

February 2024

## Persistence of First-Generation College Students During Campus Closure

Ruby Lin

Biola University, [ruby.lin81@gmail.com](mailto:ruby.lin81@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lin, Ruby (2024) "Persistence of First-Generation College Students During Campus Closure," *Journal of Critical Issues in Educational Practice*: Vol. 13: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie/vol13/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Critical Issues in Educational Practice* by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

---

## Persistence of First-Generation College Students During Campus Closure

### Abstract

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic, which caused the largest education disruption in world history. Prior to the pandemic, first-generation college students were considered an underrepresented and vulnerable population at four-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008; House et al., 2020). This study sought to capture the lived experiences of seven first-generation college students at a four-year, private institution in Southern California who had to unexpectedly leave their university community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants recount their experiences of having to leave their university campus suddenly without direct access to resources provided by the university. Framed around the tenants that higher education institutions are distinct for both social and academic integration (Tinto, 1975), perceptions of sense of belong impact the persistence of first-generation college students through college. The qualitative study included a reflective prompt that participants responded to, followed by an interview over Zoom. The emerging themes revealed how perceptions of connection to the university fluctuate, yet feelings of connection are crucial in the persistence of first-generation college students. Participants described how the emotional and social support of faculty and the first-generation program were factors in their persistence throughout campus closure.

### Keywords

first-generation college students, persistence, social and emotional well-being, sense of belonging, institutional agents, first-generation programs

### Author Statement

Teacher of future teachers. First in my family to graduate from college. Inspired by first-generation scholars, an emerging population in higher education and leadership. Committed to understanding and sharing their experiences through practice and research.

An emerging population of students in four-year higher education institutions are first-generation college students. A first-generation college student can be defined as an individual who is first to attend a four-year higher education institution. More than one-third of students entering a four-year institution are considered first in the families to attend college (Catalidi, et al., 2018). In March 2020, seven participants who lived on campus were asked to physically leave their college campus. They were in the middle of their spring semester as first-year undergraduate students.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how campus closures due to COVID-19 impact the emotional and social well-being of first-generation college students. More information is needed in understanding how first-generation college students were impacted by the physical separation from campus resources, specifically peers, support staff, programs and professors induced by the pandemic while students were away from campus. These findings can inform higher education institutions and bring greater awareness on practices in how to sustain and support the social and emotional well-being of first-generation college students on the persistence track towards attainment of academic goals.

The lived experiences of seven participants were through a reflective response and a Zoom interview. The emerging theme revealed how the social and emotional support of faculty and the first-generation program were positive factors in their persistence through their second year of college. Although social emotional learning has been positively received at the K-12 education setting, limited research has been conducted on the role of social and emotional learning in higher education institutions, specifically from faculty and embedded programs. The findings from this study affirm how the social and emotional support first-generation college students received from faculty and the first-generation program created a sense of belonging and connection to the university.

### **The Role of Theory**

This article draws from the work of Vincent Tinto (1975) who introduced the theoretical model of undergraduate retention. The major premise of the theory “can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college” (p. 94). An underpinning framing Tinto’s model of persistence includes the importance of integration because college is viewed as both an academic and social system. His theory posits the stronger the individual’s integration into both systems, the greater their commitment to the specific institution and the goal to complete college increases. The academic system includes an individual’s academic performance and their intellectual development. The social system is described as an individual’s interactions with peers and faculty. Tinto believed that a student could integrate into one of the systems, and not necessarily the whole, which served as enough of a positive factor (Mayhew et al. 2016). Most importantly, the perceptions of the individual and their college experience has the most influence on their persistence or withdrawal from college.

The first-generation college students’ experiences are often unique from their continuing-generation college peers at 4-year institutions. These differing experiences include socioeconomic status, academic preparation, social capital, levels of self-efficacy, integration into the academic and social environment and sense of belonging (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2019 Irelbeck, 2014). In addition, race and the intersectionality of multiple identities also impact their educational experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). With these possible variables

that impact First-generation college students, supporting their persistence through college is essential.

