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Peer-to-Peer Interactions Between First-Generation Students at the University of San Diego

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the interactions between peers who identify as first-generation college students at the University of San Diego. Thus far, research regarding first-generation college students has shown that those students who have increased interactions with other first-generation students experience increased success during their time in college. This study sought to examine which specific characteristics of these interactions facilitated or enhanced the success of those students. This study also sought to examine how higher education professionals can better serve first-generation college students through the programs and services which they provide. The results of this study suggest that support, encouragement, and the opportunity to share knowledge are key characteristics which drive first-generation student success at the University of San Diego. Recommendations include facilitated opportunities for students to share knowledge, formal and structured mentoring program, and foundation education about the first-generation student identity.

Introduction

My leading values are honesty, openness, and helpfulness. I call these values my leading values because they generally guide me in determining how I interact with the world and other people more so than the other values that I hold. Following these values as a Student Affairs professional and as a researcher are key to finding new and impactful practices in addition to working with students in ways that are engaging and developmental. Helpfulness can be generally defined as having a desire to help other people and in this context can be more specifically defined as having the desire to help first-generation college students. I have found that if I pursue helpfulness both in and outside of this context with honesty and openness, I have better outcomes than if those values were not involved or utilized. Because of this, I try to bring these to every interaction that I have with a student and try to be an example for them to follow and bring those values into their own lives.

During my own experiences as a student and a professional working in student affairs, I have been impacted in one way or another by people exhibiting my own guiding values in some shape or form. This has most often come up when it came to me being in a community and trying to build a community. Because my own experiences, I know the impact that relationships and community can have on college students' experiences and their ability to succeed.

A first-generation student is defined as a student whose parent(s) or custodial guardian(s) have not earned any postsecondary degree. Interpersonal relationships are defined as a close or strong acquaintance or association between two individuals. For this study, peer-to-peer interactions were defined as interactions which happen between students of similar age, background, and/or identity. Student success is a concept which has many definitions depending on who is giving the definition. For the purposes of this study, student success was defined as

college students achieving or surpassing their self-determined goals during their time in college.

Background

As first-generation students continue to account for one-third of enrolled college students, their success is a growing area of research around the country. First-generation college students often face obstacles that continuing-generation students do not face when it comes to applying to, getting into, and persisting through college. These obstacles often include a lack of parental college experience, lower socioeconomic statuses, and lower academic preparedness than that of continuing-generation students (Cataldi, Bennett, and Chen, 2018).

Parental college experience, or lack thereof, can be a prevalent source of friction for first-generation college students' persistence through college which might manifest in various forms. When first-generation students begin thinking about and applying to colleges, not having someone who is familiar with the process can be a hindrance to the student gathering necessary materials, submitting applications, and navigating the admissions, enrollment, and financial aid processes. This can also manifest itself after first-generation students arrive on college campuses. First-generation students often must navigate the college student experience without the aid of a parent/guardian who is familiar with the academic and non-academic stressors of persisting to credential attainment (Alvarado, Spatariu, & Woodbury, 2017; Tello & Lonn, 2017).

In addition to more often living off-campus, first-generation college students are more likely to have a second job. When compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students are more likely to work more hours and to work off-campus rather than in a student-worker position on-campus (Ishitani, 2016; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014). Not only does this add to the stress of succeeding academically, but it also limits first-generation students' time spent on-campus, which may lead to lower involvement in campus activities and

engagement with fellow students, faculty, and staff. Pre-college financial constraints can often play a significant part in a first-generation college student's decision to attend a particular institution. This may mean turning down a more selective school for one that is less expensive or electing to go to a school that is located in the place which the student is also located so that the student may live with their parent(s) or guardian(s).

In general, first-generation college students are entering college with a higher likelihood of being underprepared for the academic rigor of college in the United States and are persisting to the attainment of a credential (certificate, degree, etc.) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Reid & Moore, 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). The existing research around this persistence rate shows that a significant factor for first-generation students persisting through college to credential attainment is the presence and formation of interpersonal relationships. While there is contradicting evidence available, peer-to-peer interactions and relationships are shown to have a beneficial effect on the academic success of first-generation college students more often than they are shown to not have a beneficial effect. It should be noted that relationships with faculty, staff, and mentors are also shown to be beneficial for these students (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; Dennis, Phinney, & Chauteco, 2005; Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2017; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). This is a trend which many first-generation students begin prior to arriving on campus. According to Gist-Mackey, Wiley, and Erba (2017), the absence of a parent or guardian who has attained some sort of college credential leads first-generation students to engage with universities, university personnel, and peers through both traditional in-person formats as well as digital formats such as social media and websites before beginning their college journey.

Across the research, the theme of academic achievement shows up very frequently, as

most studies choose to focus on that particular aspect of first-generation student success. For example, first-generation students are shown to have lower grade point averages (GPA) than their continuing-generation counterparts through their first three years of college despite taking a lighter course load (Ishitani, 2016). However, the themes of relationships and interpersonal interactions also show up very frequently. This is an aspect of the college student experience that is not often explored or measured, despite the fact that it is consistently showing up in research as having an impact on first-generation students' experience leading up to and throughout their time in college. On a broader level, Martin (2014) illustrates the impacts of relationships and interpersonal interactions by stating:

> "Positive interpersonal relationships have been proposed as a buffer against stress and risk, instrumental help for tasks, emotional support in daily life, companionship in shared activities, and a basis for social and emotional development. Relatedness also positively impacts students' motivation, engagement, and achievement by way of its positive influences on other self-processes relevant to academic outcomes." (p.10)

As this concept relates specifically to first-generation students, Dennis, Phinney, and Chauteco (2005) showed that a lack of support by first-generation college students' peers is a negative predictor of college success and persistence. Stebleton and Soria (2012) were also in agreement that these students benefited from increased interactions with their peers. In 2004, Pascarella et al. showed that while first-generation students benefit the most from peer interaction and extracurricular involvement, they are significantly less likely to engage in those aspects of college life.

