

University of San Diego

## Digital USD

---

M.A. in Higher Education Leadership: Action  
Research Projects

School of Leadership and Education Sciences:  
Student Scholarship & Creative Works

---

Summer 8-10-2021

## First-Generation Commuter Student Experiences

Heena Lodhia

University of San Diego, hlo.mail25@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/soles-mahel-action>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Education Commons](#)

---

### Digital USD Citation

Lodhia, Heena, "First-Generation Commuter Student Experiences" (2021). *M.A. in Higher Education Leadership: Action Research Projects*. 86.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/soles-mahel-action/86>

This Action research project: Open access is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Leadership and Education Sciences: Student Scholarship & Creative Works at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in M.A. in Higher Education Leadership: Action Research Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact [digital@sandiego.edu](mailto:digital@sandiego.edu).

**The First-Generation Commuter Student Experience**

Heena Lodhia

Department of Leadership Studies, University of San Diego

Action Research Project

August 2021

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Intro.....	4-5
Background.....	5-9
Context.....	9-11
Methodology I.....	11-13
Overview of Cycles.....	13-16
Cycle I.....	16-30
Cycle I.....	30-43
Limitations.....	43-44
Recommendations.....	45-50
Gratitude & Final Reflections.....	50-51
References.....	52-54

### **Abstract**

Studies have shown that first-generation commuter (FGC) students navigate their college experience differently in comparison to traditional, continuing generation students. One of the biggest distinctions is how first-generation (FG) students are closely tied to their familial identity. As these students come from an environment and mindset that is more collective and interdependent, they can struggle to find a sense of belonging, community, and support from their institution. By physically living off-campus, FG commuter student's persistence, well-being, and ability to build relationships on campus can prove to be challenging. Therefore, as a Graduate Assistant in the Commuter Student Commons, I studied the impact of family dynamics of first-generation commuter students at the University of San Diego (USD) to further engage with this community through intentional engagement that validates and supports their unique lived experiences.

## **The First-Generation Commuter Student Experience**

As an undergraduate student at California State University Fullerton (CSU Fullerton), I was a first-generation commuter (FGC) student. I remembered feeling disconnected from my institution and lacking a sense of community as I attended classes on campus. Aside from academics, I had spent the rest of my time outside of campus to work a part time job and tended to the needs of my family. As a first-generation, Desi-American student, my parents did not understand the need nor the importance of personal growth as part of the traditional college experience. They believed that one attends college solely to complete a degree and to have a successful, well-paying career. In hindsight, I realized that I did not fully immerse myself into my college experience due to the focus I placed on my family responsibilities. I was significantly impacted by my experience living at home and this influenced the importance I placed on the academic, social, and cultural integration of my college experience. According to Tinto's (1988) model, academic integration was defined as "a student's level of engagement in the various academic opportunities and activities offered by the institution to aid the student's academic growth" (Ishitani & Reid, 2015, p. 14). In comparison, social integration was "defined as a student's connection to his or her peers and faculty that engender a commitment to the institution and fosters a sense of belonging" (Ishitani and Reid, p.15, 2015).

While I was not aware of my FGC student identity at that time, I realized that there were no actual spaces on campus where I felt a sense of community and connection to my institution. Academically, I sought out advisors for my major, but rarely did they connect with me about my identity and experiences outside of classes. As an FGC student, one may struggle to find the balance between their identity as a student, family member, and other priorities. Each student carries their own unique story and lived experiences that are not always shared or heard, and this

can be overlooked at the institutional level. This led me to formulate my research questions, which were how could I increase engagement with FGC students to strengthen their sense of community and belonging and provide intentional engagement to address the unique challenges they face while living at home with their families? How could I further value and appreciate their stories, knowing their experiences are very different from traditional, on-campus living, continuing generation students?

This topic spoke to me as a first-generation graduate student and I reflected upon how my personal experience would have been altered as an undergraduate, had my institution engaged with me in a different way. Building strong relationships personally and professionally has always been a strong value that I hold and by sharing my personal experiences with students, it allowed me to strengthen my bond with them as a mentor and advisor. As I embarked on my action research journey, I felt as though I came full circle by being an FGC undergraduate student and now having been an advisor for a community that I am still a part of today. I found great meaning and purpose by supporting FGC students and acknowledging their unique challenges and experiences.

Therefore, with this research I hoped to shed some light of different FGC student experiences and how different they are from their counterparts. My hope for the future was to mitigate some of their challenges and barriers through intentional programs that aim to provide mentorship, access to resources, opportunities, and support for an enriching college experience.

### **Background**

Firstly, I would like to begin by defining what it means to be *first-generation* and a *commuter* student. Historically, it has been unclear as to how to clearly define the term *first-generation* (FG) as there are various definitions. In the context of my study, I identify it as “those

students whose parents did not earn a college degree (Patton et al., 2016, p. 247). These students may identify as the first ones in their families to attend college. Other definitions explain that the term *first-generation*, can also be used to describe students whose parents have various education levels, status of education enrollment versus completion of college, and whether one parent has attended college only instead of both (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). By exploring previous research findings, I learned that approximately 43% of all first-year college students are first-generation and have reported feeling a lack of support and sense of belonging to their institution (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). As first-year FG students begin their college journeys at their institutions, they are learning to lead a life separate from their family social structure while adjusting to new responsibilities as a student. In comparison to continuing generation (CG) students, FG students do not have the benefit of learning from their parents' college experience and may lack strong parental involvement. According to Ishitani and Reid (2015), FG students "are more likely to come from low-income families, are more likely to drop out during their freshman year of college and are faced with a 71% higher risk of attrition than their counterparts with two educated parents." Therefore, students to rely on institutional support due to their parents' inexperience with higher education who are unable to provide guidance. Also, first-generation students were more likely to be students of color, enrolled in fewer credit hour courses, lived off-campus, be engaged in less extracurricular activities, and earned lower grades (Hébert, 2017).

In addition, FG students are seeking to find balance between their student identity and their responsibilities to family. Students may not receive emotional support from their family as they do not always understand the daily college activities that could take time away from their home life. Part of the explanation of these challenges may be due to a mismatch of values as FG students are coming from strong interdependent backgrounds that value collective and

community-based mindsets, as opposed to independent values that are encouraged at institutions. This cultural mismatch theory can be a driving force for many of the challenges that FG students experience and that institutions unintentionally perpetuate (Covarrubias et al., 2018). While students are encouraged to live on campus during their first year, this factor can contribute to the challenges of FG commuter students. Alongside being a first-generation student, students that do not live-in institution-based housing are known as *commuter students* (Jacoby, 2015). According to “recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 87% of undergraduates enrolled in U.S postsecondary institutions lived off-campus during the 2011-2012 academic year” (Jacoby, 2015, p. 1). Other studies have indicated that commuter students that live at home with their parents during their first year are 23% more likely to drop out (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). By physically not living on campus, commuters can experience a gap in their ability to successfully integrate with their institution and build relationships with their professors, advisors, and peers. As mentioned by Wagenaar and Tinto (1988), “theory of departure, explains that higher levels of integration into academic and social realms, help strengthen a student’s learning and commitment to staying enrolled during their first year”. Unlike their counterparts that have dorm rooms to study and relax, commuters do not necessarily have designated spaces on campus. In addition, they navigate transportation, travel time to reach campus and finding parking with limited spaces. The commuter student life embodies a unique lens and oftentimes are unrepresented and overlooked by institutions. They are at a disadvantage of not being fully immersed and lose the opportunity for academic, social, and intellectual growth. It continues to raise questions as to how institutions make commuter students feel more included and welcomed as part of the campus community.

Overall, the most common themes that decrease retention rates and impact the success of commuter and first-generation college students include a lack of sense of belonging, having poor academic and social integration, a limited support system, an increased risk of dropping out within their first year, and struggling to find the balance between their student identity and their family identity. These students may find it more difficult to advocate for themselves, as they are navigating how to find resources alone while struggling with imposter syndrome. In a study of thirty FG college students at a large Midwestern, public university, one of the most common memorable messages received from their parents was how “family’s the world, family’s first” (Wang, 2014). FG students took away from their parents that family should always be prioritized and struggled to decide whether to prioritize family or college. “Some parents asked their children to change their priorities when they thought that their children were allowing college to get in the way of family life” (Wang, p. 277, 2014).

Institutions may not realize the strong impact of familial relationships and how closely it is tied to the lives of FGC students. Based on this study, the researcher expressed how there was very little research of the dialogue that occurs between parents and FG students and how this should be explored further. Wang (2014) writes, “as colleges continue to accept and find ways to support FGC students, this line of research is important to understanding what messages FGC students are receiving from their parents about family and what messages they are receiving from other sources such as advisors and faculty members” (p. 284). I agree with this critique that FGC students have a significantly higher level of daily engagement with family in comparison to their counterparts. As a result, it would be beneficial for faculty, administrators, and student affairs practitioners to understand this aspect of their lives to provide more intentional support.

As an FGC student reflecting upon my own experiences, I was interested in learning more of the narratives of other FGC students and their family members. This perspective can serve a greater purpose on what higher educational institutions can do to provide more focus, better attention, and support to this underserved community of students.

