disadvantage alike (Fiske & Markus, 2012). Students from the highest earning quartile are twice as likely to enroll in postsecondary education than students from the lowest earning quartile (Stuber, 2011). Sixty percent of students that come from wealthy families go on to complete their bachelor's degrees while only 15% of students from low-SES complete their degrees (Nichols, 2020).

Achievement Guilt

This gap in the degree completion rates of continuing- and first-generation students is happening all while the narrative surrounding higher education is that of the golden road to upward mobility (Azmitia et al., 2018). However, there is often a lot of self-blame that parents of low-SES FGCS have (Rondini, 2016). There is a need to reconcile that their children must struggle and have less opportunity than their higher-class peers because of decisions or circumstances of their own doing. Personal failings aside, the idea of familial achievement guilt is prevalent within low-SES families (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Students feel the weight of the privilege of college on them. For one student Covarrubias & Fryberg (2015) encountered, the weight was so much that they considered dropping out and said, "I feel that I have such a luxury with independence, and they are suffering everyday" (p. 420). This guilty feeling can stem from familial perspectives of middle-to-upper class individuals (Gorman, 1998). For the working class, there is often found to be a sense of being pushed down by the upper classes and made to stay in their lower station. As students feel they are moving out of the working class, it can feel as if they are moving into the enemy's camp. By becoming more socially mobile, they are leaving behind the family and, in essence, becoming the same as those their parents see as their oppressors (Gorman, 1998).

Finances and Social Class

Social class and how much money a student has at their disposal can drastically change the

college experience for students. Low-SES students enroll to have the opportunity to better their

lives, but the road to that end goal is not always easy. Parental financial support for low-SES, first-

generation students is often little to non-existent (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Without this financial

backing, students are saddled with large student loans and the prospect of having to work long

hours while taking classes to make ends meet. This drastically cuts into the time available for

students to take part in the extracurricular activities and support services that are shown to make

students more successful (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Stuber, 2011).

The college choice process is hit particularly hard by financial hardship. College costs

increase every year, financial aid options have decreased, and loosening requirements for

affirmative action programs leave low-SES students progressively more disadvantaged all the time

(Smith, 2008). Application costs, as well, are prohibitive, limiting the number of schools a student

can apply to feasibly. Groups such as the National Association for College Admission Counseling

offer options such as fee waivers, but lack of knowledge of these options, less than supportive

school staff or parents, and disproportionate amounts of paperwork can stand in the way of these

programs being a viable solution for FGCS.

Networking

Along with a lack of engagement in support services, FGCS are less likely to successfully

integrate diverse college experiences (Pike & Kuh, 2005). With increased demands within the

financial and familial sectors of their lives, the time and motivation to make these connections falls

by the wayside (Stuber, 2011). Professional networking is one such area that has been shown to

cause issues for FGCS. Networking is a skill that takes time to cultivate and is often learned by

watching others network. FGCS have less exposure to professional networking as their parents

often lack the type of professional connections required to exemplify this skill set (Banks-Santilli,

2015). The skills that first-generation student parents have the ability to provide are the skills that

they have cultivated through their working-class level employment: conformity, punctuality, obedience, etc. while middle- and upper-class parents focus on traits such as creativity and independence (Gorman, 1998). Educational institutions further instill these middle-class mores, causing a sink or swim type dynamic for first-generation students as they learn these different ways of thinking. It is often thought that institutions do not grant "dual citizenship" to the middle-class culture of higher education (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). This can make FGCS feel as though they are so-called "class traitors", leaving behind the traits their families value to take up the traits of the upper classes (Jones, 2004). The need for internships in academic programs is an example of this need to take on the values of the other. Internships are often unpaid. For upper class students, this causes little issue and students are able to meet requirements, network with industry professionals, and be on their way. The ability to connect with industry professionals through unpaid internships is limited for FGCS as they often have financial needs beyond what financial aid alone can provide (Banks-Santilli, 2015).

Communication and Language

How one communicates tells the world a lot about who they and where they come from. Factors such as social class, occupation, and location can change the words chosen, the accents one has, or even the inflection of our speech patterns. Take for instance, Eliza Doolittle in the classic "My Fair Lady". Her cockney accent is heavy and considered brash. It tells the reader where in England Eliza is from and her social status, including her socio-economic status. This whole story centers around how language can make people perceive one way or another, in Eliza's case, rich or poor. For college students this perception archetype is no different.

Social Class

Communication is something every student must contend with when entering the world of higher education. For first-generation students, however, this hurdle is much harder to

overcome. Communication is just one of many cultural and symbolic processes that work to perpetuate social inequality (Stuber, 2011). The world of higher education contains its own lexicon of terms that serve as a gatekeeper to full inclusion of first-generation students.

Seattle University found that the unique struggle of communication barriers was one of the largest deficiencies for first-generation students, and precipitated their opening of The Outreach Center, a first-generation student support center, in 2017 (Campera, 2018). Student centers like this one help students break the cycle that perpetuates that inequality, but this type of support is not readily available for every first-generation student that needs it. Even within graduate education first-generation students experienced this disconnect of language citing they often did not know about the "unspoken" rules within their graduate programs (Roksa et al., 2018).

Kay Williams, Director of the Open Door Project a first-generation student support program at Tidewater Community College in Virginia, found that the lack of formal communication skills left many of her students at a disadvantage stating, "They write and talk in casual language. Many of them struggle to learn and write in formal language" (Williams, 2018, p. 1). College level coursework requires a certain formalness to writing as well as speaking. This level of formality is something that first-generation students often have little to no exposure to. Even the mere labeling of a student as a student can be off-putting for families of first-generation students who often only refer to their student in more casual terms such as baby or kid (Harper et al., 2020). It is as if the first-generation student were learning a new language altogether, one the parents or other family may have hesitancy investing in. Parents can serve as a strong source of interpersonal support for students, but this support is tempered or even detrimental when parents lack the communication skills required in the academic world (Wang, 2014).

Self-Efficacy

A lack of support from family and an inability to properly communicate needs can lead to many unique challenges for first generation students. The work a college student must do necessitates the need for self-efficacy, the belief that one can complete necessary tasks to produce specific results. First-generation students may not believe that they can do the necessary work due to a lack of proper communication or a lack of connection with their chosen institution (Pulliam et al., 2017). Self-efficacy is of particular importance to first-generation students as they enter college at a lower level of preparedness, thus impacting their confidence to complete the tasks necessary to succeed (Ward et al., 2012).

Career self-efficacy is of special importance in higher education. Most students believe they have a path to a career they will enjoy and follow. The narrative says, go to college, major in accounting, and become an accountant. For this example, that narrative is simple and easy to understand, but for first-generation students a lack of communication regarding career options or beliefs of false realities about occupations can lead to confusion and a lack of career self-efficacy for these students (Pulliam et al., 2017). Without a high level of career self-efficacy first-generation students are more likely to struggle with career certainty. Pulliam et al. (2017) found that first-generation students with a low career self-efficacy predicted lower levels of career certainty.

College Fit and Transition to College

There are many options to choose from when considering a path in higher education. Schools can be public, private, for-profit, vocational, or career focused. They can offer one program or a plethora of programs, bachelor's degrees or associate degrees, or certificates and diplomas. The number of options can be overwhelming for any student, let alone a student with more than average barriers to college attainment. For first-generation students, whose parents are

typical less well-versed in higher education than their continuing generation peers, the process can indeed be overwhelming (Ward et al., 2012). Research has found that positive parental involvement in the college search and choice process is a key factor of successful matriculation for first-generation students (Smith, 2008).

Fit and Choice

The process of finding the right school is important for any student seeking higher education. Students are more likely to remain at a school they feel connected to and are supported at, commonly referred to as the student's "fit" (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). During the search process, students evaluate different schools through the frame of their priorities. For first-generation students, fit may not even be on their radar. Priorities colored by the first-generation, minority, or low-SES experience are more impactful for first-generation students. This is not always helpful as first-generation experiences often do not fit into traditional models that many colleges and universities base themselves around (Holland, 2020).

The college search process is impacted by a variety of additional factors including academic, financial, and socio-cultural (Goings & Sewell, 2019). A student's academic profile type also has been found to have a strong impact on the selectivity of schools applied to as well as access to financial aid and scholarships (Goings & Sewell, 2019). This makes sense as generally students from low-SES backgrounds are going to need more aid or scholarships and high achieving students are more likely to be accepted at selective schools with a focus on academics. What is less clear are the impact these factors have that extend past the search process and into college life.

Major choice is one of the areas highly impacted by academic, financial, and sociocultural factors. First-generation students often see their major as a path to financial security or upward mobility (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). This often leads to dissatisfaction with the major

when it does not align with the skills and talents of the student (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). For first-generation students, changing a major is directly connected to a lower level of degree completion than first-generation students that stay with one major (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). Parents of first-generation students tend to have less involvement in major choice than the parents of continuing-generation students, further impacting the stability of the choice (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). The impact of parental involvement in major choice mirrors the impact of parental involvement in the search process, a lack of involvement leads to lower levels of success for the student (Smith, 2008).

Student Transition

Transition refers to an event that results in a change within oneself or their environment (Wang, 2014). The transition to college is fraught with barriers for first-generation students. Some of these barriers start in high school. When the needed skills to be successful in college are not taught, students suffer (Morrow & Torrez, 2012). Schools like Clear Horizons Early College School in Houston, TX are working to ease this transition by implementing specific programs for first-generation students (Morrow & Torrez, 2012). The programs offer mentoring opportunities, goal setting workshops, and other specialized student support. Programs like these can be tremendously impactful for first-generation students. Wang (2014) found that one interaction (positive or negative) with one teacher directly impacts the amount of support first-generation students seek. Having mentoring opportunities early can entrench positive experiences, leading to increased use of support services and a less rocky transition period overall.

Parents and Transition

Students are not the only ones that struggle with transition when the student leaves for college, parents also find the transition hard. Families play a critical role in the success of students, especially first-generation students (Harper et al., 2020). First-generation parents often

feel a strong desire for their child to receive a college degree, but as the relationship they have with their child changes, can become hesitant to continue to offer their support (Harper et al., 2020).

The idea of becoming an "empty-nester" is often difficult for first-generation parents (Nichols, 2020). College cultivates a culture of independence in their student that parents of first-generation students are less likely to be comfortable with due to lack of information or cultural mismatch (Harper et al., 2020). Communication is found to be helpful in all aspects of the college transition, but especially so within the child-parent dynamic.

Resilience and Persistence

Resilience and persistence seem to be universal topics of discussion across the majority first-generation student-centered research. Every student starts college with the aim to complete their degree and yet, there are many who do not. Understanding the mechanics of this phenomenon is essential to understanding the other facets of the first-generation experience because if the students do not persist then there are no students to study.

Persistence

Persistence is the continued progress towards a degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). If a student stays enrolled on their campus and completes classes, they are persisting. First-generation students are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of their first year and less likely to obtain a degree after five years than continuing generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004). There are many factors that become barriers to persistence for first-generation students. Lower levels of academic preparedness, familial obligations, and mental health issues are the three most influential barriers to persistence for first-generation students (Vega, 2016). For first-generation students, there is more to contend with than simply signing up for next semester's classes.