Historically, first-generation college students have been considered a racially and economically marginalized population in higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Soria & Stableton, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996). In 2015-2016, first-generation college students made up 48% of Pell Grant recipients. The Pell Grant is the largest federal financial aid grant based on household income for postsecondary students (National Center Education Statistics, 2016). As a result, first-generation college students often have no option but to work while being enrolled as full-time students (Adams & McBryer, 2020; Engle & Tinto, 2008). The juggling between multiple roles impacts their ability to fully concentrate on their academics and to immerse themselves in the college experience. Ongoing research stress how a sense of belonging is critical for students to integrate and feel valued in the college community and even more so for first-generation college students (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2017)

### **Possible Stressors for First-Generation College Students**

Literature already confirms that first-generation college students continue to overcome barriers and obstacles to be the first in their family to work towards a college degree (Cataldi, et al., 2018) yet alarming trends of inequities that impact their mental health continue to surface in the stories shared. First-generation college students are more likely to experience exacerbated stressors compared to their continuing-generation college peers during COVID-19 (Liu et al., 2020; Soria et al., 2020). In another study conducted by the student experience in the research university consortium, surveyed 28,198 undergraduate students between May through July 2020 at nine universities. Of those respondents, 26% identified as first-generation college students and of those 56% identified as low-income and working class. First-generation college students reported experiencing additional stressors compared to continuing-generation students. They were more likely to experience living in unsafe environments, food insecurity, housing insecurity, higher rates of mental health disorders and more challenges adapting to online instruction. These reported experiences are higher compared to their continuing-generation peers (Soria, et al., 2020).

### **Social Impact**

Social wellness of college students adds concerns due to loneliness and isolation (Lee et al., 2021). Moving to remote learning altered the possible relationship developed with peers. In a survey of 200 students, attending a 4-year college in the U.S. were recruited before the COVID-19 pandemic were surveyed through Pollfish (a survey research design platform that uses Random Device Engagement). One of the survey questions asked how Covid-19 impacted the participants' relationships with friends. The results from the survey reveal 27.8% had improved, 45.7% had strained, and 26.5% had no impact on relationships with friends. The increased stress factors at home, distance and lack of communication due to COVID-19 were the causes of the strained friendships. The survey was done during the spring 2020 semester, so the longitudinal impact on friendships have yet to be fully explored. Another study conducted on the general public in China revealed that college students were more likely to experience stress, anxiety and depression more than others during the pandemic (Li, et al., 2020). These stressors were caused by the isolation and separation from others.

## **Racial Discrimination**

Racial discrimination of Asian and Asian American students has negatively impacted their mental health (Liu, et al., 2020; Woo & Jun, 2021), and stronger efforts are needed in providing online mental health support for Asians. Reports of racial discrimination and violent attacks associated with COVID-19 has increased significantly since the outbreak of COVID-19. The Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON) received over 1800 reports of racial discrimination as of May 2020. Researchers, Woo and Jun (2021), examine the association between racial discrimination amid COVID-19 pandemic and depressive symptoms among Asian subgroups. They also investigated the role of communication after a stressful event, such as discrimination. Participants were recruited from an online survey panel across the country in May 2020. Of 1548 panels invited by Qualtrics, 858 respondents selected Asian as one of the multiple race options. They were then asked if they had experienced racist/xenophobia attacks, discrimination, harassment, and/or microaggressions since the outbreak of COVID-19. The results indicated racial discrimination was positively associated with depressive symptoms. The associations did not vary between Chinese Americans and other Asian subgroups. Communications with a spouse/partner served to mitigate the mental burden of racial discrimination. Further analysis revealed those who shared their racial discrimination experiences in online ethnic communities displayed stronger depressive symptoms. The conclusions from Woo and Jun (2021), suggest the benefits of social connection and communication in alleviating mental health burden of discrimination

## **Cultivating a Sense of Belonging**

The perceptions of first-generation college students experiencing a sense of belonging is critical for their persistence through college. Cultivating this sense of belonging can also differ for students based on their race, generation status and the intersection of both (Duran, et al., 2020). Using data from the Assessment of Collegiate Residential Environments and Outcomes, the researchers examined the environmental factors such as living on campus and perception of peer networks, contributing to belongingness. For two administrations of the survey, during spring 2017 and spring 2018, 59,364 students at two private and six public 4-year institutions across the United States participated. The findings revealed that white students indicated a higher sense of belonging compared to other students. African American/Black collegians indicate a much lower sense of belonging.