### **Context**

Beginning Fall 2019, I began my graduate journey in the Higher Education and Leadership program at USD and became exposed to identity work and development. Over time, I learned of the importance of looking inward, reflecting on who I am and the intersecting identities that I hold. I acknowledge that I am a Desi-American, first-generation, woman of color and believe that my roots will always stay strong within myself, no matter where I go in life. The fact that my peers, mentors, and instructors respected my identity as they engaged with me, made me feel seen and valued. This reinforced the sense of appreciation I have for learning of other people's stories and prompted my interest in hearing the voices of current FGC students at USD. I wanted to strategically address their unique challenges that otherwise would not have been heard and provide space for them to discuss it. As institutions empower students to explore their identity and to celebrate who they are, I wondered: how can institutions look a bit more closely at the importance of family identity? Looking at the aspect of family life and its impact on the world of academia, this makes me curious as to how student affairs programs can better approach advisement and programming for FGC students with this lens.

During June 2020, I transitioned into my role as Graduate Assistant of Community and Leadership Development (CLD) within the Commuter Commons at USD. The Commuter Student Commons (CC) is a designated space on campus which serves as a home away from home to incoming first-year commuters, continuing commuters that live off campus and transfer

commuter students. Commuter Commons serves as a space for students to study, relax and to build community with the support of the CLD team and Commuter Assistants. Within my role, I virtually served as a co-instructor for the Emerging Leaders Program, an introductory leadership course to first-year students while also supporting the Commuter Commons. I became more familiar with our programming, outreaching efforts, and initiatives and built strong relationships with my team. Our team aimed to increase engagement, involvement, and support to commuter students and increase the visibility of their unique needs. As a mentor, I hoped to provide guidance based on my own lived experiences and to engage with students based on empathy, trust and understanding.

As a campus community, USD is recognized as a First Forward Institution by NASPA's Center for First-generation Student Success. Through this initiative, the CLD team provides education and resources to FG students and families through our website. In addition, USD has created the First-Gen Network that is open to all administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Beginning Fall 2020, I joined the First-Gen Action Team Committee, to learn and be actively involved with others in community to have a dialogue around campus-wide efforts to support FG students. This committee offered space to further explore how we as an institution are increasing acknowledgement of FG students and how we are implementing steps to actively provide support.

During March 2020, we learned the news that COVID-19 or the coronavirus had spread and escalated into a global pandemic. The health and safety of our entire campus community had become a top priority. By March 23, 20, President Harris announced the decision to suspend all on-campus engagement and USD had transitioned to online learning and virtual engagement. All faculty, staff, and administrators were asked to refrain from physically coming to campus and to

work remotely from their homes. During this time, all in-person engagement on campus and the college student experience drastically changed and departments across campus worked around the clock to adapt to be in a virtual platform. During the summer, I collaborated with the members of the Emerging Leaders (EL) Administrative team to adapt our EL curriculum into a remote learning model. While this was happening on our side of things as practitioners, students were experiencing their own challenges and frustrations adjusting to a virtual college experience. While the hope was that we would return to campus by Fall 2020, USD maintained a remote learning platform through Spring 2021, to continue to ensure the protection of the health and safety of our campus community.

While our campus adapted to remote learning and found alternate ways to retain engagement with students, it was challenging to build relationships and community by not being in person. With respect to USD's *Six-Point Plan*, all students, faculty, and staff were expected to adhere to campus guidelines based on San Diego County's updates. Students across campus experienced a non-traditional college experience and were considered *non-traditional commuter students*. If on campus, individuals were asked to maintain a safe distance of six feet from others and to always wear masks. As a staff member, I worked primarily through a remote setting, and this impacted my ability to connect with students and staff. As tools to stay connected and continue our work, we utilized applications including zoom, emailing and phone-calls. Throughout the duration of my research, I continued to utilize these tools to communicate and support the collection of data towards action-oriented steps.

### **Methodology I**

As a framework, I utilized O'Leary's Cycles of Action Research as my preferred methodology which "encompasses both the role of theory and the means of analysis that outline

how we should proceed as researchers in addressing the data we collect via our varied methods (McNiff, p.14, 2016). I implemented this model with each cycle consisting of the process and steps of observation, reflection, planning and implementation of action. This can be described as a process of collaborative decision making (Parahoo, 2005). This model provided the space for me to include key stakeholders, in this case FGC students, to be involved in this co-creative process and to contribute their thoughts in developing improved methods of how we can engage more effectively with the larger FGC student community.

This model was seen as particularly useful with “change-oriented research goals” and its purpose is directed towards creating and implementing a particular change that addresses a concern (Parahoo, 2005). Thinking about FGC students, I reflected on how they are underserved, and many times overlooked, in comparison to traditional, on-campus living students. While USD has the Commuter Commons as a physical space that supports commuter students, how is the rest of the campus community engaging with this population? Is there an inclusive and culturally competent approach that is used when interacting and supporting these students? How often are spaces and departments collaborating to reach this community, knowing that their lived experiences are different in comparison to the traditional student? These students oftentimes wear multiple hats and their connection to their family and home life is many times most salient to their daily lives. I wanted to bring forward the voices and narratives of this community and their families. Therefore, I was drawn to this methodology because I believed that it would serve the most appropriate balance of mindfully examining what our current practices are within the Commuter Commons and reflecting upon the personal narratives of participants, leading to take thoughtful actions with respect to the data gathered.

O’Leary’s model encompasses four stages in each cycle, beginning with *observation*, also known as the collection of data and knowledge stage. “Research may help us understand and lead us to new ideas and recommendations for change, but change does not spring automatically from knowledge. Enter applied research” (Parahoo, 2005). Since this model seeks to create and implement change, rather than simply increase our knowledge about a subject, it is suggested that with the support of key stakeholders, we can further assess a situation, increase our understanding of a concern on a deeper level, and determine whether the interventions that are planned to be implemented down the line will be effective and beneficial to the stakeholders. After conducting *applied research*, the knowledge obtained can be further assessed during the *reflective stage*. This stage has allowed me to reflect and determine some of the current key practices that we as administrators are doing that are proving to be effective or ineffective. This was determined by the direct feedback of my participants through the sharing in individual interviews, focus groups, and group workshops. This feedback contributed towards the *Planning and Implementation* of new actions. As a graduate assistant in the Commuter Commons, I found myself to be in a unique position as someone new to my role and engaging with our students and programs in modified and virtual platform.

### **Overview of Cycles**

Prior to beginning my action research, I secured permission with the Assistant Director of Community and Leadership Development (CLD), Ariela Canzian and explained my interest in connecting with our FGC students through my role. As we entered a remote platform, being a GA has allowed me to have virtual check-ins with our commuter students and provide space and support during these challenging times. Through my conversations, commuter students expressed having adjusted well to their classes and how their college experience was not disrupted too

much by being required to stay at home with their families. In contrast, traditional students had a more difficult time with this adjustment, and many moved back home with their families. Due to COVID times, traditional students were exposed to what commuter students would normally be experiencing as a student.

On January 25th, 2021, I began my first cycle by starting the recruitment process of finding three undergraduate first-generation, commuter students that would be interested in via sharing their experience as a current college student at USD. Since my fellow GA of CLD was working with a similar action research topic, we planned to collaborate in our efforts to facilitate this process together while not interfering with each other's research. While we chose not to outreach to the same students, we supported each other along the way. Therefore, I contacted our team of Commuter Assistants (CA) to explain the purpose and intent of my action research and how I would like to invite them to be involved in supporting this process. I sent an invitation outreach email to campus partners at USD and asked them to share this opportunity with their students who could be interested in joining me in conversation. I assured my prospective participants that any information that is shared throughout the interview will remain confidential, their name and contact information will not be shared, and that their stories will be treated with the utmost sensitivity and care. As a thank you for their time and energy, each student participant will receive a \$5.00 Amazon gift card.

Partners that were outreached to included President of the First-Generation Student Association (FGSA), the South-Asian Student Association (SASA), colleagues from Student Support Services, TRIO, Center for Student Success, Student Affairs departments, Leadership Minor Administration team, Graduate Assistants of SASC, and personal invites to commuter students. Through the support of the Assistant Director of CLD and Program Director of Student

Support Services, I connected with three FGC student participants. Before officially beginning each interview, I spoke with each student via zoom to explain the process of the interview, time commitment, expectations, and compensation. Each student was sent a consent form to review and provided verbal agreement to engage in the interview and to be recorded via zoom for data collection purposes. To protect their identity, each student's name was changed to a pseudonym name for the remainder of this report.

Throughout the month of February 2021, I conducted my first round of individual interviews with three student participants to discuss their experience as FGC students during COVID times. While these students have their FGC identity in common, they all come from very diverse backgrounds and experiences and their stories do not represent all FGC students. However, it is a meaningful glimpse as to what some of the current students of this community experience and it provided me with insight as to how we can better serve them through current practices within the Commuter Commons. Due to the impact of having been in a virtual setting throughout the year, I valued the one-to-one engagement and appreciated the opportunity to further build relationships with these students on a personal level. As student affairs practitioners, we center our work on the needs of students and the chance to engage with great intention and during these moments, I was reminded of the joy that I receive supporting and mentoring students. It also helped put things into perspective as to what I could do within my capacity as a graduate assistant to create meaningful change.