There are several proposed mechanisms for how interpersonal relationships positively

influence students' outcomes. Martin (2014) summarizes the mechanisms to include teaching students about themselves and how to fit in with their environment, developing beliefs and values consistent with their environment, satisfying students' need to belong, as well as activating positive mood, motivation, and engagement. What is unclear, however, is what enables these interpersonal relationships to activate those psychological processes. What are the characteristics of these interpersonal relationships that drive and facilitate these psychological processes and in-turn increase the success of first-generation college students? The literature has extensively probed the theme of academic success which college students must attend to, but not this relational theme. Examining this through my research has provided insight into this seemingly missing aspect of the literature.

Theoretical Perspectives Informing Topic

Chickering's Theory of Student Development

Along with the existing literature about first-generation college students, student development theory provides underpinnings of this study. The first theory used throughout this study is Chickering's Theory of Student Development. In this theory, Chickering describes seven vectors along which college students develop at varying rates. The seven vectors are:

1. Developing Confidence
2. Managing Emotions
3. Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence
4. Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships
5. Establishing Identity
6. Developing Purpose
7. Developing Integrity

These vectors are not necessarily dependent upon one another, meaning they are not sequential, but can interact and intersect with each other, adding complexity to the individual's development process. As a person develops within these vectors, they begin to overlap with and add complexity to the person's development in other vectors. As a result of the process of moving through these complexities and the issues associated with them, a person can expect to experience a greater sense of stability and integration which theoretically would enhance that person's ability to make meaning of both past and future experiences (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

The intersection of vectors particularly relevant to this study is that of developing competence, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, and developing mature interpersonal relationships. By definition, first-generation students are the first people in their immediate family to have the experience of developing competence in a collegiate setting, underscoring the this vector's position as the crux of this intersection. As summarized above, the establishment of interpersonal relationships and the progression toward the interdepence of first-generation students upon those relationships brings complexity and structure to the students' growth along the vector of competency development.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

The second developmental theory supporting this study is Astin's Theory of Student Involvement. In this theory, Astin (1984) stresses the importance of the relationship between a student's involvement within their university and that student's development, framing involvement as a behavioral manifestation of internal thoughts and feelings and defining it as "the amount of physical and psycho-logical [sic] energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). Astin also describes three primary forms of traditional pedagogy through

which learning is presumed to occur:

1. Subject-Matter Theory, stating that learning and growth are most dependent upon exposure to specific sets of subject matter

2. Resource Theory, stating that learning and growth are most dependent upon the presence of centralized, accessible physical, human, and fiscal resources

3. The Individualized Theory, stating that learning and growth are most dependent upon the identification of the content and instructional methods which most align with an individual student's needs

The Theory of Student Involvement functions as a counterpart to these traditional pedagogies in the sense that it offers accommodation for all three while also recentering their focus on the process of development rather than the outcome of that process.

Astin (1984) acknowledges the role of peer groups in influencing a student's "commitment of time and energy to academic work" (p. 306) at a pre-collegiate level. As summarized above, the research that has been conducted since the publishing of Astin's theory shows that this influence also exists at a collegiate level for first-generation college students. This means that Astin's Theory of Student Involvement offered insight into the process of how those peer groups might impact first-generation college students' achievement during their time in college.

Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions

Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions (see Figure 1) functions as a framework for understanding transitions as they are experienced by adults and as a framework to aid in connecting the people experiencing transitions to the help that they need in order to cope with the transition. The theory outlines a person's encounter with a transition, the process of moving

through that transition, and the factors which affect a person's ability to move through that transition. To begin, Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) describe that a transition begins with "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). They also describe a transition as holding meaning for an individual based on three factors: the type of event (anticipated, unanticipated, nonevent), the context within which the transition is happening, and how the transition impacts the person's daily life. The second section of the theory describes the process of transition as a series of three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. Finally, Goodman et al. (2006) describe four sets of factors which affect a person's ability to cope with transitions:

1. Situation, consisting of factors related to specific characteristics of the transition

2. Self, consisting of factors related to specific characteristics of the person experiencing transition

3. Support, consisting of factors related to the support available to the person experiencing transition

4. Strategies, consisting of factors related to the coping responses of the person experiencing transition

Transition is one of the hallmark characteristics of the college student life-cycle. For first-generation students, these transitions will not only be unfamiliar to them, but also to the people in their support structure(s). Similarly, the context in which these transitions occur will also be unfamiliar for the people in those support structures of first-generation college students. Schlossberg's Theory of Transition presents a potential framework for understanding the experience of first-generation students going through transition in comparison to continuing-generation students going through similar transitions.
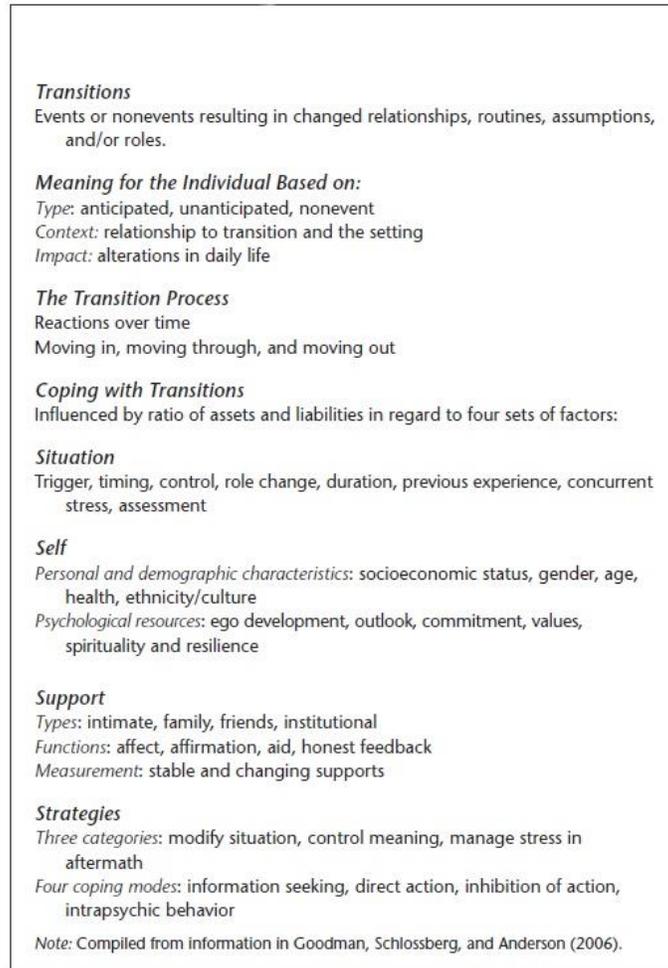
Figure 1. Schlossberg's Transition Model. (Evans et al., 2010)