Academic Preparedness.

The rigor of a student's high school curriculum is strongly linked with their overall performance in college (Vega, 2016). The simple answer may seem to be to put more first-generation students in highly rigorous programs, but lack of access to resources and high-quality staff often leaves first-generation students without a choice in the matter. Programs, like the previously mentioned Clear Horizons early college school, offer opportunities for first-generation students in academically lacking districts to have access to a rigorous pre-college experience (Morrow & Torrez, 2012). These options are few and far between. Without the proper language and math skills needed for college, first-generation students 15% less likely to persist than their continuing-generation peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Familial Obligations.

As previously discussed, family plays an extremely impactful role in the life of a first-generation college student. Specific to persistence, a lack of family support can lead to increased feelings of stress and achievement guilt among first-generation students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). This is guilt that they are leaving their families behind. It is a feeling that is hard for both students and parents alike to deal with.

First-generation students are more likely to come from low-income and minority backgrounds than continuing-generation students. These factors can lead to further familial barriers including the need to work to support family. There is only so much time in a day and for working students this cuts into time that could be spent studying. While many students regardless of generational status also work during college, first-generation students are many times obligated to work even when it would be in their best interest not to (Petty, 2014).

Socio-economic status also plays into the career choices of first-generation students, as the well-being of the family relies on the success of the students' chosen career (Pulliam et al.,

2017). Familial income is also directly related to the amount of aid a student needs. Roksa et al. (2018) found that first-generation students, including those that went on to graduate school, took longer to complete degrees and acquired more debt overall. This leaves first-generation students at a disadvantage when compared to students with higher familial income.

Mental Health.

Mental health is important for all students, but with the added pressures that come with being first-generation, these students are more likely to struggle with mental health issues (House et al., 2020). The feelings of familial and achievement guilt, that first-generation students are prone to having, lead to significantly higher rates of depression and low self-esteem (Covarrubias et al., 2015). These factors actively contribute to the high drop-out rate of first-generation students (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019).

Research suggests that supportive pre-college and transitional programming can be an effective tool to combat mental health issues in first-generation students (Frischmann & Moor, 2017; Li, 2019; Markle & Dyckhoff Stelzriede, 2020; Morrow & Torrez, 2012; Phillips et al., 2020; Schelbe et al., 2019). These programs are successful by supporting the often-invisible needs of the first-generation student and breaking down the transition process. First-generation students that take part in such programs are often outperforming in gains their continuing-generation peers in areas of intellectual development, interpersonal development, and engagement with diversity (Markle & Dyckhoff Stelzriede, 2020).

Beyond these programs, many campuses offer mental health supportive services for all students. First-generation college students have been found to be less likely to use mental health services than continuing-generation peers, but they are more likely to need such services (House et al., 2020). "Without individuals in their lives (e.g., family) who can directly relate to these taxing experiences, first-generation students may not readily share their college-specific

troubles" (Glaessgen et al., 2018, p. 22). Leaving their mental health unattended is not conducive to the persistence of first-generation students.

Resilience

Resilience and persistence often go hand in hand. A resilient student will be more likely to be a student that persists (Schelbe et al., 2019). Resilience in this context is the ability to overcome barriers and continue in school. "Resilient individuals are better prepared to deal with stressors in a constantly changing environment" (Alvarado et al., 2017, p.3). For many first-generation students there is a narrative of being "left behind" if they do not attend and complete a degree program (Azmitia et al., 2018). Without a sense of resilience, it is easy to expand upon that narrative to believe that they are not worthy of a college education (Azmitia et al., 2018). "The strength and resiliency of first-generation students cannot be overstated as many have overcome substantial obstacles to pursue higher education" (Schelbe et al., 2019, p. 61).

Non-resilient students are often psychologically less prepared for higher education (Petty, 2014). Feelings of disconnectedness pervade the lives of many first-generation students (Glaessgen et al., 2018). First-generation students need support to develop their academic selves, or society risks losing out on the enthusiastic professionals they can become (Folger et al., 2004). The key to understanding the difference between resilient and non-resilient students is goal-orientation (Forbus et al., 2011). Forbus (2011) found that goals of more motivated and resilient first-generation students were centered around familial support and high academic success expectations. Students that believed they would achieve at a higher level, had parental support and high parental expectations achieved at a higher rate than those without these factors, indicating an adaptive coping strategy (Forbus et al., 2011). The resilience of the first-generation student is directly tied to positive outcomes in the areas of social support, development, success despite adversity, academic persistence, and mental health (Alvarado et al., 2017).

Educational Policy

While a right to education was not laid out by the founding fathers, it is clear that there is a need and desire for education in America (Bradbury, 2021). Education is meant to be accessible for all, but policies protecting the rights of minority groups are often lacking (Black, 2017). The policies that do exist leave holes that they are unable to fill. For example, the Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in 2015, is on the surface a proclamation of change and equality, but in practice it increases inequities throughout the country (Black, 2017). Lack of funding for proper resources and loopholes allowing schools to opt out of the policy's requirements, leave any chance of equality by the wayside.

In higher education, policy has often been altered to attempt to combat inequities such as generational status. However, these alterations often come at a cost of lowered standards or exclusion of more students (i.e., enrolling less Pell eligible students). Li (2019) found that minority students (including first-generation) are "disproportionally routed into less desirable academic pathways *within* college" (p. 966). These less desirable pathways include lower-achieving tracks (i.e., remedial or developmental classes). Meaning students with more needs are receiving less support by being pushed aside into areas that do not meet their needs.

Organizational change is never an easy task to accomplish, and within closing gaps with proper educational policy, educators have seen this failure in practice. Ward et al. (2012) believes that a common vision and planning practice can help alleviate some of the pitfalls of policy change. It is important to be clear on what students make up the student body and find common ground when updating policies (Ward et al., 2012). Ultimately, educators want policy to match the needs of the students.

Conclusion

Based on this review of the available literature regarding first-generation students, one

can see a need for deeper research into rural, first-generation student experiences in regard to barriers and the college search process. The breadth of literature regarding first-generation students is vast, but the researcher encountered a dearth of literature regarding barriers associated with college search process for rural, FGCS. As such, the researcher believes that there is great value in striving to add to the available literature regarding the college selection process for FGCS. As more research comes to the forefront, educators can better identify the needs of rural, FGCS students and work to mitigate barriers associated with the rural, FGCS college search process, matriculation, retention, and graduation.

As noted at the start of this chapter, this review sought to provide an overview of the existing literature, albeit limited, regarding FGCS barriers associated with the college search process. In addition, this literature review provided expanded coverage of items, such as retention, race and culture, place, socioeconomic status, communication, college fit and transition, resilience and persistence, and educational policy of FGCS for purposes of FGCS description and context and factors which may play a role in the college selection process. Although rural FGCS may not face barriers with all the identified items, to understand better the unique perspective of the first-generation student, especially those from rural settings, all facets of FGCS needed to be explored. Chapter three will further detail the overall methodological approach to this research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will review the research methodology for this phenomenological study focused on the college search process of rural, first-generation college students (FGCS). Phenomenology focuses on, "describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). The main purpose of phenomenology is to distill a "universal essence" from a group of individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research attempted to determine barriers that affected the college search process, and ultimately the choice of college for first-generation students from a rural background. A qualitative, phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to explore closely the experiences of these students and the themes within the overall experiences of participants. The goal of this research was the establishment of recommendation to support students as they enter the world of higher education and allow for higher retention and student success by increasing understanding of the barriers students face within the college search process.

Research Approach

This study is firmly footed in the qualitative realm of research while using a phenomenological approach. The justification for use of this approach is that the shared experience of first-generation students can be best observed through interviews that allow the participants to use their own words. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that the type of research problem that is best suited to phenomenology is one where it is important to understand the common or shared experiences of a group in order to understand and develop practices or policies around a phenomenon. In this study, the shared or common experiences of rural, first-generation students are studied to define barriers to the college search process so that practices

and policies may be put in place to help future students alleviate these barriers. Also, the researcher believes the experiences of participants make up how those individuals view their realities, so it is also important to keep an interpretivist paradigm in mind within this research. In this worldview individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work through their subjective meanings of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The meanings each individual makes of their experiences are colored by their background and previous experiences, making that individual's reality unique to them. By researching these experiences, the researcher is attempting to make sense of the meanings others have about the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach within an interpretivist paradigm consisting of semi-structured interviews with first- and second-year first-generation college students from rural backgrounds and who attend a regional comprehensive liberal arts university in the Midwest. This research examined the experiences of rural, first-generation students within the college search process; specifically, how, and why they chose the college they ended up attending and the barriers that they encountered in the college search process. This approach allowed the participants to describe their own experiences in their own words, thereby aligning with the interpretivist paradigm.

Research Question

The core research question of this study is: **What barriers do rural, first-generation students experience during the college search process?** With this question as the central focus, barriers to the college search process and student success in choosing a college was uncovered via themes.

Setting

The setting for this study is a regional comprehensive liberal arts university in the upper

Midwest. This setting was chosen because of the researcher's proximity and familiarity with the institution. The university's community is unique in that it encompasses both city and small-town amenities and values. The town itself has a population of roughly 15,000 people but draws in nearly 50,000 additional people from surrounding communities that use the town as a central hub for business and commerce. While the town is still considered a small, rural place, there are amenities and systems that many feel make the town more akin to a larger city. This is important as the university leverages this sense of place and the dichotomy of the town's identity to recruit students.

The university itself has an annual enrollment of about 5,000 students. It offers over 65 undergraduate degree programs and 14 graduate degree programs. The population of students is closely split in terms of gender with 53% female and 47% male students. The majority of students (82%) receive some sort of financial aid, and first year students are required to live on campus.

Another area of importance to add is the area's connection to the Native American community. The university is situated on land of the Ojibwe tribe homelands. The following is an excerpt from the university's land acknowledgement,

> Located on land and water that is the current and ancestral homeland of the Ojibwe and Dakota. We acknowledge the painful history of genocide, forced assimilation, and efforts to alienate the Indigenous inhabitants from their territory here. We honor and respect the many diverse Indigenous peoples still connected to this land, retained tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, and cultural resilience. Indigenous people are spiritual and physical caretakers of this land to which we all belong.

This strong connection with the Native American community leads the university to have a large

proportion of Native American identifying students. These students are more likely to come from geographically isolated backgrounds and to be first-generation than their White peers (Schmidt & Akande, 2011).

Participants

Participants for the study were first- and second-year college students enrolled full-time at the university. To meet the needs of the study, each participant needed to self-identify as a first-generation student. This attribute was defined as being an individual whose parents have not completed any four-year postsecondary degree. Participants would also need to meet the criteria of rural, which was defined as being from a graduating high school class of fewer than 100, a hometown population of less than 5,000, and a distance of at least 50 miles from a metropolitan city center.

Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. Information regarding the study was distributed to faculty and staff to share with their students. Students could then self-identify as meeting the criteria the study. This helps to avoid any data security issues connected with the researcher's professional position. The sample size was kept small (10 participants) in order to allow time for participants to fully answer the interview questions (see Appendix A), thus allowing for a fuller picture of that individual's experiences. Pseudonyms for participants are used throughout the study to protect their identities.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Institutional Review Board (IRB) and site approval was gained prior to data collection. After initial contact with participants to establish compatibility with the required participant criteria, the researcher disseminated the informed consent documentation via email. The primary data were collected through in-person or virtual, recorded one-on-one interviews. A qualitative interview is described as, "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to

unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164). To reach this end, an interview protocol was used to guide the interview. An interview protocol is a predesigned form used to collect information during an interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview audio was recorded to aid in the data analysis and transcription process using Zoom audio. All recordings were destroyed following analysis and transcription.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. From there, the themes were analyzed to identify specific barriers to college enrollment through the college search process for rural, first-generation students.

Thematic Analysis

Phase 1: familiarizing yourself with your data

Interview data were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible using the transcription feature on Zoom. A manual run through to correct errors in transcription was also performed. This consisted of the researcher reviewing the transcript while listening to the recording to correct any errors that may have been made by the software. Through this process the researcher was able to become familiar with the data and note any interesting or outstanding information.

Phase 2: generating initial codes

In this phase, the researcher was able to move past reviewing the data and begin to classify data into codes. Codes (or categories) classify a feature of the data that is of interest to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes are the basic bits of data that form the beginnings of your themes, they are specific points that lead to the larger themes.

Phase 3: searching for themes

From the set of codes found in phase 2, the researcher then began to identify codes that link together. Once linked, larger themes can begin to emerge from the data.

Phase 4: reviewing themes

In this phase, the set of themes from the previous phase are refined. Each theme is reviewed from the code level to see if a pattern emerges. Any outliers can be reclassified, or a new theme can be created to house these codes.

Phase 5: defining and naming themes

In this phase, the researcher identified the essence of each theme and reviewed the data within each of them. This phase is where the researcher also puts together the story for each theme and gives it a name. At the end of this phase, the themes are defined to where the scope and content of each theme can be easily described.

Phase 6: producing the report

In phase 6, the researcher was able to write up a final analysis of the themes identified in the previous phases. The report tells the story of the data and goes beyond description to make an argument for answering the research question.

Role of the Researcher and Positionality

The researcher worked in higher education, mainly in admissions, for eight years prior to the study. The majority of the researcher's professional experience lies within recruitment, where they were able to interact with students on a daily basis. The researcher was able to work with many students from rural, first-generation backgrounds and saw the need to better understand the barriers that today's students face as they look for a college to attend. Currently, the researcher is the CRM Analyst/Developer at the university in this study. This position focuses on maintaining the student information database used by the admissions office for recruitment. This position has very limited contact with students on campus, so there was little interference of personal connections to students studied.

The researcher holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, and a Master of Arts degree in

communication studies. The researcher also identifies as a rural, first-generation student and encountered many barriers on the path to attaining those degrees. This, along with their work in student affairs, has led the researcher to want to influence change in higher education to better serve rural, first-generation students.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics were held to the utmost standards throughout the process of conducting this study. Following the ethical considerations outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher reviewed the procedure for ethical standards through each phase of the study. Prior to conducting the study, IRB and site approval was gained. Informed consent was given to each participant as they entered the study. Rapport was developed with each participant. The researcher's membership in the community studied allowed for credibility with the participants.

During the interview process, any cultural, religious, or accessibility requirements were respected and maintained for participants throughout. The interview site was chosen to minimize disruptions and allow for privacy. This was to help foster an open and honest line of communication with the participants. All data collected through the interviews were stored securely.

Data privacy was also maintained by assigning aliases to participants and removing personally identifying data. Results are honestly portrayed in this study in language appropriate for the audience of this research.

Conclusion

The researcher facilitated a qualitative phenomenological study of the college search process of rural, first-generation students. The study consisted of semi-structured interviews with first- and second-year rural, first-generation students at a regional comprehensive liberal arts university in the upper Midwest. Identifying themes and barriers within the college search

process allows for faculty and staff at both high schools and higher education institutions to have the opportunity to leverage this information to help students have a more positive introduction to higher education.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to highlight and understand barriers that arise for rural, first-generation students in their college search process. Because each person views the world through their own lens and interprets experiences to make meaning, an interpretivist paradigm was used. In interpretivism, also called social constructivism, individuals seek to make meaning of their realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The following chapter summarizes the data collection and analysis, participant demographics, and findings associated with the research question, **what barriers do rural, first-generation students experience during the college search process?**

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected via semi-structured interviews. Information regarding the study and participant requirements was shared with faculty and staff across campus. The researcher also spoke to four classes taught by TRIO staff at the university regarding the study. Students were able to self-identify as eligible for the study and provided their contact information to the researcher for follow-up. Interviews were conducted either in-person on campus or over Zoom. The participant was able to indicate their preference for either interviewing in person or via Zoom.

In-person interviews were recorded in an audio only format and virtual interviews also included video in addition to the audio recording. The visual recording was not necessary for in-person interviews as the body language and connection between participant and researcher was done live. With the virtual interviews, the only way to allow for a visual connection between participant and researcher and record audio, was to record the video as well. The video of the

virtual interviews was not viewed after the recording, only the audio. Zoom allows for an accessible and easy way to record audio as well as a transcription service. Therefore, it was also used for the in-person interviews. Permission to record in this manner was confirmed by each participant. Transcriptions of each interview were recorded using the Zoom transcription feature. Informed consent documents were shared with participants at each interview. For virtual interviews, the signed informed consent documents were reviewed and signed prior to the interviews. Several of the copies were obtained from virtual participants after the interview but prior to review of the transcripts because these participants had limited access to scanning at their interview locations.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Phase 1: familiarizing yourself with your data

In phase one, the researcher reviewed the automatic transcriptions for each interview captured by Zoom. The shortest interview was 11:01 minutes and the longest interview was 39:49 minutes, with an average time of 20:16 minutes. Each transcript was reviewed for accuracy and member checked by each participant. After approval was received from each participant the researcher continued to phase two.

Phase 2: generating initial codes / Phase 3: searching for themes

Upon initial review of the data, 142 quotes were identified that appeared significant to the study (see Appendix B). From the quotes, 33 initial codes were identified (see Appendix C). The codes were then analyzed into seven general themes.

Phase 4: reviewing themes / Phase 5: defining and naming themes

Upon review of the initial themes, the researcher was able to refine the themes to more accurately represent the goal of the themes. After this review, six main themes were identified. Two of the initial themes were found to be closely linked and so were refined into one singular theme.

The six themes identified are:

1. Financial support and understanding.

2. Lack of support from home and school.

3. Familial obligations and sense of dependence.

4. Lack of access to quality information on college.

5. Expectations of college.

6. Proximity to home and location.

Phase 6: producing the report

The final analysis of the themes is described below and discussed further in Chapter Five.

Participants

This study focused on the college search experiences of first-generation students from a rural background. A purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit participants for this study. First, information describing the study, participant requirements, and confidentiality was distributed to faculty from several academic departments across campus, as well as staff within admissions and student support services. The researcher was able to share information, in-person, for several classes taught by the TRIO staff on campus. Students were able to self-identify as meeting the requirements for the study, and then provide their contact information to the researcher if they were interested in participating.

Of the students that expressed interest in the study, 11 were interviewed. Data from ten of the interviews were utilized in this study. One participant chose to withdraw their information post interview for an undisclosed reason.

Of the ten participants who consented to have their data used in this study, nine identified as female and one identified as male. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-20 years old, with 60% being 19, 30% being 20, and 10% being 18. All participants came from a rural background, with 60% of graduating class sizes having fewer than 50 graduates.

A low-income status was not a requirement for participation in this study nor was it an explicit demographic obtained by the researcher. It was, however, apparent from the disclosure of several participants that there was a substantial proportion of participants that fell into this category. As discussed in chapter two, additional intersecting identities, such as low-SES, do play a large role in the higher education experience of first-generation college students. For this study, the researcher chose to focus on the intersecting identities of first-generation status and rural background.

As part of the criteria for inclusion in the study, all participants needed to identify as first-generation. This attribute was defined as being an individual whose parents have not completed any four-year postsecondary degree. A breakdown of the parents' educational background is found in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participant Parent Education

Education Level	Mom	Dad	Total	Percentage
Less than high school diploma	3	1	4	20%
High school diploma	3	1	4	20%

Some college, no degree	1	1	2	10%
Trade	0	3	3	15%
Associate degree	3	1	4	20%
Parent not active in child's life	0	3	3	15%

Findings

The following findings reflect the investigation of lived experiences of first-generation students from a rural background. Themes common to the experiences of the participants were uncovered via this investigation. The themes came together to answer the research question:

RQ1: What barriers do rural, first-generation students experience during the college search process?

Theme 1. Financial Support and Understanding.

Finances were a common topic among the interviewees in this study. Participants felt a lack of understanding when it came to financial aid. Even those who had talked with financial aid staff still felt confused by the process. Participant #5 stated, "I spent a lot of time in the financial aid office…Because the FAFSA and, you know, whatever, that's confusing" (Participant_#5, 2023).

Students often felt pressure to choose a school of a certain price point, rather than focusing their investigation of colleges on which one fit them best. Participant #7 said, "My dream school was going to the [Big Ten University], but it was really expensive…But I go to [State University] now, and so I chose this because it was just more affordable" (Participant_#7, 2023). This sentiment was mirrored by several other participants. Students felt as though they were content with their decision to attend a lower cost college, but there was still a sense of

"what if" with several students that chose not to attend their first-choice school. When asked if they thought that the college, they currently attend is the best school for them participant #7 said, "I don't think it's bad at all. I mean, like I said, my dream school was to go to like a bigger school, obviously. But I do think this is…like I'm satisfied" (Participant_#7, 2023). When asked the same question, Participant #2 said, "That's a hard question, just because I didn't like go to other campuses, so I don't know how the environment is" (Participant_#2, 2023). Students were limited by the barrier of cost, and so did not have the opportunity to fully explore different colleges to find the best fit for them.

Another barrier associated with financial considerations, was that students felt the burden of having to pay for college solely on their own. Even with governmental help from financial aid packages or other scholarships, student still felt that paying for college was on them and them alone. Participant #5 said, "It was hard because of the cost of everything. I'm completely paying for college on my own. I mean, there's some, you know, federal. Like there's help, but it's all on me" (Participant_#5, 2023). The lack of financial support from family left these students with increased pressure to find a college that would give them the education they needed but still at a price point with which they felt comfortable.

While the pressure to keep costs low can be felt for many other students, first-generation students have the added factor of doing things by themselves. It makes sense that students entering college for the first time do not have a strong background in the financial aid process, but first-generation students also have more limited access to adults with such knowledge. Participant #1 stated regarding the FAFSA,

> My teachers and stuff did a good job [explaining the financial aid process], but then it
> still was understanding like, how do you get the report? Trying to understand what you're

actually paying compared to what the state's paying. That was really hard to understand

(Participant_#1, 2023).