After completing the first-round of interviews as part of Cycle I, Cycle II followed and was prompted by each student being asked to invite one or more of their family members to share their narrative in a separate conversation with me. The purpose of the second interview was to further explore the perception of what FG families think about college as an experience and

what it means to them to have their student attend USD. Each family also received an additional \$5.00 Amazon gift card as a token of my appreciation for their time, energy, and participation.

## **Cycle I**

### **Observation, Reflection, & Implementation**

On Feb 9th, 21, I began my first interview with 2nd-year, APIDA, student named Peter and engaged in a conversation about his experience as a first-generation commuter student. Peter majored in Sociology with a minor in communications and was hoping to pursue a career in nursing down the line. As a commuter currently living with family, he expressed his value of being very family-oriented and enjoyed the experience of living at home and supporting his family. With a strong awareness of the sacrifices that his family had made, Peter appreciated this balance of having a life outside of campus life, living only five to ten minutes away from USD and feeling that it was a “blessing in disguise”. As a first-generation, low-income college student, it was a dream come true to be able to attend the University of San Diego and to further explore opportunities provided to him through programs such as Upward Bound Program, Student Support Services (SSS) and the Commuter Commons.

Second, I interviewed Jason, a 2nd-year Latinx student, who majored in industrial and systems engineering, with a personal interest to learn about the science and mechanisms of cars. Similarly, to Peter, Jason was associated with Student Support Services (SSS) and became connected through his affiliation with the Upward Bound program. Jason felt a strong sense of community, connection, and safety within SSS and greatly appreciated having the support his advisors and mentors in the space. Jason expressed “just having that advisor helped me set that foot forward, just me navigating that path. I guess sharing my experience will benefit someone else and make those first steps”. He served as student staff and shared lots of gratitude and

appreciation for his peers and his community. He wanted to give back to his community and support other students who may also be navigating similar situations as himself.

Lastly, I interviewed Mary, a Latinx, transfer-commuter student who was completing her final year at USD. She served as an Associated Student Government Senator, worked part time, and navigated balancing being both a student and a parent. During our virtual interview, Mary expressed her views on the specific challenges that she encountered being FG and a transfer-commuter student at USD. Many challenges pertained to the feeling of a lack of empathy from her professors and support from the institution overall. Mary wore multiple hats and carried many different aspects of her identity while navigating USD, including being a student of color, low-income, first-gen commuter and being a parent while navigating college. While Mary exemplifies a student that is non-traditional, it was difficult for her to find spaces outside of SSS that support her identities and unique needs. As we were in the middle of her virtual interview, she was in her home setting tending to her child while talking with me. I wanted to honor her time and energy and be flexible to her needs. Therefore, I offered to split our interview time into two sessions so that she can also tend to her daughter and not feel pressured to complete the entire interview in one sitting. This was greatly appreciated, and we completed her interview the following week to accommodate her needs.

## **Themes**

After interviewing all student participants in Cycle I, several common and overlapping themes emerged, including the layers of family engagement and its impact on college life. Like most FG students, their narratives connected to how their parents immigrated to the U.S. and established a life for themselves so that their kids can have a brighter future. For many, it is the American dream to create a life by working hard and achieving success. By acknowledging their

family's struggle, FG students grow this strong sense of awareness for what their family has accomplished and want to be able to work just as hard to validate the lived experiences of their parents. Peter shared:

My parents are 60-70 years old. I don't think that I would be genuinely happy knowing that all this, all the sacrifices my parents made was so that I could leave. At 3 or 4 or 5, my mom would take me to Rose Donuts, and we would go there and be like wow that's USD. That's a beautiful campus. If you work hard, that's where all of the hard-working people go. I've been thriving here at this institution, and I'm really blessed.

Students like Peter expressed a strong awareness and understanding of the sacrifices that his family made, living in a refugee camp for 10-14 years in Vietnam. As he shared his feelings about his strong connection to family, culture, and community, it showed how important it was for him to continue to maintain his bonds with family in proximity. Peter said:

They had a lot of sacrifices for my success. Being here at USD, I could've been selfish and gone to Santa Barbara or UCLA, but I chose to stay with my roots um to just to be in my community where I feel safe.

For other participants like Jason, navigating college meant "doing it alone" and not wanting to burden his parents financially or emotionally when it comes to his education, knowing how much they have done for him. Therefore, he would find his own way in paying for his books and taking out financial aid to help cover the cost of his education. Jason expressed:

It was more the financial part of it. I hadn't really shared how much loans I'm taking because they would start to worry and I kinda wanna leave that to myself or I wanna deal with that myself in the future. I don't wanna put those financial burdens on them. I wanna deal with those issues At the end of the day it's my life. I don't want them paying for my stuff, that I'll be doing for my future. I'd rather navigate that myself so they would only see the out-of-pocket stuff.

Growing up and being raised in a family where a student has witnessed the hard work and personal struggles of their parents, impacts how they approach college responsibility. As students learn new levels of responsibility, FG students may have a different lens in terms of what

responsibility looks like to them. On one end, in our Western culture, this may be seen as a growing experience for a student to learn adult responsibilities and learning to become self-reliant and independent. On the other hand, “FG students, mainly from Latinx and Asian backgrounds, often enter the university with the obligation or desire to stay connected to family (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). The lack of direct hands-on support received from parents or caregivers can create a gap in terms of how students can be supported in other ways while attending their institution. As student participants shared, they may carry additional financial responsibilities, serve in the role of a caregiver or while also navigating their role as a student and emerging adult.

While students like Peter and Jason work to serve their parents and family members, non-traditional students such as Mary carried the role of student and parent. As a FG commuter-transfer student and parent, seeking out resources that could help support her unique needs proved to be difficult. Mary expressed great challenges in finding affinity spaces on campus that could support her identity as a student-parent, provide resources such as childcare, nursing stations, and financial assistance. Currently, USD has a Parent and Family Relations Center that aims to increase parent involvement through the Parent Ambassador program and on campus events. However, there are no other family resources centers or spaces on campus that support student parents with supportive services and resources. As institutions think about inclusion, diversity, and equity of students of all backgrounds, it’s important to shape spaces and programs that can serve students in more meaningful and effective ways and to continue to broaden our lens as to what an undergraduate student can look like. Each student carries an intersection of identities and an array of lived experiences. As expressed by Mary, “commuter students are an afterthought”. Therefore, how can institutions become more aware of students in minoritized

groups and underserved groups? How can student affairs practitioners, faculty and staff better serve and become more aware of the unique experiences of students including Mary, Peter, and Jason?

### ***The First-Generation Experience***

Like most FG students, all three participants expressed the feeling that they must figure out how to navigate college all on their own and felt a lack of support from their families and institution in terms of receiving guidance. As part of the first-gen experience, they were unable to ask questions and receive direct support from parents as to how to acquire resources, approach academics, and discuss future post graduate plans. Jason explained:

From middle school to high school to college, I never got help with my homework.... I kinda had to seek help myself early on and that transcended over the years. I kinda am a proactive person and would seek help. But college for me and even now it's more myself navigating, my own journey, my own path.

It can be difficult for FG students to form a connection and bond with their family when it comes to their educational experience. Oftentimes, parents or caregivers may ask their other children or family members to step in and offer advice as they may feel that they are unable to share and relate to this experience. Peter said:

My family didn't have higher than an elementary level education. Just hearing that I graduated high school was a big deal for them. I didn't really see college in my path. Once I got accepted to USD, I called my mom. Other students shared how this journey alone, has been them navigating it by themselves and making a path so that they can show their parents what it's really like being a FG college student. Being FG, it allowed me to adapt to a mindset that I need to work harder than everyone else in the room. Knowing that I had a future to work towards. I didn't feel shy to ask for help.

As students shared their thoughts, it made me reflect on how relatable this is and how many more FGC students can understand feeling a disconnect with family when it comes to their educational experiences. I recall a similar feeling, growing up in a strong working-class family and finding it

difficult to explain to my parents about the complexities of college life. I found it very significant when Mary expressed:

I feel like my family doesn't understand how many hours it takes to complete an assignment. They think that you just go to class and don't do homework. Sometimes what I learn in class, I can't share it with my family, because they can't understand it. I feel like different people would try to claim my education, but they may not have contributed to it as much.

Every family is different and each with their own culture and values. We look towards others such as parents, guardians, and teachers to offer us guidance, support, and mentorship. FGC students are considered an underrepresented and underserved community of students that are not always identified individually, unless students make it known or practitioners are able to identify them. When I was an undergraduate, I recalled not knowing what it meant to be first-generation, even though all my experiences reflected that of an FG student. Yet, I was never educated of this identity until my graduate school experience. I was unaware that an entire community existed outside of myself that could have supported me and validated my challenges and experiences.