Similarly, those identified as first-generation college students reported lower perceptions of sense of belonging. To further the point of the intersection of social identities, both continuing-and first-generation African American/Black students reported lower scores for sense of belongingness compared to other students. In contrast, continuing-generation White collegians indicate a higher sense of belonging. The limitations of the study include the ability to statistically generalize the findings based on campuses, since the study included several geographical locations. In addition, the data incorporated is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to make claims about student growth and change. These findings provide a critical lens in how privileged and marginalized identities intersect to construct unique experiences of belonging at 4-year institutions.

In this article, I connect the relevance of Tinto's retention theory of social integration and the critical role of faculty and first-generation programs (Strayhorn, 2019) in emphasizing social and emotional connection for first-generation college students, specifically during remote

learning. The participants' social and emotional wellness was impacted by being physically disconnected from the university campus resources, faculty and peers for a long duration. In this study, connection is used to describe a sense of belonging. Recognizing the importance of sense of belonging, I wanted to capture their experiences in how campus closure impacted the social and emotional well-being. In the qualitative study, I sought to understand the question: In what ways are first-generation college students feeling connected to the university?

## **Methodology**

For this study, a qualitative approach served to understand lived experiences and narratives of a marginalized population in higher education institutions (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). An openness to understanding rather than making assumptions is vital in framing the participants' experiences in the study (Denzin, 2016). Further, a qualitative study is the process of which explores how people and events impact each other (Maxwell, 2013), which is yet to be completely conveyed and understood with COVID-19. The design of the study aimed to bring greater context and understanding of campus closures through the perspective of first-generation college students. Using the Theory of Persistence (Tinto, 1975) to frame literature, methods of data collection, and analysis of data was to provide a foundation for understanding how higher education institutions' academic, social and financial support are instrumental in sustaining the overall mental health of first-generation colleges students, potentially impacting their attainment of academic goals.

Data was collected through two methods: (1) reflective prompt (2) interview. The first method of collecting qualitative data was providing a reflective prompt. The researcher provided participants with a reflective prompt to answer prior to the interview. The reflective prompt was emailed to participants through a private Google document. Two days prior to the interview, the response was read and analyzed. The response by the participants was an exercise to encourage participants to reflect back to Spring 2020, since over a year had passed from the time they were asked to suddenly leave campus. The prompt was drafted with the research questions as the focal point.

### **Phase 1- Reflective Prompt**

A reflective prompt was chosen to provide participants autonomy in time and space to reflect and convey their feelings, thoughts and experiences. The prompt included the email sent to students by the president of the university asking them to leave campus immediately and additional written probes to engage the participant in possible reflections to consider in their response. Participants were encouraged to use phrases, words or images in their response. Prior to the study, a pilot study was conducted on the reflective prompt during Spring 2021. The participants in the pilot study offered suggestions and feedback regarding the directions, the content, the flow, the length and how they felt during their participation. Designed specifically for the study, the reflective prompt was included in the analysis. The reflective response served as a companion and introduction to the interview, adding depth and greater context.

### **Phase 2 - Interview Instrument**

Qualitative research involves a robust data collection (Bowen, 2009). A second source included to collect qualitative data was through the use of interviews. The interview questions were drafted to ensure that the research questions would be the focal point. The interview protocol consisted of five questions. Probes were also included for the interview to minimize the

interviewer effect by asking the same question of each respondent (Patton, 2002). Prior to the study, the interview instrument was piloted by first-generation college students from the target population during Spring 2021. These students met more than half the criteria as potential participants, which offered valuable reflections and feedback in how to adjust the interview instrument. Following the guidelines of IRB, I conducted all interviews through the virtual platform of Zoom. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## **Participants**

During the selection process, the director of the first-generation program became the contact person. The director initially emailed a cohort of approximately 35 first-generation college students who potentially met the criteria for the study. In the initial email, the director asked for the consent for access to the names and emails of potential participants to be included in the recruitment email. Thirteen potential participants responded to the email from the director and gave consent to receive the recruitment email. A recruitment email was sent to the thirteen potential participants with the details and specific criteria for the study. Ten potential participants responded to the recruitment email. From the ten potential participants, three individuals did not meet all the criteria as the requirement for the study. In the final selection of the participants, seven individuals met all five criteria and provided consent to participate in the study. The seven participants were undergraduate students in their third or final year at a 4-year, private university in Southern California.