Having a close adult that is willing and able to support and explain the process can make a strong

impact on the student's experience.

Being able to handle adult tasks, like finances, was held in high regard by the participants

of this study. Students desired to set themselves apart from family members who struggle

financially. Participant #3 stated, "I just knew I wanted to be able to live on my own and to, like,

finance myself, and like all this stuff that like a lot of my family don't do for themselves as

adults" (Participant_#3, 2023). Students did not hold those family members in less regard than

those that did not struggle, but they did feel the need to diverge from the limited career and

financial options of their small-town relatives. Participant #7 said,

I really just wanted to branch out from my family and from that small town and kind of

have a further education so I could have a better income and better chances of getting like

a stable career in the future (Participant_#7, 2023).

Financial stability was seen as one of the most important goals of a college education. Participant

#1 initially did not have interest in attending college but was encouraged to do so by her mother.

She said,

My mom basically told me I was going because she didn't want me to, not to say…she's

doing well. But she didn't want me to have to struggle in some of the ways she has

necessarily, because she doesn't have that education (Participant_#1, 2023).

Students and family members knew that higher education could help them become more stable

financially, even if they did not have a clear understanding of how the processes worked.

Finances can be a barrier for many students but are especially significant for first-generation students. The lack of process understanding, and non-institutional support often leaves first-generation students at a disadvantage to their continuing-generation peers that have access to these supports. Low-income, first-generation students are four times more likely to leave higher education after their first year because of financial issues than other students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This makes financial concerns a common make it or break it barrier for these students.

Theme 2. Lack of Support from Home and School.

Subtheme 1. Support at Home

Familial and social support is critical for an easy transition from high school to college. Without this support, it is common for students to feel like they are navigating unknown waters alone. Participant #1 felt trepidation surrounding going to college because their family was unable to support them through the college search process even through their mother supported their decision to attend college. They said, "There was just kind of me, like figuring it out on my own, like I didn't have any help" (Participant_#1, 2023).

While no participant directly stated that their family was against their decision to attend college, there was an almost universal lack of familial support during the search and enrollment processes. Participant #7 stated,

> It was really difficult. Like searching wasn't terribly difficult. It's just the whole process of like, "Okay, I applied. Now, like, what happens?" And then I get accepted and I have to enroll and like registration. It was all really difficult because I have nobody else to help me kind of go through those processes (Participant_#7, 2023).

Even for parents who wished to help, the lack of experience with and knowledge of the college search and enrollment process left them with limited avenues to support their students. Participant #1 summed it up by saying, "Because they don't know as much as I don't know" (Participant_#1, 2023).

For some there was a sense of frustration with parents that either could not or would not provide the support their student needed. Participant #9 stated, "I don't know what I'm doing and being that my parents didn't go to a four-year university, this isn't something they've had to deal with" (Participant_#9, 2023). Participant #2 in speaking about her options after high school and local family-owned businesses stated, "My parents don't have that, so it's not like I can, if I was interested in doing that" (Participant_#2, 2023). There did not seem to be sense of anger or hostility towards parents in these situations, but rather a frustration with the limitations put on students because of the decisions of their families.

Subtheme 2. Support at School.

Beyond support at home, students also sought out support at school, with mixed results. For some there was positive support in school for the college search process. This allowed for a more positive overall experience, but still feeling the lack of overall support. Participant #5 said of the support at her high school, "They weren't too bad, but they also…they can only so much…So, I had a lot of questions that I didn't have the answers to" (Participant_#5, 2023).

For students at rural schools with limited staff, college search support was found to be lacking or nonexistent. Participant #6 recalled, "I had no idea what I was doing. Literally there was no guiding. There was nothing" (Participant_#6, 2023). For participant #7, her counselor split her time between all grades K-12, leaving little time for true support for college search. She said of her counselor, "They had a counselor there, but she wasn't really like around all the

time…So, it was really hard to get ahold of her" (Participant_#7, 2023). Without staff available, these students were left to navigate the college search process alone or with limited familial help.

For students that had access to school staff for support, the support they received was often less than helpful. For participant #2 her feelings on this subject were straightforward, "My counselor was not great at it" (Participant_#2, 2023). Participant #1 mirrored these sentiments saying, "And my school counselor wasn't like the greatest" (Participant_#1, 2023). These students did not believe that the supports they were offered could provide them the tools and information they needed.

Subtheme 3. Self-Support.

When outside supports were unable to be found or found to be inadequate, some students sought support from their own skills. Participant #11 said, "They offered support, I should say, but I didn't really take it. I kind of knew what I wanted" (Participant_#11, 2023). The support was available, but the staff did not ensure full understanding of the support options available to this student. On receiving support once in college participant #11 said, "Although I will say, when I did start asking for more help after already being in college, the advisors were a huge help" (Participant_#11, 2023).

Even students that did seek out support still often relied on their own skills for college search. This did not always turn out to be the most successful avenue, however. Participant #6 said, "I was just going off of what Google told me, and that's what I did. I followed Google, and Google isn't like the most helpful" (Participant_#6, 2023).

Theme 3. Familial Obligations and Sense of Dependence.

Subtheme 1. Familial Pressure.

Families can be both helpful and a hinderance to first-generation students. Many first-generation students feel the push to go to school simply because their parents didn't. The feeling of being expected to get out beyond family situations was common amongst the participants. Participant #7 said, "I really just wanted to branch out from my family…And so, I was the first one in my family to actually graduate high school and go to college" (Participant_#7, 2023).

While they did not directly experience it themself, participant #2 spoke about the expectations of classmates' parents that their student continue in the family business instead of pursuing higher education. The participant said, "A lot of the people that I knew had plans already after school, and that was just to like continue in their parent's business" (Participant_#2, 2023). For participant #2, their family's lack of family business, left pressure to figure out an alternative path to their classmates. They said,

> My parents don't have that [a business], so it's not like I can, if I was interested in doing that…So I was like, maybe I should figure something out that I do like, because I don't want to continue the jobs I currently have (Participant_#2, 2023).

These types of familial pressures left both participants feeling like they had no choice in their path, that they must choose college.

Ultimatums are also not unheard of for these students. Parents can sometimes take an all or nothing take on college education. Participant #11 experienced this at a young age saying,

> My father gave me two choices. My adoptive father, he said, you can either choose to get married, or you can choose to go to school and get an education…And he gave me that choice when I was in the eighth grade, and I chose college (Participant_#11, 2023).

Subtheme 2. Familial Obligations

The researcher has worked with incoming freshmen for nearly a decade professionally, and has found that across the board, it can be hard for students to leave their homes and start a new chapter of life in college. For first-generation students, however, there is often an added layer of familial obligations that must be addressed before the student can take that step forward.

The idea of being close to home was a common thread amongst the participants. Participants wanted to be close enough to home to be available if they were needed by their families. Participants #3 and #11 both expressed a desire to leave the state for college but feared leaving due to ongoing family issues. Participant #3 said, "There were parts of me that were like, you know, go to Arizona…But I have only ever lived in [Two City Area] …And I didn't want to go that far with everything going on" (Participant_#3, 2023). They felt that being available for their siblings was more important than following a desire for distance. This sense of obligation to her family limited their choices of available colleges. Participant #11 felt a similar pull saying, "I thought about going to [Out of State University] …But I didn't know how I could do…how would I do being so far away from my two younger siblings that I've been with basically my entire life" (Participant_#11, 2023). They felt obligated to stay close to their brother especially, saying, "My little brother, I raised him until we were adopted, and so he is, he is like a son to me…I was like, "That's it! I'm going to [State University]" because I want to be with my brother" (Participant_#11, 2023).

The researcher would like to note that, in this research, there was a connection between instability at home and a stronger sense of familial obligations. For participant #3, the instability with their parents came from a lack of reliability in general. When their parents were unable to support their family, participant #3, "worked two jobs to take care of everything" (Participant_#3, 2023). This led to an academic record not fully indicative of their strengths.

Which, in turn, limited their college options even further. Situations such as this, show how familial obligations can easily turn into an insurmountable barrier for students. If you need to support your family so your siblings can eat, it is challenging to give that up to go to school.

In the long run, most young adults can see the benefit of furthering their education in some way beyond high school. For those students faced with challenges like Participant 3, this long view can become muddied with the needs of the present. Four-year institutions are also more likely to actively recruit students that have the financial means, or financial aid opportunities, to cover the cost of attendance (Heilig et al., 2011). Staff can help illuminate the path towards educational attainment, but for those that are not being actively recruited, this can mean another missed opportunity to see the long-term value of education.

Theme 4. Lack of Access to Quality Information on College.

Subtheme 1. Access to Information in High School.

Every participant in this study cited a lack of access to information on college during their search process. Several cited a heavy bias towards one post-secondary path over other options by their high schools. Participant #10 said,

> There was a big push to go into the trades, so they didn't talk so much about going to college…I think it would have been nice to have more. If they had talked about it more, about our options. Even different career paths we could choose to go (Participant_#10, 2023).

Participant #9 cited the opposite leanings saying,

> A lot of our teachers and counselors, they push, "You're going to go to school. You're going to go for four years", and that is something that is very, very prominent. But you

don't hear about going into the trades or going to a community college as often as you

should (Participant_#9, 2023).

Either standpoint limits the information accessible to students.

Staff can impact a student's college search experience both positively and negatively. As previously discussed, many of the participants did not have adequate staff support during their college search process. For participant #8, he felt a stronger connection with staff would have greatly helped him to make the initial decision to go to college. They felt staff should give future students support to find out about college saying, "I'd say it has to do more with interest rather than accessibility. Like, are there reasons for them to want to invest [in college]" (Participant_#8, 2023). Access to college staff at their high schools was also important for students. Participant #5 said,

It would have been kind of nice if [the high school] would have had some like college,

like representatives, you know, come to the high school. Like just different colleges. Just

so you could ask them questions about how college went (Participant_#5, 2023).

A lack of overall access to information on college was something that many of the participants had experienced during high school. Participant #1 stated, "I wish there would have just been more" when talking about the information, or lack thereof, presented by her high school (Participant_#1, 2023). Lack of options to access information on college in high school leaves students on their own to find information.

Subtheme 2. Access to Information from Colleges and Other Sources.

Senior high school students will inevitably receive some sort of communications from post-secondary education providers. This can provide a solid tool for these students to find out about colleges. Participant #7 stated, "The main reason I found out about a lot of colleges was

just like getting like letters in the mail" (Participant_#7, 2023). Getting the information on what colleges are out there is a big first step for many students. If the information is not clear or easily accessible, however, this can increase the barrier to rural, first-generation students. Participant #7 also said, "The information on the websites isn't great. I don't want to sit there trying to email back with somebody the whole time" (Participant_#7, 2023).