### ***Upward Bound, SSS, & Commuter Commons***

One of the most common themes that shaped the experiences of student participants included the significant impact of being involved in Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and the Commuter Commons. In relation to current FGC students at USD, had it not been for impactful pipeline programs such as Upward Bound, Student Support Services and the Commuter Commons, most students would not have found a sense of belonging, community, and support on campus. Each of these programs has supported these students through the thoughtful and intentional engagement provided by the mentors, advisors, and staff of these spaces. Through strong mentorship, building of relationships, and support provided in the space, students felt seen and their confidence towards achieving success strengthened. As students

shared more about their day-to-day activities, it was made clear as to how they had built a strong sense of community through these spaces.

Before entering USD, Peter and Jason shared their connection to Upward Bound, a mentorship pipeline program that supports high school students who identify as first-generation, low income that are striving to pursue higher education. Through this experience, they took some classes at USD and lived in the dorms for exposure to a real-life college experience as a high school student. Peter shared “Upward Bound, those two years at USD really helped me to see what college is like”. Afterwards, Student Support Services (SSS) and Commuter Commons continued to carry the support through as first-year students starting their college journey and offered spaces of community. It was because of SSS and Commuter Commons that students felt that they did not have to “do it alone” and that they were supported and celebrated for who they were as students. While programs such as these may not be as visible, they have a huge impact upon the FGC students and there is a strong need to continue to highlight these spaces so that students such as my participants have the support, they need to receive access to equitable opportunities.

Something that I found interesting as another commonality of was the way in which staff from SSS and Commuter Commons approached their engagement with students and the relationships they built with the students as advisors. These elements allowed students to feel more connected, comfortable, and safe to be themselves and to not feel isolated in what they were going through. Jason shared:

What helped me most was talking to the faculty at SSS, I would talk to Ryan, it was a safe space. I honestly felt like I wouldn't get lost in the system. They always would make me feel connected to the USD community.

Previously, students shared about their feelings that they are “going at it alone” and that it was difficult for them to reach out and seek support on campus that they were unfamiliar with.

Through the support and impact of just two of spaces on campus, how can more spaces support and welcome FGC students to help increase their sense of belonging and connection to USD?

As mentioned earlier, students do feel a lack of engagement from their families when it comes to their college experiences and look to their institution and other areas for support to help fill in the gaps. For example, Jason shared how he felt disconnected from being able to talk to his parents about his schoolwork, financial responsibilities, and future goals as their ideas about college were very different from his own:

My dad would think it's a simple four years...he doesn't understand the time commitment that it really deserves. He thinks it's like high school. Go to class, come home, and spend a few hours on homework. My mom does understand. I would always text her that I was coming home late.

This further perpetuates how FG students struggle with explaining to their parents about their college life and academic expectations and how they are parents are unfamiliar with the personal growth aspect that comes with the college experience. This leads to the question of how can USD further increase involvement and knowledge of higher education experiences to FG parents and families? As family identity plays a key role in the lives of FG students, family members should be considered key stakeholders in this equation.

### ***Financial Inequity***

As we further explored how FG students feel like they are navigating their college experience “alone”, they are also thinking about financial responsibilities. Jason explained:

It was more the financial part of it. I hadn't really shared how much loans I'm taking because they would start to worry and I kinda wanna leave that to myself or I wanna deal with that myself in the future. I don't wanna put those financial burdens on them. I wanna deal with those issues. At the end of the day, it's my life, I don't want them paying for my

stuff that I'll be doing for my future. I'd rather navigate that myself so they would only see the out-of-pocket stuff.

As an FG student, one may continue to think and reflect on how their parents have sacrificed so much for them and have struggled throughout their lives so that their kids can have all that they did not. This may lead to students feeling a sense of guilt in asking for financial support or additional guidance from their parents, as they do not want to burden them with responsibilities. This idea contributes to students wanting to navigate their college journey on their own and feeling the gap in support also.

Another factor is also how institutions can be more aware of the financial inequities that exist among students and how students are coming from various socioeconomic backgrounds. As USD is a private institution, its tuition and cost of attendance is much higher to attend in comparison to other institutions. This impacts students from low to middle income backgrounds who may find it a barrier to want to attend. Students have shared how expenses from as big as tuition costs and loans to smaller everyday costs such as food, books, parking services, and home life have contributed to their stress and anxiety, as an additional responsibility to think about.

Mary explained:

I don't like being a commuter student. Cuz like I can't, I don't feel like I can do my best being a commuter student, struggling financially, having home insecurity. The institution doesn't always notice that, but SSS does notice it. But not everyone that experiences that is in SSS. What about those students? Where do they go to? You don't always wanna identity those things about yourself. You don't wanna say that it's really embarrassing. You don't wanna share that with your professor. I'm not eating enough, sleeping enough.

As students are struggling internally and externally with many factors, how can more spaces, departments, faculty, and staff help recognize it and offer support and resources? How can USD provide more equitable resources that are more financially inclusive of all students?

### ***Imposter Syndrome & Lack of Support from Faculty***

The world-wide pandemic has created emotional, mental, physical, and financial instability for people all around the world. It has led to an increase of stress and anxiety due to the uncertainty of the situation. As a campus community, faculty, students, and staff have worked together to adapt to this situation and transition to virtual engagement. In terms of academics, instructors had taken various approaches to their teaching and curriculum to maintain a level of rigor while adapting to a new teaching environment. Some professors approached students with empathy, knowing that they are adjusting to so much. Other instructors decided to not create any leniency towards the work assigned to students. While spaces such as SSS and the Commuter Commons have served to be a safe place where students have felt supported, spaces outside of them were rather challenging, especially within the classroom. Some students shared times where they felt hesitation towards approaching their instructors due to the feeling of imposter syndrome and their instructors showing a lack of empathy towards their situations. Students spend most of their time within their classes and the type of environment created by their instructors can greatly impact their ability to feel comfortable and included in the space.

Jason expressed:

Prior to covid and now, it's always been a struggle dealing with imposter syndrome, being in a community that is going to a school that is primarily white, it's difficult to kind of like.. fit in in a way. You feel kinda left out and people don't really wanna work with you and now being online, you have no one to talk to. It's hard to learn. I was struggling with that my first semester and now choosing my career path, I wasn't too confident...

When this was shared with me, it made me reflect on the role of faculty and what their approach is when it comes to their approach with students. While there are various resources and departments across campus that serve different needs of students, professors may not realize that they can serve as a liaison and gateway to these resources for students. How instructors approach their students can have a big impact on a student's willingness and effectiveness to learn and be

engaged. However, if a student is not seen or valued within the classroom, how can instructors connect with their students more effectively using a more empathetic and compassionate lens that can ultimately support personal growth, success, and well-being? In addition to the experience of some professors being unapproachable, they may also be inaccessible outside of the classroom. As a commuter student, it can be hard navigating office hours of professors when not living on campus. Commuter students often vary in terms of how far they travel to reach campus and may hold other responsibilities outside of campus including a such as a job or family duties. Therefore, it can be unrealistic for students to travel back and forth to campus just to reach specified office hours of their professors. For example, Mary had shared how some of her instructors were inflexible in meeting with her due to a conflict of scheduling.

It was hard, I feel like my teachers were so inflexible with me not living on campus, and them wanting me to go to their specific office hours. If you have work or a life outside of campus, you can't always do that. That's not a reality.

Even while students may have shared that they were unable to reach certain times, instructors were not as helpful in accommodating for student needs. From the faculty's perspective of things, there can be a difference of values and expectations that they hold of students versus supporting students through a student-centered model. Mary continued to share:

Feeling like I don't belong, connected to high anxiety, mental health, professors want you to go to office hours, but it wasn't accessible to me, they were upset that I wouldn't come to office hours, but they wouldn't make themselves flexible to my needs. I'm not driving all this way to attend office hours; I would rather work to earn \$50.00 for work. I needed the extra hours, money. I felt disconnected and isolated on so many levels. USD presents a lot of their programs and resources are a first-year experience. Transfers don't know where to go and feel like they don't belong in certain spaces.

Whether as a student or professional, we have all navigated zoom while working from home and have tried our best to have backgrounds that are fit and appropriate during our working and class hours. Unfortunately, some instructors may have found a conflict with students having an

inappropriate background being in a home and or bedroom setting. As we are working from home, it is natural to have kids, pets and home décor in the background as opposed to a classroom or home office setting. With Mary being a mom, it was only natural to have her child with her during classes to take care of her daughter while also attending classes virtually. This has offered many parents who are working professionals and students with family responsibilities, the flexibility to work from the home setting. However, Mary shared how some of her professors showed a lack of compassion and approval for having her daughter in the background, as she tried to attend class. With respect to this scenario of faculty being able to visibly witness a student's home life and not show understanding, it further prompts the question as to whether faculty are thinking of students more holistically in terms of their experiences and needs outside of the classroom. Even though as higher education practitioners, our focus might be narrowed whether it is academically on a specific subject or providing programming from an affinity space on campus, it would serve students best to be aware of the wider experiences that they may have and for us to be able to support them in areas outside of what we traditionally know.