Based on the methods of Lochmiller and Lester (2017), purposeful sampling, non-probability was used by the researcher to conduct the research. Purposeful sampling was selected for the study in trying to understand the experiences of a specific population; therefore, the sample population included in the study must meet a set of criteria. The criteria were included in the initial email to recruit participants. Participants meeting the criterion needed for the study includes:

- enrolled as a first-year student in fall 2019
- first-generation college student
- undergraduate
- had been living on campus
- ages 18-20

Seven participants who met the criterion were selected to participate in the study. Since the focus is on the impact of social and emotional well-being of first-generation college students due to campus closure, the participants are represented by different races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and both genders. All participants were students of color. Of the first-generation population from the university, 61% are female, which was reflected in the ratio of five females and two males selected for the study.

Table 1 is a chart describing the participants' major and anticipated graduation date:

**Table 1**

*Participant Information*

Participant name	Ethnicity	Major	Anticipated Graduation
Franco	Latinx	Business administration with concentration in analytics	Spring 2023
Lisa	Asian	Psychology with minor in sociology	Spring 2023
Kevin	Latinx	Psychology	Spring 2023
Veronica	Latinx	Christian ministry and sociology	Spring 2023
Katrina	Latinx	Communication science and disorder	Fall 2021
Caroline	African American	Biological science (pre-med)	Spring 2023
Maya	Asian	Communication science and disorder	Spring 2023

**Data Analysis**



This study utilized a qualitative approach to data collection. The research questions served to guide the data analysis for the reflective prompt and interviews. In alignment with the design of the study, the reflective prompt and interview questions were crafted with a direct connection to the research questions. Both forms of data were reviewed, coded and analyzed to answer the research questions.

Data was collected from reflective responses and interviews from the same participants. After each reflective prompt was submitted and interview conducted, the researcher wrote separate reports documenting any key findings and further questions for clarification for the follow-up email. In qualitative research, specifically populations that have been historically marginalized and silenced, being mindful and culturally sensitive was prioritized throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data (Milner, 2007). Making informed decisions based on continual conversations with individuals that represent the target population and piloting the data collection instruments prior to the study centered their narratives. Understanding the interpretations of the format, wording, and language incorporated in the data collection. As the interviews were transcribed, I assigned codes to themes that emerged. Based on codes, statements by participants were assigned accordingly. As new themes emerged from reading through the transcription multiple times, several codes were merged that were aligned with prominent themes or noted as a divergent perspective.

Engaging in self-reflection, member checks and peer review encourages accountability for personal bias and minimizes possible assumptions during the analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All of the responses from the interviews were transcribed and systematically coded. Further, I read through the transcripts and listened to the interviews multiple times to develop possible ideas regarding themes and relationships (Maxwell, 2013). Similarly, the reflective responses were systematically analyzed in the same manner. I extracted emerging themes and patterns from the reflective responses that were congruent and/or diverging from the interview analysis. The analysis of the reflection responses served to guide the opening questions of the interviews, add any new contextual information or fill in any possible gaps from the literature (Bowen, 2009). Throughout the process, the confidentiality of each participant and their responses were maintained.

## **Experiences of the Participants**

Before campus closure, five out of the seven participants had a sense of belonging to the university. Kevin had just started a job he had wanted. Veronica and Katrina were both invested and deeply involved with the first-generation program. They had developed friendships and were enjoying a college experience. Participants described the emotional and social impact of having to leave campus.

### **The Emotional Impact**

A sense of loss was described by three of the participants. Being first in their family to attend college is significant, so they were excited to have the college experience. Lisa described her feelings:

And so, college was my one chance to finally be in the same place for four years, and I told myself I am not transferring because the longest I've ever been in a place was less than two years, in the past. So yeah, I just really wanted to be in one place, and then I just

felt so robbed. I was preparing for this my whole life, for all 18 years. I was so excited for four years, in the same place, with the same people—being super excited, and that did not get to happen.