Other students used word of mouth to gain information on colleges, with mixed results. Participant #6 said, "Everyone I asked, they were like, "oh yeah you can't go to med school with a psychology degree or major". I didn't know that, until I got to college, that I can" (Participant_#6, 2023). Situations like this can completely derail a student's path. Proper information must be available to students in order to inform an accurate college search. Participant #2 said, "I would say another issue that I had would be like, just like trying to find someone who had that information" (Participant_#2, 2023). This participant was looking for a clear place to start and struggled because of lack of access to accurate information from varying sources.

Theme 5. Expectations of College

Subtheme 1. Anxiety of Expectations.

Students often felt limited by their expectations of what college would be like when choosing which college to attend. Lack of knowledge about college options let the students' imaginations to take over when thinking about what college experience they wanted to have. Speaking on how their expectations varied from the reality of their college experiences showed the anxiety put on by these expectations. Participant #10 said, "It's not as scary. I was expecting it to be like really intimidating" (Participant_#10, 2023).

Misinformation can lead students to fear the college experience. For participant #3, her family made her feel as though the college was giving her misinformation and that her experience was going to be full of parties and experiences she didn't want. She said, "There's a different expectation, it's like, my family thinks like college equals partying. It's like really not. So that was nice to know" (Participant_#3, 2023).

It can be incredibly intimidating entering a new space and a new chapter of life. This is especially true when you have negative expectations of the experience. Participant #6 reflected on her initial negative expectations saying, "It was completely different. People here are actually nice and helpful" (Participant_#6, 2023). Participant #9 reflected on a similar experience,

> I came here, and I was initially overwhelmed…At first, you know, it's so many new faces and so many people you don't recognize. And then you start to realize, holy buckets, my class maybe isn't actually as big as I thought. Like I recognize a lot of the people I walk past on the sidewalk or in the dorm building, or whatever it is, which is kind of comforting (Participant_#9, 2023).

These students were able to overcome their negative expectations to have positive experiences. Those that are unable to overcome their negative expectations could struggle with their decision to attend college at all.

Subtheme 2. Going in Blind.

Students with lacking information and support during their college search process can come upon another barrier of expectations, the absence of expectations altogether. Participant #2 stated,

> I just didn't know what to expect…No one else did college, so I was kind of going in blind, I guess, and I was fine with that because I'm like, I'm able to adapt. Like not afraid

to ask for help if I need help, but it was definitely a lot different than what I was used to (Participant_#2, 2023).

Participant #7 had a similar experience saying, "I went into college like blind. I had no idea what it was going to be like" (Participant_#7, 2023). For participant #8, he felt that the lack of expectations on what college was going to be like discouraged him from entering college altogether, prompting him to take a gap year. Of this experience he said, "Like if I felt I would have had some sort of familiarity with the college before I was enrolling blind, it would have felt easier" (Participant_#8, 2023).

A lack of expectations led a number of students to experience somewhat of a culture shock upon entering college. Participant #1 said, "After versus like a high school, it was definitely like a culture shock. It was really hard for me, and it's hard to say like what I really expected" (Participant_#1, 2023). Participant #9 mirrored this sentiment saying, "This is definitely an adjustment, coming somewhere where everybody's new and everybody's from such different backgrounds. That's not as common where I come from" (Participant_#9, 2023).

Going into college without expectations led to mixed feelings and uncertainty on if they made the best choice, although no participant regretted their ultimate decision on where to attend college. When asked if the school she currently attends is the best school for her participant #2 said, "That's a hard question, just because I didn't go to other campuses so I don't know how their environment is…But I would say yes because the environment is nice" (Participant_#2, 2023). The feeling that there might have been a better fit school out there lingered, but the participants did not have the background to know whether this feeling was true. Participant #7 said, "I don't think it's bad at all. I mean, like I said, my dream school was to go to a bigger school, obviously. But I do think this is…like I'm satisfied" (Participant_#7, 2023).

Theme 6. Proximity to Home and Location.

Subtheme 1. Being Close, but not too Close.

Participants often felt an urge to distance themselves from their families physically, but they also wanted to still be close. This idea of being "close, but not too close" was prevalent throughout this study. Participant #5 described this feeling saying, "I kind of wanted to stay closer to home, you know, but like far enough away. I wanted to have some distance but wanted to be able to drive there and back in a day if I had to" (Participant_#5, 2023). Students often had a desire to be independent, but still had the pull of familial obligations urging them to stay close to home. Participant #3 stated,

> I have only ever lived in [Hometown], and so I was like maybe I want to get out. And I didn't want to go that far with everything going on [with the family]. And so, when I did get to [State University] I was like maybe that was the best option because it was close, but still far away (Participant_#3, 2023).

The feeling that staying close to home would put students in a position requiring them to limit their independence was also common. Participant #2 stated, "I did want to be farther away from home…I kind of wanted to be more independent. So, I thought that being away from home would make, I guess, adulting be a little more easier" (Participant_#2, 2023). Participant #6 said, "Location was pretty big. I wanted to be close to home, but not too close where I had to live at home" (Participant_#6, 2023). For participant #11, the university she currently attends was her third-choice option, "solely because it was so close to home" (Participant_#11, 2023). Being too close would mean staying in line with their family's plan for them and not having the chance to experience their own choices. Participant #7 said, "I didn't want to stay out of state, but I didn't

want to go like too close or too far from home…I really just wanted to like branch out from my family" (Participant_#7, 2023).

Subtheme 2. Environment

For many rural students the outdoors is an integral part of their lives. Growing up in an area that had a focus on the outdoors led several students to want to find a college that mirrored that type of environment. Participant # 10 said, "I liked the outdoorsy environments. I was surrounded by that growing up, so I kind of wanted to stick with that" (Participant_#10, 2023). Participant #2 was also drawn to the environment of certain schools during her college search process. Ultimately deciding on her university because, "It was more nature-y, more…that aspect was more kind of normal for me" (Participant_#2, 2023). For participant #6, her knowledge of the city her university is in confirmed her desire for an outdoors focused environment saying, "I love the outdoors, so [City] – outdoors" (Participant_#6, 2023).

The campus environment itself was also an important draw for these students. Participant #5 said, "I actually picked [State University] because when I toured it, it felt most like home" (Participant_#5, 2023). The connection to the university was made for this student because of the similarity in environment. For others, the campus environment was important because it was different from home in positive ways. Participant #3 described this saying,

> A lot of people from my high school went there [Hometown State University]. I wasn't really friends with them. There's a big party scene. I'm not that much of a partier. So yeah, just like the quiet, the lakeview really pulled me in. I just needed that distance (Participant_#3, 2023).

In either situation the environment of the campus was important because of the way it made the student feel. If a student was unable to find a school that met this need, then the barrier could become insurmountable or lead to a negative overall experience.

Conclusion

The unique experiences of the participants were recorded through their interviews. Participants were able to describe their experiences choosing a college, finding support or lack thereof, finalizing their decisions, coping with expectations, and enrolling in college. From those interviews the researcher was able to identify six main barrier themes to answer the research question: **what barriers do rural, first-generation students experience during the college search process?** These barrier themes are:

1. Financial support and understanding.

2. Lack of support from home and school.

3. Familial obligations and sense of dependence.

4. Lack of access to quality information on college.

5. Expectations of college.

6. Proximity to home and location.

Even with differences in items such as hometowns, family composition, and trauma these common themes were able to be identified in a way that can used to help future students. The following chapter will use the identified themes to discuss techniques that student support professionals can use to help alleviate barriers for other first-generation students from rural backgrounds.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Rural, first-generation students often encounter barriers throughout their college search and enrollment process (Killiam & Degges-White, 2017; Sims & Ferrare, 2021). These barriers can be detrimental to the overall experience and success of this type of student. First-generation students continue to be one of the fastest growing groups in higher education (House, et al., 2020; Liversage et al., 2017). That is why it is imperative to understand the experiences of first-generation students and the barriers they face. This way student support staff and others can help alleviate these barriers for first-generation students during their college search and beyond.

To achieve this goal, the following research question was asked: **What barriers do rural, first-generation students experience during the college search process?** To answer this question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with first- and second-year students from rural backgrounds. From the interviews, data were analyzed into the following six main themes with corresponding subthemes:

1. Financial support and understanding.

2. Lack of support from home and school.

    a. Support at Home.

    b. Support at School.

    c. Self-Support.

3. Familial obligations and sense of dependence.

    a. Familial Pressure.

    b. Familial Obligations.

4. Lack of access to quality information on college.

      a. Access to Information in High School.

      b. Access to Information from Colleges and Other Sources.

5. Expectations of college.

      a. Anxiety of Expectations.

      b. Going in Blind.

6. Proximity to home and location.

      a. Being Close, but not too Close.

      b. Environment.

Chapter five provides a summary of the findings that culminated from this research. Additionally, recommendations for practice for student support professionals are discussed as well as limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

Summary of Findings

Findings revealed that rural, first-generation students face barriers from several different areas during their college search process. Financial obstacles were an almost universal theme among the participants of this study. First-generation students are more likely to be low-income than their continuing-generation peers (Stuber, 2011). The interviews revealed that constraints on finances limited the options of colleges available to these students. Participant #7 stated, "My dream school was going to the [Big Ten University], but it was really expensive…But I go to [State University] now, and so I chose this because it was just more affordable" (Participant_#7, 2023). Along with limiting options during the college search process, financial obstacles were also present throughout the student lifecycle. A lack of knowledge regarding how financing college works left several participants desiring more support in this area. Speaking regarding financial aid, participant #5 said, "Like that was really confusing…that needs to be more clear…

The other stuff isn't too bad. You can usually do your research, you know, but I think that would be the biggest takeaway thing is the financial aid resources" (Participant_#5, 2023). With parental support often lacking in this area for low-SES first-generation students, there is a clear need to additional support at the school level (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Lack of support during the college search process was also revealed to be a significant barrier for rural, first-generation students. Participants noted lacking support at home and at school. Limited knowledge of parents and staff on college fit and resources left many participants left to their own searching. "Literally there was no guiding. There was nothing. I was just going off of what Google told me, and that's what I did. I followed Google, and Google isn't the most helpful" (Participant_#6, 2023). For rural students especially, limited staff at their high schools left a gap in the resources available during their college search process. Several students noted staff that was supposed to support them during the transition to college, but they did not do so. The reasons for this were cited as lack of time to help all assigned students, lack of knowledge regarding college, discounting certain post-secondary options, and negative attitudes held by staff. As previously noted in chapter 2, support from counselors and other student support staff is a critical part of the college search and application process, providing guidance and technical knowledge to students (Holland, 2020). Lack of support at home leaves the same gap in guidance and technical knowledge, although participants seemed to harbor less frustration with parents who didn't have the skills to support them than staff that could not or would not support them.