### **Reflections & Actions**

As I reflected on the interviews, it felt incredibly powerful to hear their stories aloud and to understand their individual journeys. Each participant shared about their experiences being both inside and outside the classroom, campus life, and family life. They acknowledged the sacrifices that their families have made so that they can pursue college and they brought great warmth, authenticity, gratitude, and humility towards the opportunity to attend USD. It was inspiring to hear about their resilience and hard work that has brought them so far and it was interesting to see the impact that family had on shaping their values. While college is an

environment that fosters and encourages a student's individual identity development and growth, celebrates diversity and culture, and empowers students to find their individual self, it makes me wonder how USD can provide more spaces and opportunities to celebrate the *familial* identity of students. As students shared repeatedly of how interconnected their experiences with SSS and Commuter Commons were with their overall college experience, I was happy to hear how much these programs encourage and motivate them to do well and to be well and have created a space for them to feel a sense of belonging, community, and connection.

After completing each interview, I assured students that I am a direct resource and mentor and am happy to further support them with anything in the future. Participants shared closing thoughts and feedback as to how they can feel better supported by USD. Some students shared their enjoyment for programming such as *Waffle Wednesdays* as a chance to connect with other students and share space in community. Others shared their need for more financial aid workshops that were more thorough in explaining the process of applying for the FAFSA and DREAM application. Mary shared:

Transfer orientation--they didn't cover a lot, the way it was run. The reason I knew about things was because of Ryan from SSS. He would create these workshops so that we can learn from them. Being first gen, it wasn't like my parents knew a lot about FAFSA. My mom and I had to google it and figure that out cuz we didn't know what we were doing. Financial aid, OneStop does one during orientation time, but it was rushed. The one they did at SSS was more thorough and they took their time to break it down.

As soon these interests and concerns were mentioned, I shared upcoming cooking and financial aid workshops that were being hosted by our Commuter Assistants. As a member of the First-Generation Action Team Committee, I also invited students to consider joining spaces such as the *First-Gen Hour*, a monthly program hosted by the First-Generation Student Association (FGSA). This space offered first-gen students to join in community to share their experiences with one another and to learn of future events and opportunities that highlights the FG

experience. Other resources that were shared included the First-Generation Student Support Group hosted by the Counseling Center as another potential space where they can feel supported. I wanted to share resources based on their immediate feedback and invite them to feel more connected in FGC spaces that they may have been unaware of. Since USD had undergone virtual settings, most departments began sharing their latest updates through social media accounts. Therefore, I encouraged them to also follow our social media accounts on Instagram @usdfirstgen, @usd\_commuter and @usdfinancialwellness to continue to stay connected with the latest programs, news, and events.

Building relationships is one of my greatest values and it was meaningful for me to find that personal connection with each student participant, especially since in-person engagement with students was increasingly limited due to COVID. I enjoyed talking to them and they shared how much they appreciated being a voice not only for themselves, but to also amplify the voices of their communities. I reflected on my own experiences as an undergraduate and realized I had my own biases coming into hearing these narratives. I thought that I would hear more about the challenges and difficulties balancing home life with school and how hard it must be to navigate family expectations. However, each student showcased different responses in relation to their family. Peter's key theme of his story focused on the importance of family in his life and why that *needed* to be a part of his college experience as opposed to a separate one. Jason on the other hand shared how at times, it was difficult for his Dad to understand why college is different from high school and how higher education is not just a means to an end to solely receive a degree. Lastly, Mary as an FG transfer commuter student was one of the few in her family to receive a college education but did not receive financial support and at times emotional support from her family. Each student faced their own unique experience in relation to family, finances, and lack

of support from the institution and it is through the significant impact of spaces such as Student Support Services and Commuter Commons where they have received a substantial amount of support. However, we as an institution can do more and learn to be more intentional and collaborative to reach more students like Peter, Jason, and Mary.

## Cycle II

### Observation, Reflection, & Implementation

Later in March 2021, I carried forward my lens from the *reflections* and *actions* of Cycle I into the beginning of Cycle II, to focus more on the narrative of FGC families and to explore the commuter student experience. Initially, I planned to interview at least one or more family members of each of the student participants from Cycle I. However, due to language barriers and scheduling conflicts, I interviewed only one family member. As student affairs practitioners at the university level, rarely do we personally connect with parents and family members. While it is understandable to focus solely on the needs of the student, it would bring a greater depth of perspective to connect with *all* parts of the student, as their family identity is an extension of who they are. Whether a student identifies as first-generation, transfer, commuter, non-traditional, or parent, it is important to approach our students with this broader lens to understand that students will not always fit the traditional box of what we imagine to be a *typical* college student.

As I outreached to student participants about their family's interest in engaging with me, some students showed concern. Peter showed some hesitation and concern asking his parents to speak to me due to language barriers and not being able to understand what is being asked of them. This was a valid concern. At the time, it did not occur to me that this could be a potential challenge in communicating with family members and I had assumed that all the family participants that I would engage with, would speak English. I appreciated Peter's transparency

about this concern, and I assured him that his concern is received. I did not want to further press his parents to interview with me nor make Peter feel uncomfortable in any way. Therefore, I was unable to interview his family members. Mary on the other hand shared how excited her mother was to be asked to be interviewed and really appreciated that someone from USD wanted to give her space to share her story. Unfortunately, after multiple attempts in contacting her about reaching out to her mother and a lack of response within the timeline of Cycle II, I was unable to complete the interview with Mary's mom. Even though we were unable to connect, the fact that her mother was initially so willing and interested to have a dialogue with me was telling of how many more parents could be excited to also share their narrative and feedback.

While the language barrier was proven a challenge to communicate with Peter's parents, this raised an interesting question and observation: what can we at USD do to increase involvement of parents and families of students from culturally diverse backgrounds? What are we currently doing to bridge that gap and to be more inclusive of this type of family involvement at USD? How can FGC families have space to find community with each other and build a bridge with their student and the institution that their student is attending?

### **Themes**

While I was unable to interview the family members of two of my student participants as intended, I was fortunately able to connect and share space with Jason's older brother Jonathan. Jonathan is currently attending San Diego State University and as an FGC student, has also been a part of the Upward Bound program and EOPS throughout his college experience. I valued the time that we spent, discussing what his current engagement with Jason was like and learned of the ways he offers his support and guidance as a family member.

### ***Paving the Path***

Jonathan is the oldest son in his family and is the first one to attend college. When first asked which word comes to mind when hearing the word “college”, he responded by saying, “Opportunities. College can open doors for my family”. Attending college has always been a topic of conversation in his family, especially amongst his nine other younger cousins and siblings who are all similar in age and navigating college life together. As the oldest, he felt that he was jumping certain hurdles so that those younger than him can learn from his mistakes and his experiences and he can share the benefit of his experience. As the oldest who is walking this path of higher education first, he expressed how he is essentially paving a path so that those younger than him, including Jason can feel supported by someone who has experienced college before.

### ***Brotherly Love***

As we engaged in further dialogue about his relationship to Jason as an older brother and their connection about the college experience, it was apparent how strong of a support system Jonathan is to Jason. As they share a room, they engage in many conversations in this space where they can talk about navigating college, personal goals, and life overall. Jason really looks to his older brother for that guidance, as someone who has taken this path before him. Jonathan explained:

Jason had a similar mindset as me, that college isn't for me. He looked to me for those answers, how to do things, the little conversations that we had. I was the first in my family to get into Upward Bound. Once I did it, it encouraged him to do the same. The conversations with family members help build the confidence of FG students versus. not being supportive. We share a room, so we are always having convos back-to-back talking about the future, what we are doing, our decisions always change, there are lots of books in our rooms and during covid, we had to be remote and so we had to create a space that is professional and serious so that we can work. Our room is that space where we can talk about anything. This impacts the total of 9 cousins and their educational journey, we are all very “book wormy”, so we are all very connected.

As an older brother, he also expressed that the only real expectation that he has of Jason is that he learns from his experiences and mistakes and to be better than him. “The only expectation is to learn from me and to be better than that—because I am the first one going through those doors”. He enjoys being able to play this role as someone who can support those who are younger than him and to continue to share his knowledge and wisdom so that it is helpful to others in his family. As Jonathan expressed his commitment to being a guiding force for Jason, this highlights how many FG students need and appreciate these conversations from family members when discussing college experiences. While Jason may not receive that connection with his parents, it goes to show how important of a role his brother plays in supporting him in his college journey and how much of a difference that makes in having a support system from the family side of things when it comes to education.

### ***The Role of Family***

As we explored further about the role of family, it was clear as to how emotionally supportive Jason’s family is in terms of pursuing education. Jonathan explained, “aunts and uncles, grandparents are all very close and like my parents, they all play a supportive role. They believe in us, to achieve”. Jonathan and Jason’s parents serve as models of safety, comfort and support and offer their love to their kids every day to help them build the confidence to achieve their dreams. As an FG student who may feel overwhelmed in how they will be successful academically, it is essential that there are various levels of support not only at the institutional level, but also from the familial level.

As student participants have expressed feeling a lack of confidence in their abilities and experiencing imposter syndrome, being able to receive the words of encouragement from their

support systems surely has had a positive impact on their level of personal self-confidence and how they view themselves. Jonathan continued to share:

If you just talk it out with your parents, talking to them about how I'm feeling emotionally, my level of confidence, having that honest conversation about how college makes you feel. They really want me to be that person that sets the foot, set the path, and see what works for me, to see what I'm doing right or wrong and who can learn from that.