Lisa described the feeling as being ‘robbed’ from the college experience she worked her whole life to attain the opportunity to attend college, especially being first in her family. Growing up she moved 17 times and never lived in the same location for more than two years. She thought attending college would give her the opportunity to stay in the same location for four years. In her words, “I had barely adjusted to being a freshman in college and I suddenly had to move back home. I felt robbed of something that I had worked towards my entire life, especially coming from a first-gen background.” Lisa was robbed of the opportunities she had been anticipating with campus closures. The most difficult part was the suddenness of it all. From her reflection response, there was no time to grasp the events that followed, while having to physically leave campus suddenly. Participants had to react and respond to the expectations of the university to abide by the shelter in place mandates.

Veronica described having to mourn the loss of the stages and experiences in college. Second year students in the first-generation program on campus are asked to be a mentor to first-year students, but she did not get that opportunity to do this in-person. She described her initial feelings in an excerpt taken from her reflection response:

I think the most challenging thing for me was what ended up happening after I left campus. The physical packing and saying goodbye initially were not difficult. I had prayed the morning before, so I was emotionally able to continue the day. I look back now and didn't realize most of the people I had said goodbye to would have already graduated by the time September 2021 came along. I think the challenge was mourning different things as the year unfolded.

Veronica was really looking forward to that second-year experience, but had to finally come to terms with the loss of experiences and opportunities. According to her reflective response, Veronica expressed that she did not realize this would be the last time she would see certain friends. By the time students would return to campus for in-person learning, these friends had graduated.

To further elaborate on these feelings of sadness and loss, Katrina provided imagery in her reflection response. She described the imagery of a storm cloud hovering over her. The entire college experience was taken away from her so suddenly. She further explained in the reflective response:

Everything changed and everything was like falling apart. Everything was—I was being sent home. I was told I had to do school online. I couldn't see any one and definitely that took a big toll on me and because community is like insanely huge for me. So, it gave me more issues with mental health.

The three participants from this study had to process those feelings of loss and disappointment of all the possible opportunities they were anticipating for their college experience. Being first in

the family to attend a 4-year institution is quite significant, and with every missed opportunity signifies a loss that holds personal value and meaning for the participants. Building a social community was important to the participants. The opportunities that create social connections through residential events, participating in on-campus clubs, dining on campus, living on campus and meeting professors for office hours are considered a loss from campus closures. The missed experiences could not be replicated for the participants because the uncertainty of having that opportunity again was part of their grieving process.

### **The Social Impact**

The findings for the social impact of campus closures were both a mix of negative and positive. Five out of seven participants described the difficulty of being physically separated from their friends. Kevin spent time recalling his feelings and explained:

It was just really depressing because I'm one of those social people. So, I like being around my friends and all that stuff, and I like being around my family. But it's just like being locked up in my room or my house. Altogether, for like weeks on end, without really going out. It just really got worse. I would say, it was pretty consistent, just feeling depressed. My friends are right there, but we can't just go out and hang out. I just can't really get out of the house.

They acknowledged that facetime and Zoom were available, but this did not feel the same as seeing friends and professors in-person. Veronica explained that she thrived off being around people and not being around people made her forget who she was before campus closures. She states, "It really tested my friendships, so a lot of friendships just went away." Caroline elaborated on the same point that "Friendships were hard to maintain during remote learning."

Kevin did not anticipate the lengthy duration of shelter in place. He struggled with not being able to physically hang out with his friends. Katrina had the opportunity to move back on campus during spring 2021. Despite being on campus, she had to live by herself in a suite because of social distancing restrictions. As a result, she experienced panic attacks because of the isolation. Caroline expressed the difficulty in maintaining friendships during remote learning. Friendship connections made her first-year on campus just tapered off.

A few participants expressed positive experiences in their social life during campus closures. Franco had a difficult adjustment moving back home to live with his parents, so he described his friends as being a 'safe spot.' He would connect with them while playing video games and online chats. The time with his friends online was an opportunity to talk about other things besides school and for him to just be himself. He noticed the time spent with them online would go by so quickly. Lisa described that most of her friendships were made during remote learning because she did not prioritize friendships when on campus. During campus closures, she connected with friends by playing online games and responding to friends' social media posts.

### **Feelings of Connection**

Participants described their experiences with their level of connection during the year and a half of a closed campus. Their experiences and perceptions varied depending on location and

involvement with the university clubs or jobs. Through the findings, a few major themes emerged in regard to perceptions of connection.