Abes, Jones, & McEwan's Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity

Abes, Jones, and McEwan (2007) present a revised Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity which illustrates the the relationships between a college student's various identities, contextual influences, and how the student makes meaning of their experiences. The original model was designed by Jones and McEwan (2000) as "a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development" (p. 408). In this revised model (see Figure 2), contextual influences pass

through a meaning-making filter which determines the degree to which the context interacts with the individual's self-perceptions of their multiple identities. In both models, the self-perception is represented by a core identity comprised of valued, non-observable characteristics which make up an individual's sense of self. Surrounding this core are intersecting rings of identity, illustrating that identities cannot be understood on its own, but in conjunction with other identities. Additionally, these rings represent that each identity will have varying degrees of salience for an individual person.
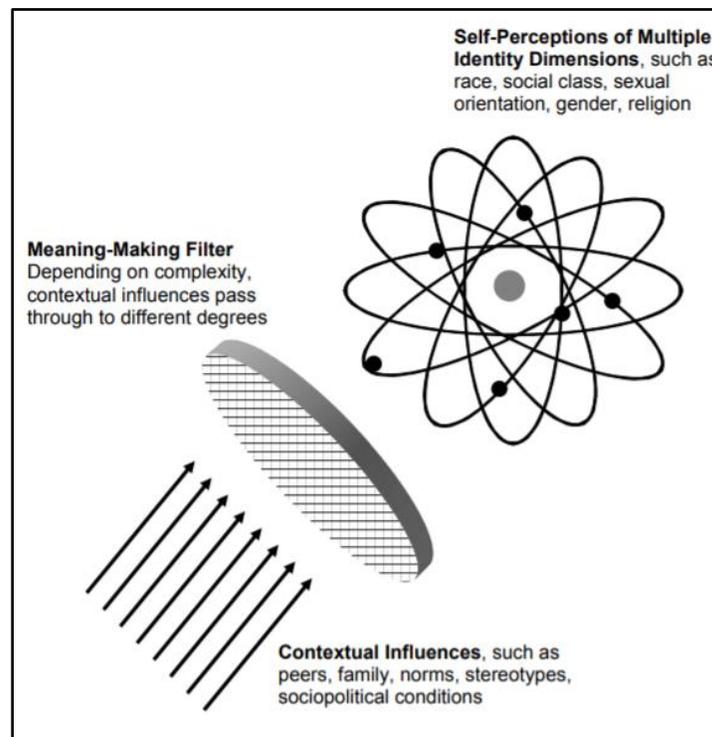
Figure 2. Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. (Abes et al., 2007)

When considering the first-generation student experience, it is important to remember that we are not discussing a homogenous group of students. Although we can recognize that first-generation students tend to exhibit a certain group of characteristics, it is important to understand how an individual first-generation student's various other identities and contextual influences might be affecting their experience as a college student. Abes, Jones, & McEwan's Model of

Multiple Dimensions of Identity provides a conceptual framework for examining the experiences of first-generation students as a group while also validating the individuality of each student.

Context

This study took place at the University of San Diego (USD) where I work as the Graduate Assistant for Community and Leadership Development. A significant portion of my responsibilities focused on first-generation student success at USD, vaguely stated as providing outreach to first-generation students at USD who are identified as needing additional support. Despite its vagueness, this responsibility was important because it was the first time that first-generation student outreach and support had been included in any non-grant-based job descriptions at the university. Along with three other student affairs professionals who also had the first-generation student responsibility added to their job descriptions, I began working with students to figure out what it is that they need in terms of support and outreach.

This new addition to job descriptions was the foundation of this study. While research at other institutions is valuable and can provide some potential directions and paths forward in our endeavor, we cannot make the mistake of assuming that everything that is true at other universities will also be true here. If our students are to get the best support that we are able to provide, it is imperative that we first take the time to gather data about our first-generation students and how they interact with each other as well as how they interact with the broader USD community. Without this knowledge, our efforts toward being helpful carry a significantly greater risk of falling flat. In essence, this study aimed to help us as a team formulate best practices for furthering and refining our work with first-generation students.

Over the course of the study, this research also took on another context. Between the beginning and the end of the study, USD earned recognition as a First Forward Institution. This

designation comes from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators'

(NASPA) Center for First-Generation Student Success and serves as "a recognition program for

higher education institutions committed to first-generation student success" (First Forward). As a

result of this and several USD staff members presenting at various professional conferences

about the work that USD has been doing to support first-generation students, there is a certain

necessity to continue to improve our work and the support which we offer to first-generation

students.

Research Question

I had two primary research questions to begin this study. Given the gap in the existing

literature and the experience of first-generation college students as a whole, my first research

question was "what specific aspects and characteristics of interpersonal interactions between

first-generation students facilitate increased success rates of first-generation students at USD?"

Given my own role as a staff member at USD and the new addition to my position description,

the second research questions for this study was "how can higher education professionals, and

myself specifically, foster beneficial interpersonal interactions between first-generation students

which incorporate those characteristics that facilitate increased success rates of first-generation

students?"