Family served as an important entity that greatly influenced how both Jason and Jonathan viewed themselves and their ability to succeed with a strong educational future. Even though historically, FG parents may not fully understand the college experience, a common thread between many of the narratives shared thus far is how much parents have continued to offer their love and support towards their children, in hopes that they can achieve their dreams without the same struggles they had.

### ***Upward Bound and EOPS***

Jonathan expressed how he received much encouragement to pursue college from his high school, as initially he felt some uncertainty and lack of confidence to move forward when it came to education. "I wasn't confident in myself to go to college, but high school really changed my perspective on why it is important to go to college". Prior to transferring to San Diego State University, he was a part of the EOPS Program at his community college. Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) is a state and college funded program centered around supporting qualified students who identify as being at a disadvantage in pursuing their educational goals and are first-generation, low-income, and students of diverse backgrounds. Jonathan expressed the impact that EOPS had on him and helping him accomplish his goals and transferring to San Diego State University. He connected with his advisors on a personal level and built meaningful

relationships with practitioners who were well invested in supporting him throughout his educational journey. He explained:

It was the first time I opened up with a staff about my personal life. The counselors were asking me about my family. That was the first time that I opened about my personal life. They connected me with other FG students that helped me build that community with others and made me feel that I am not alone.

Outside of EOPS, there were no other programs or spaces that made him feel as supported at the institutional level. Prior to attending community college, Jonathan was also the first in his family to experience being involved in the Upward Bound program. Like Jason, Peter, and Mary, Upward Bound really helped to provide the support, resources, and opportunities as a first-generation student pursuing higher education. Jonathan shared:

I have been given the building blocks, Upward Bound and EOPS really helped me and gave me everything that I needed. Upward Bound helped me build that confidence and I was relying on my family and cousins for that support. I learned how to be confident and focused by myself and sought out that support. The separation helped me think and reflect on my own which is different when I am with my family all of the time. I depended on others for my confidence. Living on campus, through Upward Bound, gave me that experience.

After engaging in dialogue with Jonathan, his experience was very reflective of another FG student navigating college, only, unlike Jason, he did not have someone older to look up to and to offer their guidance on how to navigate things. As he mentioned, he had an experience that was very new to him, and he walked on a path that no one else had experienced before. Since he has navigated certain struggles, it was very important to him to offer Jason the benefit of his experience so that he struggles less. I really appreciated his time and energy for sharing his story and he shared how important it was for him to share his story, not just with his brother, but other FG students who are having similar experiences. I was happy to hear that Jason had a positive role model to look up to and views his brother as that mentor who can help support him in ways that his parents cannot. His narrative provided light to the role and impact of family engagement

for an FGC student. Seeing as Jason has such strong daily interactions with his older brother, he receives positivity, encouragement to persevere, and reassurance that he is not alone. Without the support of his family, especially his brother Jonathan, Jason's college experience could have been different.

### **Reflections & Actions**

After engaging with students and family participants on an individual level, I connected back to my role as graduate assistant to engage more directly with our Commuter Assistants (CA). Part of my role was to support our CAs through individual check-ins, team meetings, and weekly seminars that we offered as part of their professional development. After learning and reflecting on the importance of identity, family, and community from Cycle I, my co-graduate assistant of CLD and I wanted to collaborate on a workshop that focuses on some of these themes. We facilitated an interactive workshop called *The First-Generation Commuter Experience* during one of our weekly seminar classes, to create space for our CAs to talk about their experience as first-generation commuter students. We invited them to reflect about their challenges as FGC students as a form of feedback and centered our activities on identity, grounding of the self, and who they considered as part of their support systems. As CAs, they served in mentorship positions and offered support to other commuter students. During typical seminars, they are often asked to engage in individual and group reflective activities. However, this workshop was different in that it centered more on their identities, separate from being a student working professional and invited them to be in community with each other. As a mentor, I enjoyed this time with them, and was most interested in learning more about what their views were being FGC students. Throughout the workshop, we had broken up activities into four different sections including: *Intersectionality: Who Am I? My Values, Challenges as a First-Gen*

*Commuter Student*, and *Community*. In the beginning of the workshop, we encouraged students to think about their identity and what has helped shape them to be the person they were. Later, we asked them to reflect on their values and to connect how they show up in their everyday life. We aimed to create this foundation in encouraging them to think about their identity more holistically and later narrowing their focus on the aspect of being a commuter student. Throughout the conversations, we learned about their challenges wearing multiple hats and navigating college life in a way that is different from others.

As a result, the CAs really appreciated the space to talk about their identity, their challenges and concerns, and the opportunity to provide feedback. This created a chance for students to strengthen their sense of community and expressed their gratitude for having the opportunity to be a Commuter Assistant and having the support of the Commuter Commons. In conclusion of the workshop, we facilitated a community building activity as a reminder that they are not alone and that we are all part of this community, navigating it together.

Afterwards, I followed-up with each CA via email and zoom to thank them for their attendance and to offer them space to check-in and discuss any needs that may have come up because of the workshop. Meeting with an advisor on a regular basis has proven to be a positive influence on the overall success and retention of first-generation college students. These close personal bonds are known as *relational instrumentality*: “mentors not just helping them achieve goals and meet their needs but also able to bond personally” (Plaskett et al., 2018, p.48). By offering the opportunity for a check-in meeting, which can serve as an advising session, has allowed me to further strengthen my relationship with them and provide mentorship with respect to their FGC student identity. One of our CAs expressed how much she enjoyed the time to talk about her experience and to delve more into this part of her identity. This was a meaningful

follow-up conversation to have with her as a participant in the workshop and to receive direct feedback as to how that experience made her feel.

Just a few weeks following this workshop, CLD joined and collaborated with the Assessment team from the Center of Student Success (CSS), to lead a focus group with our CAs to learn more about how commuter students can be better supported at USD. In parallel to the previous workshop, it was a space where more broad questions were asked and it was approached from a wider, commuter focused lens. As a result, from both workshops, they openly shared about how they may feel like an afterthought in comparison to other traditional on-campus living students and provided feedback as to how USD can be more intentional and effective in supporting commuter students.

### *A Day in a Life of a Commuter*

As previously mentioned, what separates commuter students from traditional students is how they do not physically live in on-campus housing and typically travel to come to campus. As a commuter, students drive, take the bus, train, walk, or carpool to reach campus and the distance travelled can vary between each student. While some students live five to ten minutes away, others travel between forty-five minutes to an hour or longer. As a commuter that drives to campus, navigating parking can be a big challenge that students sometimes have to plan their entire day around. Students have an extra layer to think about including waking up extra early to leave their homes on time, navigating traffic, and finding a parking spot as spaces and structures are limited. While there is the additional lower West Parking lot, sometimes the trams are not always reliable to receive students on time. Since parking is a challenge for commuters, it is difficult for students to leave campus throughout the day and return later. Since our CAs work on

campus, it helps them to form their schedules around their work and to plan to stay the entire day on campus before returning home. One student shared:

I have to plan to spend the entire time on campus to stay for meetings for clubs on campus. I can't just go all the way home and come back. There's traffic to deal with depending on the time of day.

While reaching to and from campus is one challenge, spending the day on campus can create other challenges. Unlike on-campus living students, commuters do not have a student meal plan that they can use to purchase food on campus. It can be expensive to purchase food throughout the day and students expressed how it is unaffordable to buy lunch all the time. It can also be difficult to leave campus in the middle of the day to go buy food and then to return with the challenge of finding parking once again. With majority of their time spent on campus, commuters may have to plan to bring food from home but if they weren't able to, they are forced to buy food on or off campus. As an institution, USD is a private, faith-based university that is also an expensive institution to attend as a student. While it offers wonderful opportunities to its students, commuters struggle to find more equitable resources that can enrich and contribute to their college experience, as opposed to creating additional barriers.

### ***Sense of Belonging***

Unlike traditional students who have their living quarters to go to as a space to study and relax in between classes and activities, commuters lack having designated spaces for themselves. Students shared so much gratitude and appreciation for having a space such as the Commuter Commons, which has served as a home away from home. For our CAs, having a job on campus has contributed towards a greater sense of belonging, making strong connections with peers, and having a space where they can not only feel supported, but can help support other fellow commuters. It was expressed how students feel comfortable and welcomed being in such a

diverse space with other students from unique backgrounds and experiences. The Commuter Commons serves as a study, lunchroom, break room, space to spend time with their peers, attend fun programs for commuter students and to feel connected not only to each other, but to the welcoming student and professional staff of this space. One student expressed:

The Commuter Commons feels like a home because I didn't know where else to go. Finding that sense of belonging with people who look like you, being in that diverse space is really helpful.

Some of the greatest benefits of being a student staff member as explained by the CAs includes the ability to earn money, the opportunity to stay on campus, feel involved and be in a space that makes you feel like part of a family. It also helps students find that physical separation between home life and college life. Students agreed that “the Commuter Commons was a space to help separate home life from college life. Having home life and school all in the same place is hard having to navigate”. This space has served many students and continues to hold an important space on campus. Its impact on commuter students speaks volumes and should continue to be highlighted as a space that provides meaningful engagement and community to all commuter students at USD. I have seen first-hand the family-like environment that it creates not only for our students, but for us as a team as well. The concept of community is not something that we say that we do, but it is embodied in each team member and student staff. This type of culture is truly what makes the Commuter Commons so special, and it is something that this space continues to aim to do for future students that enter this space.