Even supportive families can still be an impactful barrier for rural, first-generation students. Students often felt pressure to attend college, but they were given limited knowledge or skills to do so from their families. Participant #11 was given an ultimatum by her father to attend

college or get married after high school. She chose college and while her family was supportive

of that decision, they also made her feel obligated to stay close to home to help with family

responsibilities (Participant_#11, 2023). Several other participants also noted such pressure to

still be available to the family, if needed. Banks-Santilli (2015), noted that familial pressure can

be a unique psychological challenge for first-generation students. This, again, limits the options

available to students during their college search process. Students felt pressure to only look at

schools nearer to their homes. Speaking regarding her familial issues and the college search

process participant #3 said, "If I was at [Hometown University], I would have…like my mom

works like a block from [Hometown University]. It wouldn't have worked because I wouldn't be

focused on the right things" (Participant_#3, 2023). Even with this insight, the participant still

felt like she had to choose an option that was "close, but still far away" (Participant_#3, 2023).

Access to quality information was a significant barrier for the students in this study.

Participants found information difficult to access or not relevant to their situations. Speaking

regarding her high school and her parents, participant #5 said, "They can only do so much…So, I

had a lot of questions that I didn't have the answers to" (Participant_#5, 2023). Major life

changes are intimidating for most people regardless of generational status, but limited access to

quality information leaves first-generation students with the fear of the unknown. When the

needed skills and information to be successful in college are not taught, students suffer (Morrow

& Torrez, 2012). For continuing-generation students, generational knowledge and general access

to higher quality educational staff give them the upper hand in the college search process

(Pascarella et al., 2004). Location also was a factor in the ability of students to access quality

information. Rural students were often met with limited staff at school and limited access to local

colleges, if there were any local colleges available. Participant #9 stated,

I think a lot of like what I missed is like, what options are there for schools? Because you

hear about a lot of the big ones, right? Like it's easy to find those, but when it comes to

like community colleges or smaller schools, you don't hear a lot about them…And I

think that coming from a small community, a lot of people look to find something

similar…And I just think encouraging people to go to those smaller schools, because I do

think that not everyone is built for a four-year degree. And you just don't hear about it

(Participant_#9, 2023).

Several participants indicated that they were happy with their choice of college but could not say

if there would have been a better fit school for them available. This was due to the lack of

knowledge and experience with other campuses. Being able to access the physical campuses as

well as quality information regarding college is a privilege many rural, first-generation students

do not have access to.

A lack of knowledge can lead to a sense of unknown for rural, first-generation students as

they enter college. This can become a barrier for students when there is a mismatch between

expectations of college and real life, or a total lack of expectations. The idea of "going in blind"

was a common theme among the participants in this study. The lack of expectations left students

blindsided by their experiences both good and bad. Participant #2 stated,

I just didn't know what to expect…No one else did college, so I was kind of going in

blind, I guess, and I was fine with that because I'm like, I'm able to adapt. Like not afraid

to ask for help if I need help, but it was definitely a lot different than what I was used to"

(Participant_#2, 2023).

Had this student struggled more with adapting to their surroundings, their experience could have

been much different. As previously discussed in chapter two, individuals with cultural capital

know more about the world and are comfortable in new situations (Stuber, 2011). Students

without the cultural capital regarding college life will find it harder to acclimate to this new

world and run into more barriers just from this lack of knowledge. Having knowledge and

expectations of college is a type of cultural capital that rural, first-generation students seem to

lack. All this lack of expectations can lead to increased levels of anxiety for these students.

Imagine going into a major life event with little to no knowledge of what it will be like. This type

of experience can be extremely nerve wracking for anyone, but especially a young person

heading out on their own for the first time.

For rural, first-generation students the location of their college and the proximity it had to

their homes was immensely important. Many students felt a strong need to be close to family, to

be there in case they were needed. Participant #5 described, "I kind of wanted to stay closer to

home, you know, but like far enough away. I wanted to have some distance but wanted to be able

to drive there and back in a day if I had to" (Participant_#5, 2023). She felt as though there

needed to be distance but not too much distance between herself and her family. Rural, first-

generation students tend to hold their place of origin as more a part of their identity than their

urban counterparts (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). Leaving this part of their identity behind was seen as

a chance to grow, but also something they wanted to keep close. The environment of the campus

was often just as important for students as the geographical location. Participant #5 recalled

deciding on her campus because, "it felt most like home" (Participant_#5, 2023). Students

wanted a space in which they could be independent, but also a space that reminded them of the

safety of home. Each student gained cultural capital and making their own sense of place from

their experiences finding a college.

Recommendations for Practice

Student support professionals at all levels should always continue to learn more about their students and how to better serve them. This research aimed to help uncover barriers of rural, first-generation students as a way to better inform such practitioners. From the findings in this study there are several areas in which student support professionals and the schools themselves can help alleviate barriers for rural, first-generation students. These areas are training, staffing, support for parents, and accessible literature.

Recommendation 1. Training.

It is clear from the responses of the participants, that training for staff at the high school level is lacking. Training for staff should be an ongoing, intentional and systematic process (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). Many of the students in this study were met with staff who did not have the ability to adequately help them in their college search process.

Post-Secondary Options

Within continued training, there should be knowledge of multiple types of post-secondary options for students. Not every student is going to be a good fit for a four-year degree, just as not every student is going to be a good fit for a community or technical college. Information on all choices, including but not limited to universities, communinty colleges, technical colleges, apprenticships, military options, and career options, should be covered in any training for staff.

In any situation, it is difficult for individuals to remove their own person biases from their work. For educators who have found growth and identity building from their university education, it can be easy to feel that this is the only option for all students. We need to remember that there are many other positive options for students to have a healthy and productive adult life. Even when students may be best fit for a four-year degree, learning about alternate options can be beneficial. This allows the student to understand what else they could be doing after high

school and feel completely comfortable with their choice. It eliminates the feeling of "what-if"
that can be destructive to a student's higher education experience. As previously discussed,
several participants in this research noted that while they felt comfortable with their overall
choice of post-secondary option, they did not know if there were better options available
elsewhere.

At the college level, staff should also be well-versed on all the options available to
students. Also, knowing the proper paths to achieve certain career goals is advantageous.
Participant #6 noted an experience with campus faculty that left her searching for more.

> When I got here, I went to my advisor. My advisor told me I wasn't smart enough to get
> into med school, so I found a different one, and then I got another one, and now I have
> like three advisors, and they all work together to help me (Participant_#6, 2023).

Students should feel comfortable working out their educational paths with their advisors and
other support staff without the fear of being put down or left on their own.

Financial Aid

Basic financial aid knowledge should be a part of the training for student support staff at
all levels. All participants noted financial concerns in their college search process, with several
stating that finances were their most impactful obstacle. All students can benefit from increased
knowledge of the financial aid process. Taking on loans and other financial options to pay for
school is an undertaking that should not be done lightly. The more knowledge a student has
access to on the subject, the more they can feel comfortable with their financial decisions.

First-generation students are more likely to be from low-SES backgrounds than
continuing-generation students (Stuber, 2011). This coupled with parents who have not
personally experienced the financial aid process, can leave students relying solely on the staff

from their high schools and prospective colleges for guidance through the process. Many of the things that seem obvious to those that have experience with financial aid are completely new to these students and their parents. The "unspoken rules" of higher education are often intimidating and can increase barriers for students (Roksa et al., 2018). As such, training in this area should include a full breakdown of the financial aid lexicon to avoid miscommunication between staff and students.

Recommendation 2. Staffing.

Lack of proper staffing is an issue almost any educator or student support professional has had to deal with. For the students, however, a lack of proper staffing can lead to increased barriers and lower educational attainment. As we have discussed, the participants in this study noted a lack of properly equipped staff at their schools to help them with their search processes. Specific personnel is needed to help support the diverse needs of all students. In rural areas, the lower levels of individuals looking for these positions can cause districts to struggle to fill student support positions. While this struggle is understandable, it is imperative that students be given the access they need to succeed in whatever path they choose. Students in rural areas should not be shortchanged simply because they live in a less populated area.

In colleges, student support programs should be promoted and actively engage with students. Many of the participants noted being a part of the TRIO program at their school. TRIO is a set of federally funded programs "designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds" (United States Department of Education, 2023). Programs such as these give students an opportunity to fill in the gaps left by barriers in their college search and enrollment process. For participant #9, being sought out by the TRIO program gave her access to needed resources she did not know were available to her prior to her introduction to

the program (Participant_#9, 2023). When programs stand in the background, students lose out. Colleges can also add institutional backing to programs specifically for first-generation students such as The Outreach Center at Seattle University (Campera, 2018). Centers and programs like this one, target issues specific to first-generation students and give them the resources to overcome those issues. One resource offered by Seattle University is a peer mentoring program. This program matches an upperclassmen first-generation student with a small group of first- and second-year first-generation students to assist with their personal and academic development (Seattle University, 2023). Barriers do not disappear once a student steps on campus. Colleges must be able to support their students holistically.

Recommendation 3. Support for Parents.

Schools know they need to support their students, but parents are often left out of that equation. Parents are the first line of support for students. When parents lack the knowledge to adequately support their student with the college search process, they may not know where to look. Schools can offer this missing line of support to parents new to the college experience. Both high schools and colleges can embark on this endeavor, by offering programing specifically for parents.

In-Person Support Programs

Being available in-person to talk to a parent can be the first step in bridging the gap of support at home and support at school for students. Simply offering video chats or easy appointment booking can open up the lone of communication with parents. Parents of first-generation students often have many responsibilities and extra worries due to limited job opportunities and low-socioeconomic status (Covarrubias et al., 2015). This leaves them with

limited time and energy to contact student support staff. For those who do reach out, offering easy ways to connect with them is the best way to get things moving in the right direction.

In-person support can also mean offering seminars for parents or other events, such as a financial aid night. These events do not need to be anything extravagant, but they do need to offer information in an easily digestible format. College cultivates a culture of independence in their student that parents of first-generation students are less likely to be comfortable with due to lack of information or cultural mismatch (Harper et al., 2020). These parents need to be brought into the process of college search and enrollment. Receiving information can help overcome any feelings of being uncomfortable for parents. Seeing other parents who also have similar concerns can help as well. Just as bringing first-generation students together has benefits, bringing parents together can as well.

Remote Support Options

While in-person support options work well for many parents, there are those who may not have the means or desire to meet in-person. For these individuals, remote support options may be a better fit. Ideas for remote support options include personalized parent pages on the institutional websites, parent portals at the high school level with easy links to information on post-secondary options, emails, and mailings directed specifically at the parents of first-generation students directing them to more information. Options such as these can often be a one-time lift for staff with minimal upkeep. This makes it a great option for schools with limited staff.

Recommendation 4. Accessible Literature.

While there is much information on the internet and beyond regarding the college search process, it can be hard to know where to look and what questions to ask. The literature that is

available can be hard to understand for first-generation students and their parents as well. There is a whole lexicon attached to the world of higher education. Breaking things down to fully explain these "industry terms" can be invaluable knowledge for rural, first-generation students.

At the high school level, counselors and other student support staff could offer information sessions or individual meetings with students to go over basic college terms and the basic steps of the college search process. This gives students a starting point that can strengthen the rest of the search and enrollment process. Giving students a private area to access college information can also be beneficial, as some students may have limited or no internet access at home.