In seeking to answer these questions, I hoped to add to the existing body of research on

first-generation college students and their success in college. Specifically, I wanted to establish a

potential basic foundation for higher education professionals designing programs and services to

support first-generation college students both at USD and at other universities. As the study

progressed, these research questions became even more relevant within the contexts discussed

above. As my role working with first-generation students developed and USD became more

known for its work with first-generation students, I became more hopeful that the answers to these research questions would both strengthen the work of supporting first-generation students and provide practical suggestions for future practice and inquiry.

Methodology

My methodological approach for this research was heavily based on O'Leary's Cycles of Action Research (See Figure 3). O'Leary describes a cyclical structure that includes four main components. The first component is observation and is generally what one would think of as data collection. The second component is reflection. For my research, this was two-fold, involving both my reflections on the data I collected as well as my own place in the data and my own impact on the students that were participating in my research. The third component is to plan an intervention based upon a combination of the observations and reflections. The fourth component is to make the planned intervention which will then provide another opportunity for observation, thus beginning a new cycle (O'Leary, 2004).
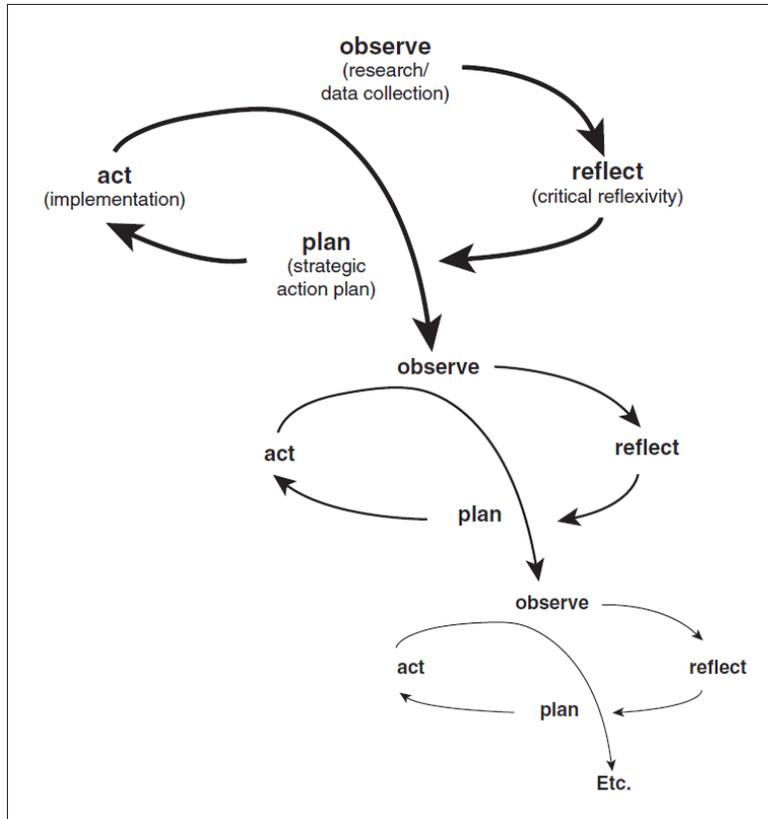
Figure 3. O'Leary's Cycles of Action Research. (O'Leary, 2004)

The reason I chose this approach is because many of the other approaches either begin with, or critically involve, a "diagnosing" aspect. I determined that diagnosing a problem was not appropriate for my research because I was approaching the study from an inquiry-based standpoint rather than an issue-based standpoint. By this, I mean that I was inquiring about a certain aspect of peer-to-peer relationships and interactions that is neither problematic nor advantageous. Because of this inquiry-based approach, I decided to augment O'Leary's Cycles of Research in a way that allowed me to use my cycles to continue gathering data in each cycle rather than creating and implementing an intervention. Rather than planning an intervention, I utilized the data gained in one cycle to inform how I would facilitate the next cycle.

Personally, I was attracted to this model of action research because it allowed me to remain true to the inquiry-based approach while still utilizing data gathered from participants.

Since I value stakeholders having a voice in matters that affect them, I wanted the first-generation students that my research would impact to have a more active role in what data was sought from cycle to cycle. I also valued the flexibility that this model affords in terms of what it can be applied to. As a Student Affairs professional, I will consistently be working with a population of students that is different in some capacity than the group of students that I will have worked with before or that I will work with after. This may take the form of the same population of students at the university, but with different students as final-year students graduate while first-year and transfer students enter. It could also take the form of myself moving to a new place and working with a completely different population. Regardless, this model of observation, reflection, planning, and inquiry (or action if a needs-based approach is taken) can be utilized as a way to create new ideas and services or to refine existing ones. I was also drawn to this model because of how it allows for collaboration between myself and others. Since my work with first-generation students involves large degrees of collaboration between myself and my colleagues, I needed a model that other practitioners could join me in regardless of how acquainted they were with doing action research.

Participants

There were a total of five participants for this study. The participants were all first-generation (as defined above) undergraduate students at USD who ranged in academic standing from second-year students to fourth-year students. Because this study was designed to examine interpersonal interactions and relationships, I decided to take a personal approach by individually inviting students to participate rather than sending impersonal mass-invitations. My hope in using this approach was to leverage the relationships that I as a staff member had already built with first-generation undergraduate students at USD to gather participants. I also continued to

seek out new participants throughout the duration of the study, allowing participants to join at

any point in any cycle. Because of this, the total number of participants increased from two

participants in the first cycle to five participants at the conclusion of the third cycle.

As each participant joined this study, they were provided with an informed consent form

outlining the purpose of this study, their role within the study, and resources available to them

(see Appendix A). I provided each participant with a brief overview of the study, an explanation

of the cycle in which they were joining, and an explanation of each cycle after the cycle in which

they joined. For the purposes of writing this paper, each participant was assigned a pseudonym

by myself to protect their anonymity, and will be referred to as their pseudonym throughout this

paper.