### **Connection and Location**

Feelings of connection are closely linked to being physically in the same location. Franco states, "Connection is when you are not alone." Four out of the seven participants defined connection as being physically in the same environment to have human connection. The on-campus clubs and residence halls offered virtual activities to try to keep students connected. Some participants attended what they called 'huddles,' but eventually they stopped attending. At the initial stages of campus closure, participants tried to stay connected to their friends from the university through facetime, texts, phone calls or Zooms. Eventually, this became difficult with conflicting schedules and making the effort. The relationships were hard to maintain once they were off campus. Virtual activities could not replace the human connection participants feel while being physically together. Kevin explained:

Connecting is being able to hang out with friends. Go to different places on campus - cafeteria, grab coffee, or hang out at his apartment. Talking and hanging out with professors. Attend clubs in person. Not being on Zoom. Virtual activities were not effective. No one attended.

Katrina also defined connection as being physically in the same environment, and once she moved off campus, she did not feel connected to the university. Her perspective of needing human connection was also solidified when she moved back on campus during Spring 2021. Katrina had the opportunity to be on campus for one of her classes that needed to meet in-person. Although she was physically back on campus, she felt isolated and alone for the first time in her life.

Veronica identified a change in her sense of belonging to the university. She states, "No, I did not feel it at all. It was almost as if I lost my identity as a student of the university. I just felt like a student." From her perception, everyone was living their own life and doing their own thing. Not being in the same physical location became a common theme as to lack of connection for Veronica, Kevin, and Katrina.

### **Connection and Involvement**

Participants felt a level of connection to the university depending on their involvement. During the interview, Lisa defined connection by stating, "Knowing that the school cares about you. Not being afraid to reach out to somebody. Mostly just the school is really caring, like seeing me as a person, not just as tuition money." Feelings of connection were different for the participants that had a campus job and were involved with a campus club or activity. These jobs were considered campus jobs even though they were still being done remotely. Lisa's perceptions of connection to the university were related to their jobs. Before leaving campus in March 2020, she received the role of pure wellness ambassador. This position would start her second year of college. During her training and meetings, she was able to feel cared for by the administration, faculty and staff. Her director would check in on her wellness often. Prior to getting the pure wellness ambassador position, Lisa was considering transferring to a different university. She had been accepted into an out of state, prestigious university, and her parents were encouraging her to transfer. During the interview she also explained, "I really think getting

the job. Having students ask me questions, realizing that I can answer them and that I am passionate about helping students. I think that really validated me, and I am actually helpful.” Lisa realized the position brought her validation and value. The ability and opportunity to support other students provided a level of connection to the university.

For first-generation college students, their social integration has great significance as part of the college experience. They have a strong desire to become part of the campus life and also contribute to the university community. Lisa found this connection and experience when she got her new position through the university. The pure wellness position represented connection, validation of worth, and ultimately prevented Lisa from transferring to a different university.

Feelings of connection were stronger through involvement with a campus club and student government. She got to be a huddle group leader and part of the student government on campus. Caroline explained that she felt most connected to the university through her job and involvement with a campus club. With her role as a huddle group leader, she was asked to plan virtual activities for students to participate in during campus closure. She described her role:

I had to plan some for one of my jobs. I had to be a huddle group leader. We met once a month or so. We showed up—just a space for people to talk, play games and just get to know each other. Being part of the student government offered her insight into decisions being made at the university level.

In fall 2020, Caroline, along with other student government leaders had the opportunity to sit in on a meeting with the president of the university to express their concerns. Being in student government also allowed her the opportunity to move back into on campus, residential housing by spring 2021.

### **Feelings of Connection Fluctuate**

Franco’s feelings of connection were dependent upon the interactions within his Zoom classes. He noticed his feelings would change. During the interview he explained the feelings of connection:

Just not being around my friends made it difficult, but still being able to see everybody in the classes still made it feel like I was connected in some way, especially when everybody participated, and it was a really good class.

The weekly Zoom classes enabled Franco to feel engaged and connected with his classmates. He particularly enjoyed the classes when students were talking over each other because in essence, there was a feeling that his classmates were not in individual rooms, but in a physical class setting. The loudness and talking created an energy that imitated the environment of the classroom. Those types of moments during Zoom class created a connection for Franco.