### ***COVID times as a Commuter***

As students were asked about their experience navigating college while also in a pandemic, they shared both some of the benefits and the challenges adjusting to attending school in a remote platform. As commuters, one of the biggest benefits was not having to think about

driving to campus and navigating the concern of finding parking. By attending classes from home, this created flexibility to reach both classes and cocurricular activities. It also became more convenient for students to support their families and be involved in their family life. As all students were asked to shift back home to their families, this gave traditional on-campus living students the experience of what it would be like to be a commuter student, by attending school from home. As this experience took place, the term “commuter” had been widened and used to identify all students as being virtual commuter students. Traditional commuter students did not struggle as much with having to stay at home with their families, as this was very similar to their already daily college lives. However, traditional students became more understanding of parts of the commuter student experience in terms of navigating school from home instead of living on campus. Alternately, CAs expressed that by not coming to campus, they were missing the opportunity to separate themselves from their home life and transition into being in school mode.

One CA shared:

My work and my school and my home life is all in the same place, which is super stressful, like it's not fun. I don't like it. Sure, I got like good food, I can like have my kitchen and all, but I miss having like a space to call my own, instead of having like a lot of intrusions.

Students agreed that trying to balance attending classes from home was difficult because of the lack of personal spaces to study and do work. This prompted additional academic challenges and struggles with professors being understanding of the dynamic of a student's home life due to the circumstances. Some professors believed that it would be easier for students to do work from home and students struggled receiving empathy from their professors in being adaptable. Another CA shared:

Like, hey like I live at home full time now and I'm still trying to attend classes, but I have familial responsibilities and it kind of sucks sometimes when professors are all like.. Oh

well, you should have more time now that you're at home to be you know doing this work.

Instructors may be thinking that students have the responsibility to uphold academic expectations. However, it is also the instructor's responsibility to understand that a student maintains a life outside of their classroom and may be navigating other additional responsibilities. This can make it more difficult for students to approach their instructors for support and resources. How can instructors have a more student-centered approach when engaging with their students? How can instructors create a more open, inclusive, and culturally competent space so that students can feel safe and a sense of community within the space of their classes? While there can be the question of how academic rigor cannot be compromised because of the pandemic, it is important for institutions to understand that both academic and student affairs have the responsibility to put the needs of student's first. As practitioners, it is helpful for us to learn from our students as to how we can better serve them.

### **Summary**

From an academic standpoint, students struggled to find the balance of working and studying from home. In addition, their social experience was greatly impacted by not being able to engage with people in person on campus. A big part of a student's time during college is the social aspect of their experience. However, being a student virtually has taken away from the in-person interactions that they would typically experience. CAs shared how their engagement with supporting other commuters because of how different it is connecting with students virtually instead of in person. While being online has become a barrier for students to connect in person, some CAs shared that in some ways, this has helped with their social anxiety. It allowed them to open a bit more about themselves by being online and leading virtual programs. It did also offer additional flexibility to attend more virtual programs and to not worry about driving to campus to

try to attend these events. Overall, as a community, we have all learned to adapt to being in a virtual platform and learned new creative ways to engage with one another. During this time, the team of CLD grew closer as we were on this journey together both as students, staff, and professionals and our community strengthened as we supported each other during these uncertain times.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations that impacted my actions and findings, with one of the biggest barriers being unable to engage with more students in person due to the impact of COVID-19. In March 2020, all departments across campus and students undertook much stress as to how we can navigate living in a global pandemic while also continuing the work that we do. There was an increase in anxiety as to how we can approach our work and re-create programs and curriculum to be virtual-friendly. Due to the urgency of the situation and time sensitive tasks that needed to be done, the initial submission of my IRB did not happen until September 2020. Initially, I had wanted to begin my first cycle by this time. However, due to delays and the on-going adjustment of working in a remote platform, my IRB was not approved until December 2020.

While we learned to adapt and work primarily in a virtual platform, it was difficult to not engage with each other in person. Our abilities to socially connect and build relationships was compromised. This was a world-wide adjustment and sacrifice that we all had to make to help ensure the health and safety of ourselves and others. For me, it was a unique experience as I had just entered my role as the new graduate assistant of CLD and did not have pre-established relationships or knowledge entering the Commuter Commons. I was excited to join my team in person and to begin establishing bonds with students and staff. Even though, my experience was

not in person, I was still able to connect with our Commuter Assistants and CLD team as best as I could due to our circumstances. I believe that I would have been able to connect with more FGC student participants, had we been on campus but access to students was limited.

As my action research wanted to focus more on the impact of familial relationships on first-generation commuter students, I was thrilled at the chance to engage in dialogue with family members. However, another limitation included not being able to interview all family participants as intended. As mentioned earlier, when discussing with Peter about interviewing his parents, he shared his valid concerns of how there would be a language barrier and his parents spoke very little English. This was a very reflective moment for me, as during the planning of my research, I did not consider this as a potential barrier. I really appreciated Peter for speaking to this point and for putting things into perspective. I could imagine how other families can relate to this and may feel that it is difficult to create a bridge with institutions if they cannot culturally connect. In contrast, Mary's mom couldn't interview with me due to a scheduling conflict and lack of communication. Mary was also a senior graduating and became busy wrapping up her final semester.

Upon further reflection of these limitations, it is important for institutions to think about the importance of hiring more employees of color and of diverse backgrounds. This can further support students of minoritized and underserved groups and can help increase engagement with students and their families. In Peter's case, I had wished that I spoke their language or had known a professional staff who could have helped to talk to his parents so that they were more comfortable. At the same time, this may increase the risk of employees feeling tokenized and taken advantage of as the only staff person of color. Therefore, as institutions are hiring more practitioners, it is important that they too are also supported by their institutions.

## Recommendations

As a person who was born and raised in an Eastern culture and grew up in a Western culture, there was a delicate balance when it came to forming and shaping my values personal approach. As part of Western culture, it is common to adopt an individualistic mindset and to embody independence as a strong value and way of life. Similarly, most four-year institutions celebrate this by encouraging students to live in on campus and to begin learning how to be self-reliant. This opportunity helps students grow into their own and find out who they are separate from their family identity. While this is an important step in a student's personal development, how are students who are first-generation commuters supported at the institutional level when their daily lives are still strongly associated with their family identity and culture? How are we fostering an environment that celebrates who they are as individuals and the communities that they belong to? As we think about students of various backgrounds, the comparison between a collectivist culture and an individualistic culture becomes very relevant. When looking at a traditional higher education model and the assumption of what a typical, traditional college student may be like, many times the familial aspect of a student's life may be overlooked. When institutions look at students with a limited lens in terms of how their on-campus experience will be impacted, it is important to consider those students who are living off-campus and to understand their influences outside of campus life. For example, when looking at how independent societies form, its strong roots are built on the importance of how people are more likely to elaborate on focus on aspects of themselves that are self-sufficient. In contrast, interdependent communities recognize the importance of connecting with others (Shotton et al., 2013). While for some students, it may seem difficult to balance a family life and their academic

experience, FG students find a unique balance between supporting family, and the college experience. Peter shared:

My home life really influenced me to be a more responsible person, I knew that I had duties that I had to perform when I came home but it was like I got home and was not bombarded with tasks. My parents were really understanding, I'm really blessed for that.

As I reflected on this, I think more about the difference of values between Eastern and Western culture. Western culture celebrates independence, and individualistic culture. Students that are continuing generation students living on campus, are ready to physically separate from their families and form their own individualistic identities. For students whose parents are immigrant parents, never attended college and are coming from a collectivist culture, it is more uncommon for parents to physically separate from their children until they are married. It would be beneficial for institutions to find the balance between these values and understand that not all students will have the same experience in terms of living on campus.

Currently, there is a department known as Parents and Family Relations, which encourages parents and families to be more involved with USD, by offering their time, money, and commitment to building community with other parents by becoming a Parent Ambassador. Through this experience, parents are invited to help support on campus events and to be a part of the Torero experience. However, not all parents have the ability and capacity to be involved in this way. This type of involvement may be considered non-inclusive of all parents and first-generation families. With the increase in awareness of the inequities that exist, USD can help to bridge the gap so that families of all backgrounds can be more involved. It can also be overlooked that students may be parents themselves and experience challenges in being supported. It would be beneficial to incorporate or to create a Family Resource Center, which aims to provide outreach, education and resources to parents and families and students who are

parents. This space can focus more on serving the needs of families and student parents by forming providing services through a more inclusive and culturally competent lens. This center can also serve student parents by providing supportive services such as childcare, financial aid resources, nursing stations and workshops on finding the balance between being a parent and student. This resource center can be strengthened by functioning as a collaborative with other departments including Student Supportive Services, Commuter Commons, Counseling Center, Women's Commons, and other affinity spaces. They can help to provide workshops, with topics focusing on "Connecting with your Family", "The First-Generation Student Experience", and other workshops that serves to support FGC students and families. Throughout my action research, it has been made apparent as to how important the role of family can be and how there is a gap between how FGC students are connecting with their families about their college experience. USD can invite families to be more hands-on in a different way and highlight that brings forward the visibility of this identity by emphasizing the role of family in a student's higher educational experience.