<div align="center">**Cycles**</div>

This study consisted of three cycles, based on O'Leary's model of action research as

described above. The first cycle was a digital survey which was completed by two participants.

The second cycle was a series of focus groups. In total, there were two focus groups, each

consisting of two participants. The third and final cycle was a single mind-mapping activity,

which was also completed by two participants.

Cycle 1

Process.

The first cycle in my research was a four-question survey which sought to gather

preliminary information about the first-generation students at USD (see Appendix B). This

survey was intentionally created to be quickly completed by participants with the hopes that a

quick survey would not inhibit students who otherwise might be deterred by longer, more time-

intensive surveys. The survey aimed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from the participants, so a balance of Likert Scale and free-response was offered to participants. The four questions posed to participants via this survey were:

1. How much do you think being a first-generation student affects your college experience?

2. What is one of the major challenges in your college experience that you think might be a result of you being a first-generation student?

3. How much do you think having friendships and relationships with other first-generation college students affects your college experience?

4. What three adjectives would you use to describe your relationships and friendships with other first-generation students?

Findings.

A total of two participants completed the survey, and the responses to each of the questions was mixed between the two respondents. The average qualitative responses indicated that being a first-generation student moderately impacted the participants' college experience and that having friendships and relationships with other first-generation college students only mildly affected the respondents' college experience (3.5 and 2 out of 5 respectively). Qualitatively, both participants expressed that there are specific challenges associated with being a first-generation college student. One student described their challenge as "people in my family do not comprehend what a big compromise it is going to college. They think of it as a high school you need to pay for." The other student stated that "nobody reliable is experienced enough in anything to really provide direction with much of anything regarding school." Additionally, while one student described their relationships and friendships with other first-

generation students as "reliable," "relatable," and "caring," the other student bluntly stated "I don't know if I have first generation friends, I don't find it important."

Altogether, the results of the survey show two very different experiences as first-generation students. Although both participants agreed that being a first-generation student has at least moderately affected their college experience, the participants differed in how they viewed those effects playing out. While one student seemed to experience those effects as a disconnect between themselves and their familial support structure, the other student seemed to experience those effects as a disconnect between themselves and the resources they need to navigate being a college student. Similarly, while one participant expressed having positive, impactful relationships with other first-generation students, the other participant expressed not even knowing if any of their friends were first-generation students because they did not find that identity to be important in their friendships.

Reflection.

Upon reflection, I was very disheartened by this cycle. I took the approach of personally asking students to participate in my research and received a lot of interest. However, when I would reach back out to those students and send them an informed consent form, they would not respond to my email. After months of trying to recruit students with minimal success, I could not really wrap my head around why filling out a form of all things was the thing that was holding me back from continuing this research. Ultimately, I began to wonder if there simply wasn't enough structure around the form and my expectations around them completing it. I made a note to provide more structure in the future cycles as a way to remedy this oversight.

I was also disappointed in the results from the participants who did respond to this survey. While I was thankful to have the two survey responses at all, especially given that most

of the students who I asked to participate by the end of the cycle did not make it past the consent

form, I found myself frustrated at the fact that those two responses were very different from each

other. However, having now finished the study, I can see how my findings and recommendations

benefited from having even these very small pieces of data. I think that without them, I would

have missed out on a key foundational piece of my recommendations because I would not have

seen a pattern emerge in later cycles.

Cycle 2

  Process.

  Following the first cycle, I wanted to get more insight into the first-generation student

experience at USD through simply allowing participants to share parts of their story. In the

second cycle, I facilitated two semi-structured focus groups which were each about an hour in

length. I describe these focus groups as semi-structured because I wanted to provide structure via

questions asked by myself while at the same time allowing the participants to respond to each

other and build upon each other's responses. I prepared a total of four questions which were not

asked in sequential order. This was because I wanted the focus group to be more conversational,

so I asked follow-up questions and clarifying questions as well as questions that I had not

thought of until the focus group. The four prepared questions were:

1. Do you find support in having friendships and relationships with other first-generation
   students? If so, in what ways?

2. Do you feel as though you are missing anything because you are a first-generation
   college student? If so, what?

3. Would you be interested in having a mentor who was a first-generation college student
   and is now a graduate student, faculty member, or staff member at the University of San

Diego?

4. Would you be interested in being a mentor for potential first-generation college students who are juniors or seniors in high school?

Findings.

This cycle was particularly revealing for the purposes of making recommendations. A total of four students participated in the focus groups. In these focus groups, three of the four participants expressed experiencing supportive friendships and relationship with other first-generation students. Contrasting these responses with those of Sun Li who did not express this experience aligned with the survey responses during the first cycle. Specifically, Sun Li stated "Well, I don't know any other first-generation students on this campus. Maybe my cousins are considered first-generation. Sometimes we talk to each but its not like every day, it's not that often." When I compared what I was hearing from the group of three students and what I was hearing from Sun Li, I realized that the group of three students were able to articulate what the first-generation identity actually meant in practical terms and the obstacles that it presented for them as students to an extent that Sun Li was not. This suggested that Sun Li may have not had an opportunity to explore this identity as adequately as the other students and therefore may not view it as important as the other participants do.

Another theme that emerged during this cycle is the role of familial support on the students' experience. Similar to one of the survey responses, all of the participants identified their family as a significant factor in their experience as a first-generation student at USD. One student discussed their relationship with their mother, describing how their mother tried to be as helpful and understanding as possible but that there were some aspects of the student experience that were difficult for the mother to provide support on because she had not experienced them

herself. Another student, Liza, discussed how it can sometimes be difficult to explain to their

parents what college is like and why she is pursuing an education. Specifically, she stated

"getting into USD and looking at my financial aid package, I needed help navigating the

financial aid system and navigating how to do an appeal." Rosa added to this, saying

> "the emotional support wasn't there very much my first year and I think it wasn't
>
> until last year that my mom got the hang of it. It's not enough to say 'you can do
>
> this. You got this, mija'...for that just wasn't enough."