Three participants experienced a sense of connection with the university prior to campus closure. Kevin was at a great place in his life before campus closure. He had just been hired as part of campus safety, a job he had been waiting for, and he had established solid friendships, but this was all disrupted suddenly. Kevin explains, “When I was online, I just did not feel like I was part of the campus any more or part of that university experience.” He also described how returning to campus fall 2021 was difficult because he had to start all over again in making those connections with people and even where places were located around campus. Prior to campus

closure, Veronica described herself as a “social bird.” Before going to remote learning, she specifically stated five people she had made connections with, and desired to get to know them better. Reflecting back, she was saddened by a lack of connection with them now. Katrina was also quite involved with the first-generation program and campus life before campus closure. She really enjoyed talking with classmates and meeting professors for office hours in-person. These were ways she felt connected, but these feelings of connection changed when she moved away from campus. In her perspective, feeling connected became challenging and she no longer felt like a college student.

### **Support Through Faculty and First-Generation Program**

The participants most felt supported by the university through the efforts of the professors. Six out of the seven participants remarked how they felt supported by their professors. At the beginning of remote learning, professors were extremely patient and understanding. They understood that remote learning was new for many students and not every student had reliable Wi-Fi. In support of their social emotional learning, professors made themselves available to talk, opened up time during class for students to share how they are doing, to ask questions about COVID-19, prayed for students and acknowledged their feelings. In support of their academics, professors were flexible in assignments, made exams open book, provided more study sessions, and made themselves more available to students.

A noticeable finding was the level of support perceived by participants in the first-generation program. All seven participants, who are part of the first-generation program on campus, had direct contact from the directors. The first-generation program directors would consistently call, text and email to check in on the participants in the program. Five out of the seven participants stated they received some type of support through the first-generation program on campus. For Veronica, the support from the program was significant, especially with the difficult living environment. She expressed how the leader of the first-generation program checked in on her wellness:

Xavier does a really good job at being intentional. I guess because he knew, at least in my cohort, we had more students of color, so he knew the groove of my cohort. He would always be intentional about contacting us, and how we are doing in our individual living situations. Asking us if we needed anything. He was very helpful.

On a regular basis, she would talk to Xavier, her mentor, to process the challenging circumstances at home. Katrina also expressed that she is so grateful for the support from the first-generation directors. She explains, “Xavier and Aurora were my biggest support. I don't know what I would have done without them.” Having the social and emotional support of the directors allowed her to persevere through her struggles and challenges.

The first-generation program was also a source in providing social and navigational capital. Lisa believes that her lifelong friends are through the first-generation program. First-generation students have the opportunity to participate in a summer bridge program leading into their first-year at the university. They are given support through resources, mentorship and mentoring opportunities, seminars, academic advising, and networking opportunities with the directors, staff and faculty. Caroline utilized several of the resources that the first-generation program had offered and recommended through the summer bridge program. The directors of the

program were intentional in reaching out to the participants to check on their well-being. The type of support also included regular check-ins, mentoring, and access to resources. The first-generation program offered and provided a variety of support to the participants.

### **Persistence through Campus Closure**

The discourse surrounding first-generation college students include perceptions of deficit and disadvantages (Schelbe, et al., 2019). Contrasting these perceptions, this study revealed the resilience and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) of the seven participants. The semester after returning to campus, one participant graduated early by Fall 2021. In Fall 2022, two participants graduated. As of Spring 2023, three participants graduated. One participant took one semester off for health reasons and is returning back to school in Fall 2023 to finish their undergraduate degree. These seven participants persisted.

### **Discussion**

The findings for the type of support participants received are alignment with the research from Tinto (2017) and Strayhorn (2019). Faculty and staff are influential in the ways they establish a culture of care and positive learning experiences for students. They must be committed to promote a sense of belonging and positive learning outcomes, especially for the retention of students from diverse learning backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomics (Tinto, 2017). The faculty at the university were able to provide the level of support that participants mentioned. Focused programs can also serve in creating support and a sense of belonging for first-generation programs (Strayhorn, 2019). The first-generation program at the university has been committed to the academic success and well-being of first-generation students. To take the case in point, participants noted the level of support they received through the program and program directors. Specific research is still needed on cultivating cultures of care within 4-year institutions that integrate social-emotional learning as a means to address how college is a distinct place for academics and a social support system that Tinto (2017) emphasized. I recognize that the lived experiences reflect a small sample of the first-generation college student population at a private institution. The experiences are limited and may not transfer to other higher education institutions. More of their experiences can be explored and need to be understood as first-generation college student transition into recovering from the pandemic.