Throughout many of the student testimonies, we have seen the prevalence of imposter syndrome being high in FGC students. As students identify as BIPOC, non-traditional, first-generation, underserved students, it can be challenging to find a strong sense of belonging and community at a predominantly white institution (PWI). These students look for spaces of support and meaningful engagement where they feel seen, heard, and acknowledged. As student participants have mentioned, some have felt a lack of support and understanding from their professors, and this has contributed towards their feelings of imposter syndrome. Mary recommended:

I think faculty should have some sort of training on how to engage with transfer students, realizing that we are not traditional four-year students, and have administration follow.

Certain opportunities are different for students that live on campus. Coming from a community college, it makes a difference as to where you're coming from. Coming to USD, it is assumed that we all have the same access to resources and opportunities. Professors should use trauma informed pedagogy, to be aware of student's needs, experiences. They can we create teaching communities so marginalized communities feel welcome and comfortable. They should use appropriate an non-triggering language, so students don't feel attacked.

Students spend majority of their time with their professors in their classes. Therefore, it is important for faculty to implement a more student-centered and inclusive approach. Instructors may not realize the power and impact that they have when engaging with their students. They serve as one of the most direct points of daily interaction and engagement with students and can connect students to additional resources at USD. It is helpful for instructors not just to say that are creating a safe, diverse, and inclusive environment for all, but to truly *embody* these values by showing students in the classroom that they are willing to support them in a more holistic way, rather than solely focusing on academics. It is recommended by our students, that instructors incorporate resources in their syllabus that would be helpful for students with unique needs, including financial tools, access to a computer or laptop on campus, and other additional equitable resources that can serve their students in the classroom. Traditionally, instructors will include their office hours on their syllabus, but students can feel more supported by offering flexibility and availability so that commuters are able to have better access. In addition, this can be more of a campus-wide effort to learn and understand the needs of their incoming students.

Mary suggested the following:

USD should do a survey to incoming students about their access to resources. Do they have access to technology, textbooks, funds to pay for supplies, books, ask if students identify as being in need of DDLRC....

These considerations will greatly be appreciated by students, especially those who do not live on campus and who may not have as much direct access to resources.

It was also made apparent as to how there is a gap in equity in terms of commuters finding access to parking services, affordable food options and finding spaces on campus where they feel a sense of community and belonging. These students navigate many other things outside of campus life, including their family, part-time jobs, and other priorities while balancing college life. Students that live on campus are living within this sphere which allows them to solely focus on their college experience without any distractions and their experiences are built in for them, such as on-campus events, social opportunities, food meal plans, living quarters, access to professors, peers, and advisors. While USD provides great focus to the traditional student experience, commuter students are underserved and would appreciate more consideration and support as they navigate their unique college experience.

Commuters must navigate finding equitable food options, parking, and spaces on campus that increase their sense of belonging. The Commuter Commons serves as this one space that is meant to serve all commuter students, but there should be a more campus-wide effort to highlight the commuter student experience. USD can better support commuter students by being more considerate of timings of classes, orientation, and registration because commuters have a farther distance to travel, navigate traffic and parking challenges. Specially if there is early morning registration, it would be helpful to have more designated parking areas or assigned parking spots for commuter students. Commuters mentioned having additional expenses, including spending up to \$100 a week on gas alone to travel to campus, making it financially inequitable. In terms of food options, commuters typically do not have a meal plan, but it was suggested that it could be helpful to be able to load a certain amount of money onto student ID cards so that students can purchase food on campus, as opposed to purchasing an entire meal plan which could be very expensive and impractical for a commuter.

After reflecting upon current practices and systems that are in place to support FGC students at USD, it would be beneficial to have a more intentional campus-wide collaborative effort across departments to engage, connect, and provide support to the larger first-generation commuter student population. Collaboration is key and bridging the gap between student affairs and academic affairs, families, and institutions, and approaching students with a more empathetic, and inclusive lens can greatly better support our current and prospective students at USD.

### **Gratitude and Final Reflections**

As I have come towards the end of my action research and graduate school journey, I am so grateful for what this experience has taught me. This topic is dear to my heart as it made me reflect on what it was like being an undergraduate first-generation commuter student and how it has connected to my experience as a first-generation graduate student at USD. It brought me great joy to have been able to connect with students on a personal level and to have served them as a mentor and advisor as a graduate assistant for the Commuter Commons. I feel that I am in a place of privilege to be able to amplify the voices of the unheard and to help create visibility to the beauty and sense of community that first-generation commuter students bring to USD. By creating space for students to share their narratives, it brought forward a fresh perspective as to what current FGC students are experiencing today and how we can share their stories and implement that as feedback to better improve our practices.

With the knowledge that I gained, my hope for the future is to advocate for mentorship program that serves first-generation commuter students, that aims to focus on academic preparation, advising and mentorship, community building, family relations and life-skills workshops. This type of program can create the space for students and families to build a sense

of community and to receive intentional support, leading them to have an enriching college experience. I want to help raise awareness of the gaps that continue to persist in providing support to FGC students and to take this as a learning opportunity of how we can improve our approach as higher education practitioners.

I want to personally thank all the student and family participants who have given their time, space, transparency, and vulnerability while sharing their stories and lived experiences. I also want to thank my team of Community and Leadership Development, Commuter Assistants, my fellow Graduate Assistant Jocelyn Velasquez, Assistant Director of CLD, Ariela Canizal and campus partners, without whom I could not have done this work. Thank you for all your support, guidance, and feedback in helping to make my action research possible. Finally, I want to dedicate this to first-generation commuters, your families, and to my own family who were the inspiration and thread for my action research. It gave me great privilege and joy to learn from you and I value being able to share it with the world through your lens. As the reader, thank you so much for taking the time to read about my research. I hope that it was as powerful for you to read as much as this experience has been for me.

## References

- Benigno, A. (2012). The effects of family obligation on college degree attainment for Filipino American students (Dissertation). Alliant International University, San Diego, CA. Available from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (AAT 3517759)
- Covarrubias, R., Valle, I., Laiduc, G., & Azmitia, M. (2018). “You never become fully independent”: Family roles and independence in first-generation college students. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 34*(4), 381–410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558418788402>
- Hébert, T. P. (2017). An examination of high-achieving first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 62*(1), 96–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0016986217738051>
- Ishitani, T. T., & Reid, A. M. (2015). First-to-Second-Year persistence profile of commuter students. *New Directions for Student Services, 2015*(150), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20123>
- Ishitani, T. T. (2003). A longitudinal approach to assessing attrition behavior among first generation students: Time-varying effects of pre-college characteristics. *Research in Higher Education, 44*, 433-449. doi:10.1023/A:1024284932709
- Jacoby, B. (2015). Enhancing commuter student success: What's theory got to do with it? *New Directions for Student Services, 2015*(150), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20122>
- Longwell-Grice, R., Adsitt, N. Z., Mullins, K., & Serrata, W. (2016). The first Ones: Three studies on first-generation college students. *NACADA Journal, 36*(2), 34–46. <https://doi.org/10.12930/nacada-13-028>
- McNiff, J. (2016). *You and your action research project*. Routledge.

- Parahoo, K. (2005). The essential guide to doing research Zina O’Leary the essential guide to doing research Sage 205 £18.99 0761941991 0761941991. *Nurse Researcher*, 12(4), 90–91. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.12.4.90.s7>
- Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido-Dibrito, F., & Stephen John Quaye. (2016). *Student development in college: theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand.
- Penrose, A. (2002). Academic Literacy Perceptions and Performance: Comparing First-Generation and Continuing-Generation College Students. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 36(4), 437-461. Retrieved March 30, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/40171585](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40171585)
- Plaskett, S., Bali, D., Nakkula, M. J., & Harris, J. (2018). Peer mentoring to support First-generation low-income college students. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(7), 47–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721718767861>
- Shotton, H. J., Lowe, S. C., & Waterman, S. J. (2013). *Beyond the Asterisk understanding native students in higher education*. Stylus.
- Swecker, H. K., Fifolt, M., & Searby, L. (2013). Academic Advising and First-Generation College Students: A Quantitative Study on Student Retention. *NACADA Journal*, 33(1), 46–53. <https://doi.org/10.12930/nacada-13-192>
- Telzer, E. H., & Fuligni, A. J. (2009). A longitudinal daily Diary study of Family assistance and academic achievement among adolescents from Mexican, Chinese, and European backgrounds. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38(4), 560–571. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-008-9391-7>

Toutkoushian, R. K., Stollberg, R. A., & Slaton, K. A. (2018). Talking 'Bout My Generation: Defining "First-Generation College Students" in Higher Education Research. *Teachers College Record*, *120*(040303), 1–38.

Wagenaar, T. C., & Tinto, V. (1988). Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition. *Contemporary Sociology*, *17*(3), 414. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2069700>

Wang, T. R. (2014). "I'm the only person from Where I'm from to go to college": Understanding the Memorable Messages first-generation college students receive from parents. *Journal of Family Communication*, *14*(3), 270–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2014.908195>