This suggests that there is a specific gap between the support that college students need and the

support which can be offered by first-generation students' families. According to Schlossberg's

Transition Theory, having this gap in support would negatively impact the students' experience

(Goodman, et al., 2006). However, when this gap is supplanted by relationships with peers, it

seems to bolster the students' support structures, allowing for a smoother experience. As one

student stated, "it can be comforting and encouraging to see and be with others going through

similar experiences."

This cycle also showed unanimous enthusiasm for a mentoring program for first-

generation students. Interestingly, the participants were also unanimous in their desire to both be

mentored and to mentor. This desire to share their experiences and to give back to their fellow

first-generation students seemed to be a key factor in the participants' desire to engage with a

mentoring program, suggesting that the opportunity and ability to exchange knowledge might be

specific characteristics of the peer-to-peer relationships which enhance first-generation student

success. When describing their previous experiences with mentors, Rosa mentioned that she

found it difficult to voice her dissatisfaction with the mentor relationship. Rosa explained that

she did not have the confidence to seek out someone to talk through her frustrations. This could

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be helpful to keep in mind when designing any kind of mentoring program.

Reflections.

In comparison to the first cycle, the second cycle was much more encouraging for me. Looking back, I think that I allowed myself to fall into the trap of trying to make something work when it simply isn't getting any traction. I found that students were much more willing to give me an hour of their time in person than they were to give me five minutes of their time through a digital survey, reinforcing the relational component of my study. I think that I could have further enriched the second and third cycles if I had not put so much effort into getting more responses in the first cycle. In addition to simply making progress in my research, I was excited at the end of this cycle because it did actually provide some potential answers to my research questions.

This cycle also forced me to challenge my assumptions around the students who were participating in my study. When I was again presented with a student who did not view their first-generation student identity as particularly relevant, I first found myself asking how they could not find it impactful. However, when I took a step back, I realized that I should have been asking myself what assumptions I was making about the person saying it. I assumed that Sun Li understood their first-generation identity, and therefore expected her to be able to speak about it in the focus group. This experience was a helpful reminder that even though I may have gotten used to working with students with deep understandings of their identities, I shouldn't let myself assume that every student will fully understand their identities.

Cycle 3

Process.

Following the second cycle, I continued to add structure to my time with the study's participants. The final cycle consisted of a guided group activity called mind mapping. In this

activity, I began by writing a single word or phrase on a whiteboard. The participants were then

instructed to write words, phrases, and thoughts which they associated with the original word.

Participants were also allowed to build upon the things that they wrote as well as the things

which were written by other participants. The results of each session were then discussed as a

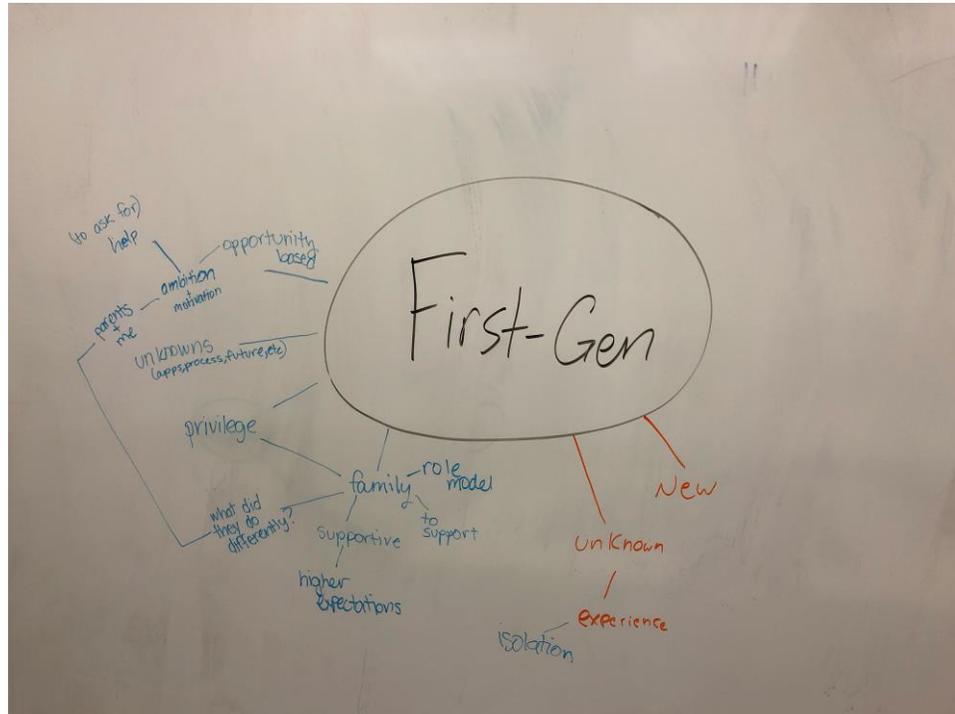group. The three words and their results are pictured below:
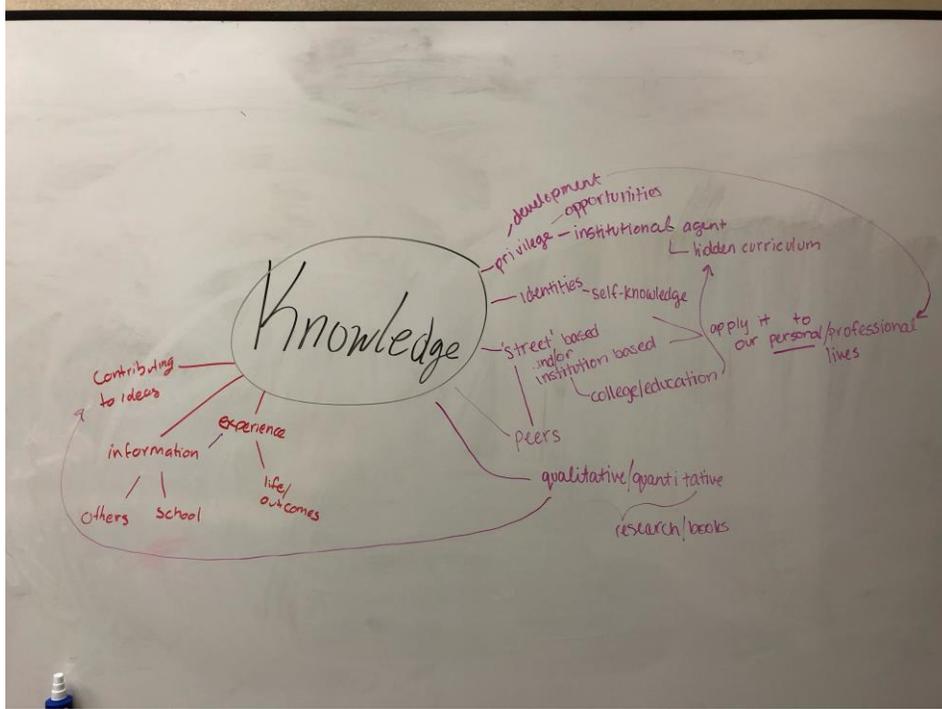