For colleges, a communications audit should be conducted to ensure easy to understand language and inclusive terms are used across all communications to prospective students. Emails, letters and even text messages should be carefully crafted to be clear and concise, but still be easily understood by anyone whether they have experience with college. An audit of the institution's website should also be conducted to review for the same inclusivity and clarity of language. The website should also be reviewed for ease of access. Tabs and headings should be clear. Information commonly needed by first-time students should be easily accessible through a limited number of clicks. Having to dig through a website can be frustrating for students. Participant #5 indicated that her biggest frustration with her campus' resources were the clarity and ease of access. She said, "If they would have made it more clear in the first place, then I probably wouldn't have been in there [the offices] as much. That's kind of going across the board" (Participant_#5, 2023). Colleges are providing the information for students to be able to make their decision on which college to go to, everything should be done to alleviate barriers to the access of the information.

Beyond the written literature, any staff should use accessible language and be able to explain higher education terms clearly. Admissions representatives are the living literature and, as such, need to be accessible for their students. Training for staff should include basics of the college search and enrollment process, a financial aid overview, and a breakdown of campus housing requirements. Being able to fully explain and give the "why" behind any campus policy can help open the gates of higher education to more students.

Limitations of the Research

This research was limited by the small sample size. Participants needed to self-identify as first-generation to avoid data privacy issues connected with the researcher's employment at the university where the study was conducted. This limited the amount of students available for the study. Students may have been hesitant to take part in the study due to a variety of factors. Had the researcher been able to individually contact students that met the criteria of the study, the population available for the research would have been larger.

Another limitation of this study was the participants' ability to adequately translate their experiences into words. There were two participants, in particular, whose answers to the interview questions were sparse, even with prompting and follow-up questions. This could be due to shyness of the participants or a lack of self-awareness. The participants were first- and second-year students who are still developing their adult identities.

The homogenity of gender identities among the participants could also be a limiting factor. Only one participant identified as male, and no other males expressed interest in being involved with this study. The results may have been influenced by the skewed levels of females versus males. The researcher did not encounter any active knowledge produced by the

participants on their gender identities having any influence on their college search process or experiences.

Recommendations for Further Research

Several possible for avenues for additional research were evoked from this study. Additional research into the rural student experience should be conducted to more fully understand the unique factors that influence college choice for this population. Rural continuing-generation students also face barriers when searching for and choosing a college. More insight into their experience could further inform and highlight the rural, first-generation experience.

Future research should also focus on the enrollment and retention of rural, first-generation students. Beyond the college search process, these students face unique barriers during the enrollment process and completion of courses. The ultimate goal of college is to prepare students to be productive members of the workforce. Understanding and finding ways to alleviate barriers at all stages of student development is beneficial in reaching this goal.

Conclusion

This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to uncover the barriers that rural, first generation students face during the college search process. Participants in this study were able to share their experiences choosing and enrolling in college through semi-structured interviews. Through these interviews several main barrier themes were revealed.

The findings in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis to be able to identify the main themes. Findings indicated six main themes and corresponding subthemes.

Theme 1. Financial Support and Understanding.

Theme 2. Lack of Support from Home and School.

Subtheme 1. Support at Home

Subtheme 2. Support at School.

Subtheme 3. Self-Support.

Theme 3. Familial Obligations and Sense of Dependence.

Subtheme 1. Familial Pressure.

Subtheme 2. Familial Obligations

Theme 4. Lack of Access to Quality Information on College.

Subtheme 1. Access to Information in High School.

Subtheme 2. Access to Information from Colleges and Other Sources.

Theme 5. Expectations of College

Subtheme 1. Anxiety of Expectations.

Subtheme 2. Going in Blind.

Theme 6. Proximity to Home and Location.

Subtheme 1. Being Close, but not too Close.

Subtheme 2. Environment

This information and the corressponding recommends for practioners can be used to help alleviate such barriers for future rural, first-generation students. This research can further inform future research to continue to make the path to higher education smoother for first-generation students.

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APPENDIX A.   Interview Protocol

College Search Process of Rural First-Generation Students
Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. As I mentioned in the research request, I am interested in learning about the college search experience of first-generation student from a rural background. For the conversation we are having right now, I am specifically interested in your personal experiences choosing and enrolling in college.

I have a list of several questions here that are mostly to remind me of the general sorts of things I thought might give me insights into your experiences. However, it is more important for me to hear what *you think* than it is for me to get through my questions. If we don't go in order – or if we don't get to all of them – that is perfectly fine. And if there are things you think are important for me to know, please feel free to bring them up even if I don't ask about them. Again, what is most important is that I give you a chance to tell me what your experiences have been like with your college search process.

As I mentioned in my email message, our discussion will likely take about 45 minutes. As we talk, you may notice me making notes, so I can remember what you tell me. However, in order to capture your thoughts as accurately and thoroughly as possible, I would like to record our conversation with Zoom. Is that still okay with you?

Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. Tell me about your educational background.
☐ How many students were in your graduating class?
☐ Describe the setting of your high school.
☐ What is the educational background of your parents?
☐ What year of college are you in?
☐ What program/major are you studying?

2. Tell me about your college search process.
☐ What schools did you consider for college? Why?
☐ When did you start considering college options?
☐ What lead you to start thinking about college options?
☐ Where there things that made your college search process more difficult? If so, what were they?
☐ Did your first-generation status weigh into your college selection? Why or why not?
☐ How did location weigh into your college search process?
☐ How did you finalize your decision to attend your current school?

3. Now I'd like to talk about your experiences with supports and resources.
☐ Did you seek out any help with your college search process?
☐ What support, if any, did your high school offer in your college search process?
☐ What supports or resources do you think would have been helpful during your college search process?
☐ If those supports were available to you in high school, do you feel you would have used them?

4. Now I'd like to talk about your experiences after entering college.
☐ How have your experiences been similar to or different from your initial expectations?
☐ Have you sought out any support and/or resources since you have been at college? Why or why not?
☐ What types of support resources would you like to see on campus? Why?
☐ Do you believe that the school you are at now is the best school for you? Why or why not?

6. Out of all the things we've talked about today with regard to the college search process – or maybe some topics we've missed – what should I pay most attention to? What should I think about when I read your interview?

Conclusion
Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today and share your experiences. As a reminder, I was collecting this data for my dissertation, and any information that might identify you will be removed from the transcript before I submit it. Let me know if you have any questions about the project. [*answer questions about the project, collect the signed informed consent, thank the participant for their time*]

Appendix B. Quotes, Themes, and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Evidence	Participant
Financial support and understanding		I spent a lot of time in the financial aid office…Because the FAFSA and, you know, whatever, that's confusing	5
		It was hard because of the cost of everything. I'm completely paying for college on my own. I mean, there's some, you know, federal. Like there's help, but it's all on me	5
		So, the cost was something I needed to be in a certain range. So that was kind of difficult to find	5
		Yes, if you're in state it's cheaper than going out of state.	5
		Because the FAFSA and, you know, whatever. That's confusing	5
		There's like the deadline for the payment, for you know, dorms, tuition, everything. There's a deadline. I didn't understand that.	5
		And I would probably spend a lot more money than what I have versus living here	1
		My dream school was going to the [Big Ten University], but it was really expensive…But I go to [State University] now, and so I chose this because it was just more affordable	7
		My teachers and stuff did a good job [explaining the financial aid process], but then it still was understanding like, how do you get the report? Trying to understand what you're actually paying compared to what the state's paying. That was really hard to understand	1

		I just knew I wanted to be able to live on my own and to, like, finance myself, and like all this stuff that like a lot of my family don't do for themselves as adults	3
		I really just wanted to branch out from my family and from that small town and kind of have a further education so I could have a better income and better chances of getting like a stable career in the future	7
		My mom basically told me I was going because she didn't want me to, not to say…she's doing well. But she didn't want me to have to struggle in some of the ways she has necessarily, because she doesn't have that education	1
		Like that was really confusing…that needs to be more clear… The other stuff isn't too bad. You can usually do your research, you know, but I think that would be the biggest takeaway thing is the financial aid resources	5
		And that coupled with financial, the financials…because my dream was to stay in the dorms, kind of get the full college experience which, spoiler alert, never got	11
		It made it difficult thinking about the financials of it, because I knew that by the end of my last college year, I would basically be paying college, either by myself or with scholarships	11
		I wanted to go to school and not have to pay for anything, not have to worry about financials, because I just…I struggle with finances	11
		He could help me perform a scholarship piece	8

		A big thing for me was state school. I have…my cousins all ended up going to private school, and the tuition they pay is insane. I just couldn't justify that for myself.	9
		So that's probably the most difficult part. And it's still difficult because, like I just had to fill out my FAFSA, and I was like, what am I doing	7
		Definitely more with like understanding financial aid and stuff…trying to understand what you're actually paying compared to what's the state's paying	3
		I feel like just more class courses on financial aid and understanding it would have been nice	3
		The financial aid part of it was really stressful because I knew I was going to be on my own a bit with it	3
		And then I got a scholarship, like the food one. So, I knew that my food was taken care of	3
Lack of support from home and school	Support at Home	There was just kind of me, like figuring it out on my own, like I didn't have any help	1
		It was really difficult. Like searching wasn't terribly difficult. It's just the whole process of like, "Okay, I applied. Now, like, what happens?" And then I get accepted and I have to enroll and like registration. It was all really difficult because I have nobody else to help me kind of go through those processes	7
		Because they don't know as much as I don't know	1
		I have nobody to go to at home	1

		I don't know what I'm doing and being that my parents didn't go to a four-year university, this isn't something they've had to deal with	9
		My parents don't have that, so it's not like I can, if I was interested in doing that	2
		Like my parents never done it	3
		I have eight siblings, none of them…only one of them graduated high school. The rest of them dropped out.	2
Lack of support from home and school	Support at School	They weren't too bad, but they also…they can only so much…So, I had a lot of questions that I didn't have the answers to	5
		I had no idea what I was doing. Literally there was no guiding. There was nothing	6
		No, because I knew that I wouldn't get any	1
		I just didn't get any from the high school. If I needed help, I'd ask my mom, which she didn't know	1
		They had a counselor there, but she wasn't really like around all the time…So, it was really hard to get ahold of her	7
		My counselor was not great at it	2
		And my school counselor wasn't like the greatest	1
		If they would have made it more clear in the first place, then I probably wouldn't have been in there as much. That's kind of going across the board	5

		More training for advisors, maybe?	6
		I would have to say more like resources for high school kids in small towns, because that's definitely a big issue	6
		We had a counselor, but the only thing I ever went to him for was my transcripts	10
		I would say the transition from very little support in high school to having all of these resources available around	10
		And I'm in TRIO in [City], but, like, if they had something like that before you get to college, I think would be very helpful	2
		High school…that's just like not it. They were like, you're on your own	6
		I kind of wish they offered more college classes, because I was only able to take one and the credits didn't even transfer over	7
		I guess it's like, not to say, my school did obviously talk about some stuff, but there was just nothing really. It was just kind of "oh, you'll need to start filling out college applications", "oh, look into what you want to do", kind of stuff like that	1
Lack of support from home and school	Self-Support	They offered support, I should say, but I didn't really take it. I kind of knew what I wanted	11
		Although I will say, when I did start asking for more help after already being in college, the advisors were a huge help	11
		I was just going off of what Google told me, and that's what I did. I followed Google, and Google isn't like the most helpful	6