Figure 4. Mind-Mapping Activity, Session 1.

Figure 5. Mind-Mapping Activity, Session 2.

Figure 6. Mind-Mapping Activity, Session 3.

Findings.

This cycle was very helpful in refining the recommendations which were already emerging from the data gained in the first two cycles. The dichotomy between the responses of Sun Li and those of her counterpart Rosa continued to show the need for some foundational education around the first-generation identity. Not only is this dichotomy visually apparent due to the volume of words written by Rosa compared to the few words written by Sun Li during the first session of this cycle, but it was also apparent in the content of what each student wrote. "New" and "Unknown" were two of the three words written by Sun Li. Rosa, however, was able to demonstrate a knowledge of the context in which this identity shows up through writing words such as "family," "privilege," and "isolation." As this contrast materialized across all three cycles, it became more and more apparent that some sort of developmental work was needed before every first-generation student would be ready to engage with that identity. The other theme that emerged in the second cycle was the idea of support and what forms that support takes for first-generation students. This theme continued to develop throughout the third cycle through words such as "family," "peers," and variations of "support."

Reflections.

More than anything, this cycle provided a sense of satisfaction and finality for me. I think that I enjoyed doing this type of work with students partly because it is not something that I get to do with students very often and partly because I knew that this meant something for me in terms of finishing my degree. When I began the process of conducting action research, I was not sure exactly what the process would look like. During the first cycle, I became very frustrated due to how difficult it was to get participants and was feeling very anxious about whether or not that would continue throughout the rest of the research. Finally being finished with the research came with a bit of relief for me, because I was carrying that initial experience with me through

the second and third cycles.

Summary of Findings

The results of this research suggested that the specific characteristics of peer-to-peer interactions between first-generation students which facilitate student success are multi-faceted. The participants in this study with deeper understandings of their first-generation identity expressed a great desire to share knowledge with their peers and to receive knowledge from their peers. Those participants also expressed a great appreciation for the supportive and encouraging components of their relationships with other first-generation students.

The results of this research also suggest that higher education professionals can foster beneficial interpersonal interactions between first-generation students by supporting the students' growth and understanding of their first-generation identity. We as professionals can also impact first-generation students' success by facilitating their process of forming relationships with other first-generation students.

<div align="center">

Recommendations

</div>

Education about First-Generation Identity

One of the key indications from this research is that students with a better understanding of their identity as a first-generation student are able to better articulate how this identity has impacted their college experience. Those students with better understanding are also able to articulate how that identity has provided them with specific strengths and skills. Based on this, I recommend that practitioners at USD provide a foundational education about the first-generation identity for students who identify as such. To find the best format for these educational experiences, practitioners should seek ideas from best practices in academic literature as well as from the students themselves.

As is evidenced in this research, having a more developed and nuanced understanding of the first-generation identity will allow those students to better identify its impacts as well as how it intersects and interacts with their various other identities. This is supported by Abe, Jones, & McEwan's Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identities which suggests that identities do not function in silos, but rather they intersect with varying degrees of saliency to form a whole (Abes et al., 2007). This work also finds particular relevance in Astin's Theory of Involvement. As stated above, this theory recenters the focus of working with students on the process of development rather than the outcome of that process. For practitioners at USD, this can be a particularly helpful framework with which to approach this foundational education.

Structured Mentoring Program

Given that all of the participants in this study expressed enthusiasm for participating in a mentoring program for first-generation students, I recommend that practitioners at USD create a structured mentor program which allows participants to connect with other first-generation students as well as first-generation graduates. Specifically, I recommend providing specific structural guidance in regards to what the mentoring relationship should involve and what it should not involve so that both mentors and mentees have clear understandings and expectations from the program prior to beginning. Since it was specifically brought up during the second cycle of this research, I also recommend that this mentoring program incorporate regularly occurring opportunities for mentors and mentees to provide feedback regarding the mentoring relationship. Not only would this remedy the need for mentees to seek out opportunities for feedback, but it would also provide an opportunity for adjustments to be made within the mentor-mentee relationship to maximize growth and development.

This recommendation is grounded in the theme of support as well as the idea of holistic

growth and is therefore incorporative of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Chickering's Theory of Student Development, Astin's Theory of Involvement, and Abes, Jones, and McEwan's Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. According to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, an individual's support systems significantly impact that individual's ability to cope with a transition. By adding a mentor to that support system, first-generation students are gaining someone who has relevant experience and knowledge about universities and being a college student. Intentional work should also be done with the mentor to ensure that the work that happens within this program is student-centered and process-focused rather than outcomes-focused as described in Astin's Theory of Involvement (Astin, 1984). By taking part in this program, participants should have the opportunity to experience growth along several vectors as described in Chickering's Theory of Student Development while also strengthening their understanding of their identities and how they interact as described in Abes, Jones, and McEwan's Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Abes et al., 2007).

Knowledge-Sharing Opportunities

Through this research, it emerged that first-generation students at USD seem to readily engage with opportunities to share knowledge with other first-generation students. I recommend that practitioners at USD capitalize on this readiness by intentionally creating accessible and engaging opportunities for first-generation students to exchange knowledge and to share their experiences with each other. Particular attention should be given toward creating a supportive and caring atmosphere during these knowledge-sharing and experience-sharing opportunities.

Creating these intentional knowledge-sharing opportunities combines Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Chickering's Theory of Student Development to support first-generation students in several regards. Schlossberg's Transition Theory identifies networks of friends as one

of the key types of support for an adult experiencing transition and recognizes that "affect, affirmation, aid, and honest feedback serve as functions of support" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 217) within those networks. As students continue to engage with each other through these knowledge-sharing opportunities, they will strengthen their rapport and relationships with each other, which will then strengthen their support structures as described by Schlossberg (Goodman et al., 2006). Chickering's Theory of Student Development describes the first vector, developing competence, as a three-branched structure consisting of intellectual competence, interpersonal competence, and physical competence (Nadelson, Semmelroth, Martinez, Featherstone, Fuhriman, & Sell, 2013). This recommendation primarily aims to improve intellectual competence and interpersonal competence by providing students with opportunities to acquire knowledge about various topics as well as experience working effectively with other students. Within the context of these knowledge-sharing recommendations, it would be reasonable to assume that the students in attendance will have progressed in this vector at various rates for various lengths of times. With that in mind, practitioners should ensure that there is an opportunity for those who have progressed further in these vectors to continue their progress and gain new knowledge, ideas, or skills while also supporting the students who have not progressed as far.

Conclusion

First-Generation students make up a significant portion of the total number of college students across the country. Given this prevalence, higher education practitioners should be intentional about the types of support that they offer for first-generation students. At the University of San Diego, action research has revealed that we can best support these students by listening to what first-generation students have to say about their experience and then creating programs and services based on that feedback. The recommendations provided from this

research are grounded in the student voice, but are structured with and supported by student

development theory.

APPENDIX A:
Participant Consent Form

Research Participant Consent Form
For the research study entitled: Peer-to-Peer Interactions Between First-Generation Students at the University of San Diego.

I. Purpose of the research study

Chris-Marcus Kitchings is a student in the School of Leadership & Educational Studies at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he is conducting. The purpose of this study is to strengthen my own work related to supporting first-generation student success, community, and leadership at the University of San Diego.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to be involved over a six-month period as follows:

1. Complete a survey
2. Participate in an initial focus group consisting of a discussion
3. Participate in a second focus group which will consist of a word-association activity called "mind-mapping"

Your participation in this study will take a maximum total of 10 hours and 0 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they may feel anxiety, sadness, or other negative emotions. If you would like to talk to someone about these feelings or emotions at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:
San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339
University of San Diego Center for Health and Wellness: 619-260-4618

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the challenges facing first-generation students at University of San Diego, and how staff and faculty may better support first-generation students at University of San Diego.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (false name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and

information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually. As a participant you will be working with researcher, Chris-Marcus Kitchings.

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

Chris-Marcus Kitchings
Email: ckitchings@sandiego.edu
Phone: 803-640-0875

Or

Cheryl Getz
Email: cgetz@sandiego.edu
Phone: 619-260-4289

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX B:
Survey Questions

For the purposes of this study, a first-generation college student is defined as a college student

whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) does not have an Associate or Bachelor degree.

- According to the definition provided in the description, do you identify as a first-generation student?

    ○ Yes
    ○ No
    ○ Unsure

- How much do you think being a first-generation student affects your college experience?

    1   2   3   4   5

- What is one of the major challenges in your college experience that you think is a result of being a first-generation student?

- How much do you think having friendships and relationships with other first-generation college students affects your college experience?

    1   2   3   4   5

- What three words would you use to describe your relationships and friendships with other first-generation students?

APPENDIX C:
Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Questions

1. Do you find support in having friendships and relationships with other first-generation students? If so, in what ways?

2. Do you feel as though you are missing anything because you are a first-generation college student? If so, what?

3. Would you be interested in having a mentor who was a first-generation college student and is now a graduate student, faculty member, or staff member at the University of San Diego?

4. Would you be interested in being a mentor for potential first-generation college students who are juniors or seniors in high school?

Process

Researcher will instruct the participants to not attribute specific quotes or summarized statements to other participants while using the attributed person or persons' name(s) if they choose to discuss the activity with non-participants. Rather, the researcher will instruct the participants to use vague terms such as "one person" or "some people" instead of using individuals' proper names.

Researcher will explain to participants that the researcher will anonymize any quotes used in the reporting of the research.

Researcher will ask the group questions and allow participants to answer as much as they are comfortable answering. Researcher will ask any clarifying follow-up questions.

Researcher will thank the participants for their time and dismiss participants.

APPENDIX D:
Mind Mapping Protocol

Focus Group #2 Activity and Discussion

Researcher will write the beginning word(s) on a white-board.

Participants will write words or phrases that they associate with the beginning word. Participants will also write words or phrases that they associate with things that other participants have written

Once participants have finished writing, researcher will draw some observations and ask participants to make some of their own observations.

Researcher will erase the whiteboard and then write a new beginning word(s) and repeat the process.

Process

Researcher will thank participants for coming to the activity.

Researcher will instruct the participants to not attribute specific quotes or summarized statements to other participants while using the attributed person or persons' name(s) if they choose to discuss the activity with non-participants. Rather, the researcher will instruct the participants to use vague terms such as "one person" or "some people" instead of using individuals' proper names.

Researcher will explain to participants that the researcher will anonymize any quotes used in the reporting of the research.

Researcher will then explain the activity and guide the participants through the activity. Once the activity has finished, researcher will again thank participants for joining the activity and dismiss them.

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