		I mean I did most of it on my own	10
Familial obligations and sense of dependence	Familial Pressure	I really just wanted to branch out from my family…And so, I was the first one in my family to actually graduate high school and go to college	7
		A lot of the people that I knew had plans already after school, and that was just to like continue in their parent's business	2
		My parents don't have that [a business], so it's not like I can, if I was interested in doing that…So I was like, maybe I should figure something out that I do like, because I don't want to continue the jobs I currently have	2
		My father gave me two choices. My adoptive father, he said, you can either choose to get married, or you can choose to go to school and get an education…And he gave me that choice when I was in the eighth grade, and I chose college	11
		If I was at [Hometown University], I would have…like my mom works like a block from [Hometown University]. It wouldn't have worked because I wouldn't be focused on the right things	3
		He expressed how proud he was of me to be pursuing a bachelor's degree	11
		Because of the choice I made to move in with my partner, and because of who I chose my partner to be. I didn't get a lot of help from my family, and so I was kind of on my own.	11
		I really, really wanted to go to [Western Private College]…and then, just like, family issues and a lot of stuff, like my GPA wasn't what they wanted and	3

		everything, and so that didn't work out like I wanted	
Familial obligations and sense of dependence	Familial Obligations	There were parts of me that were like, you know, go to Arizona…But I have only ever lived in [Two City Area] …And I didn't want to go that far with everything going on	3
		My parents are drug addicts, and I'm the oldest of six, so it's really hard to leave them	3
		My mom hasn't worked a job since I think she was in high school. My stepdad was the one for a time…he's just not reliable and in the picture as much	3
		I thought about going to [Out of State University] …But I didn't know how I could do…how would I do being so far away from my two younger siblings that I've been with basically my entire life	11
		My little brother, I raised him until we were adopted, and so he is, he is like a son to me…I was like, "That's it! I'm going to [State University]" because I want to be with my brother	11
		worked two jobs to take care of everything	3
		I'm very family oriented, and if you put me away from my family, I am like a fish out of water.	11
		I think it would be really hard to move away from my family	10
		What if they need help and no one else can get to them fast enough? Like I want to be there	11
Lack of access to quality information	Access to Information	There was a big push to go into the trades, so they didn't talk so much	10

on college	in High School	about going to college…I think it would have been nice to have more. If they had talked about it more, about our options. Even different career paths we could choose to go	
		A lot of our teachers and counselors, they push, "You're going to go to school. You're going to go for four years", and that is something that is very, very prominent. But you don't hear about going into the trades or going to a community college as often as you should	9
		I'd say it has to do more with interest rather than accessibility. Like, are there reasons for them to want to invest	8
		It would have been kind of nice if [the high school] would have had some like college, like representatives, you know, come to the high school. Like just different colleges. Just so you could ask them questions about how college went	5
		I wish there would have just been more	1
		Like someone to talk to or that would have like talked to all of us individually about just college…versus just like, "oh, you're on track to graduate"	1
		They had a counselor there, but she wasn't really like around all the time…So it was really hard to get ahold of her	7
		I went to my counselor, and she was like, "yeah you need to do this", but she didn't tell me like how	6
		I don't know. It was interesting. Very weird. There was no talk about furthering your education	10
Lack of access to	Access to	The main reason I found out about a lot	7

quality information on college	Information from Colleges and Other Sources	of colleges was just like getting like letters in the mail	
		The information on the websites isn't great. I don't want to sit there trying to email back with somebody the whole time	7
		Everyone I asked, they were like, "oh yeah you can't go to med school with a psychology degree or major". I didn't know that, until I got to college, that I can	6
		I would say another issue that I had would be like, just like trying to find someone who had that information	2
		I was the only one applying for college, so, having no one in the family who could relate to the application process, and just like, any knowledge on college in general is tricky	2
		I think a lot of like what I missed is like, what options are there for schools? Because you hear about a lot of the big ones, right? Like it's easy to find those, but when it comes to like community colleges or smaller schools, you don't hear a lot about them…And I think that coming from a small community, a lot of people look to find something similar…And I just think encouraging people to go to those smaller schools, because I do think that not everyone is built for a four-year degree. And you just don't hear about it	9
		The information on the websites isn't great	5
		The programs and having some help with the stuff outside of college is what I really needed	11

		My sister, she went to technical school, so it was like completely different for her. But I was like, am I supposed to be doing this? And she's like, I think so. And then we just went with it.	6
Expectations of college	Anxiety of Expectations	It's not as scary. I was expecting it to be like really intimidating	10
		There's a different expectation, it's like, my family thinks like college equals partying. It's like really not. So that was nice to know	3
		It was completely different. People here are actually nice and helpful	6
		I came here, and I was initially overwhelmed…At first, you know, it's so many new faces and so many people you don't recognize. And then you start to realize, holy buckets, my class maybe isn't actually as big as I thought. Like I recognize a lot of the people I walk past on the sidewalk or in the dorm building, or whatever it is, which is kind of comforting	9
		I kind of expected it to be a little bit easier than it was	5
		Well, I knew that college was going to be a lot of work	11
		I thought I could take on 15 to 18 credits my first semester easily. And that resulted in me actually being on academic suspension my second semester at [State University]. So, despite being told that it was hard, I expected it to be easier, and it was not. It was a lot more, a lot more work…I found myself missing high school	11
		Yeah, different kind of structure, one that I didn't have much experience with. So, on that first semester where I	11

		got all of that freedom, I'm not used…I wasn't used to it	
		I guess I was expecting the classes to be like very strict like high school	11
Expectations of college	Going in Blind	I just didn't know what to expect…No one else did college, so I was kind of going in blind, I guess, and I was fine with that because I'm like, I'm able to adapt. Like not afraid to ask for help if I need help, but it was definitely a lot different than what I was used to	2
		I went into college like blind. I had no idea what it was going to be like	7
		Like if I felt I would have had some sort of familiarity with the college before I was enrolling blind, it would have felt easier	8
		After versus like a high school, it was definitely like a culture shock. It was really hard for me, and it's hard to say like what I really expected	1
		It honestly kind of sucked, like it really did.	1
		This is definitely an adjustment, coming somewhere where everybody's new and everybody's from such different backgrounds. That's not as common where I come from	9
		That's a hard question, just because I didn't go to other campuses so I don't know how their environment is…But I would say yes because the environment is nice	2
		I don't think it's bad at all. I mean, like I said, my dream school was to go to a bigger school, obviously. But I do think this is…like I'm satisfied	7

		High school, they didn't really prepare me for, you know, I thought it was real easy, real nice when I was doing it, but it didn't prepare me for, you know, like studying	1
		[State University] may not have been what I wanted, but it's what I needed	11
Proximity to home and location	Being Close, but not too Close	I kind of wanted to stay closer to home, you know, but like far enough away. I wanted to have some distance but wanted to be able to drive there and back in a day if I had to	5
		I mean there's more [options], but I don't want to go to [Metropolitan Area]	6
		I know a lot of people they stay in-state, especially from small towns, because they want to be close to home. They want to…We…That's where we belong	6
		I have 17 siblings, and one of them lived there, and so I was like I could still be close to family, and not too far away from my siblings, my youngest siblings	11
		And the two other schools I applied to in [Eastern City] because those were only like 45 minutes from home.	1
		I have only ever lived in [Hometown], and so I was like maybe I want to get out. And I didn't want to go that far with everything going on [with the family]. And so, when I did get to [State University] I was like maybe that was the best option because it was close, but still far away	3
		There's actually a good chunk of people from where I'm from that have went here or that do go here	1
		When you come from these small	1

		communities, how it affects you when you get into college, because, like I said, it was a culture shock	
		I did want to be farther away from home…I kind of wanted to be more independent. So, I thought that being away from home would make, I guess, adulting be a little more easier	2
		Location was pretty big. I wanted to be close to home, but not too close where I had to live at home	6
		solely because it was so close to home	11
		I decided to stay in Minnesota, because I know how bad I get homesick, and I just knew I could not do it.	11
		I didn't want to stay out of state, but I didn't want to go like too close or too far from home…I really just wanted to like branch out from my family	7
		I never thought that…because it was so far away from where I'm from.	1
		And even though, like, there was a part of me that like wanted to get out, another part of it is like, we're all just so intertwined here	1
		I decided it was best to get out, get away, be able to grow as my own person.	1
		Being able to get out. Go a little further	1
		It definitely helped a lot. Because my professor was local, and I met him before I enrolled	8
		Like already knowing what the string community looks like around here, like knowing how many potential students I	8

		might have, or what the expectations from the different teachers might be.	
		I know I didn't want to go somewhere giant because I come from somewhere so small. That even this was kind of a culture shock a little bit.	9
		I also knew I did want to be close to home, like, we have one state school within an hour of us.	9
		I'm three and a half hours now, which is a nice distance. I can make it home for a weekend. But it's not a day trip, which is nice too. So, location was a pretty big factor for me.	9
		I considered them, because like, close…Minnesota.	6
		I would say that I stuck closer to home	10
		Like I said, I didn't want to be too far or too close from home at first	7
		I knew [Southern State University] was out of the question, too close to home.	9
Proximity to home and location	Environment	I liked the outdoorsy environments. I was surrounded by that growing up, so I kind of wanted to stick with that	10
		It was more nature-y, more…that aspect was more kind of normal for me	2
		I love the outdoors, so [City] – outdoors	6
		I actually picked [State University] because when I toured it, it felt most like home	5
		A lot of people from my high school went there [Hometown State University]. I wasn't really friends with them. There's a big party scene. I'm not that much of a partier. So yeah, just like	3

		the quiet, the lakeview really pulled me in. I just needed that distance	
		I ultimately chose [City], because it was more closer to what it was like back home	2
		I didn't like go to other campuses so I don't know how their environment is. But like…I well, actually I do. I would say yes because the environment is nice. Like the rural, and then also, just like the work environment	2
		They're smaller schools, because I've only ever been to a smaller school	6
		And [City] is obviously a beautiful area. It's still pretty small. So, it still gets me that like home feeling	1
		So, when I did my tour, I did it with [Friend Name] and her mom, and I was like, I really like it, it's beautiful up here, I like the area…I think [State University] is what's calling me	2

Appendix C. Initial Codes and Themes

Financial support and understanding	Lack of support from home and school	Familial obligations and sense of dependence	Lack of access to quality information on college	Expectations of college	Proximity to home and location
Money	No help	Guilt	Choices	Expectations	Location
Paying for school	Limited	Intertwined	Help	Culture shock	Leaving
Cheaper	Resources	Family	Options	Blind/unknown	Different
Invest	Questions	Dependence	Preparation	Weird	Close
Financial aid		Belonging	Structure	Overwhelmed	Homesick
				Intimidating	Distance
					Independence