### **Implications for Education Practices**

First, higher education institutions should consider a holistic approach in teaching college students. The social and emotional support are necessary in promoting the academic growth and achievement of students, specifically for first-generation college students (Strayhorn, 2019). Social-emotional learning has been successful in the K-12 setting (Weissberg et al., 2015); therefore, this mindset of social-emotional learning could transfer into higher education settings. Fostering places for young adults to manage, cope and communicate their feelings is needed during significant transitions and changes in college. The pandemic brought to light that social and emotional factors impact the sense of belonging perceived by students and their persistence through college. Perhaps, this is an opportunity to pivot towards social-emotional learning in higher education settings.

Second, findings from participants in the study suggest how faculty can integrate classroom practices to address the social-emotional needs of students. Building capacity in faculty to address needs beyond academics and classroom interactions require a comprehensive approach. During the interviews, participants recount how professors cultivated a sincere care for students by intentionally pausing in class lectures, discussions and activities to inquire about student wellbeing. Responsive faculty who prioritized the social-emotional needs of first-generation college students offer another layer of support that could sustain their overall social and emotional well-being. The reprioritizing of social and emotional needs affirms the holistic care of students and centers their humanity in higher education institution spaces.

Third, a growing number of 4-year universities offer programs such as summer bridge and first-year seminars, which aim to support their social and emotional growth at the beginning of college (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013; Howard & Sharpe, 2019). As many institutions have shifted back to in-person learning, mitigating gaps in connection by creating specific opportunities to feel connected and supported throughout the college experience are paramount. Growing research indicates that feelings of connection can fluctuate. Higher education institutions can consider consistent approaches to strengthen social and emotional connection for students. Traditionally, faculty are expected to fulfill teaching, research, committee and advising responsibilities. However, expanding opportunities for ongoing mentoring by faculty throughout the college experience could strengthen feelings of connection and social integration. Research indicates how faculty can act as institutional agents in promoting the education success for first-generation college students (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). In addition, ensuring that college campuses establish first-generation programs for continual support of first-generation college students. The participants described how the program and leaders were instrumental in their emotional and social care. These specific interactions and supports beyond the classroom setting would cater to the social-emotional needs of first-generation college students, which could lead to higher retention rates and persistence through 4-year institutions.

## References



- Adams, & McBrayer, J. S. (2020). The lived experiences of first-generation college students of color integrating into the institutional culture of a predominantly white institution. *Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 733–757.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a research method. *Qualitative Research Journal* 9(2), 27–40
- Cataldi, E., Bennett, C., Chen, X. (2018). *First-generation Students: College access, persistence, and postbachelor's outcomes*. Stats in Brief. NCES 2018-421. National Center for Education Statistics.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018421>
- Denzin, N. K. (2016). Critical qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), 8–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416681864>
- Duran, A., Dahl, L., Stipeck, C., & Mayhew, M. (2020). A critical quantitative analysis of students' sense of belonging: Perspectives on race, generation status, and collegiate environments. *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(2), 133–153.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0014>
- Engle, J. & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, First-generation students*. Pell Institute. [http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Moving\\_Beyond\\_Access\\_2008.pdf](http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Moving_Beyond_Access_2008.pdf).
- Gibbons, M., Rhinehart, A., & Hardin, E. (2019). How first-generation college Students adjust to college. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 20(4), 488–510. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025116682035>
- House, L., Neal, C., & Kolb, J. (2020). Supporting the mental health needs of first generation

- college students. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 34(2), 157–167.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2019.1578940>
- Howard, B. L., Sharpe, Jr., L. (2019). *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, May 2019, Vol. 7 Issue 2, p20-30, 11p; DOI: 10.32674/jise.v7i2.1207
- Lee, Solomon, M., Stead, T., Kwon, B., & Ganti, L. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of US college students. *BMC Psychology*, 9(1), 1–95.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00598-3>
- Li, H., Cao, H., Leung, D., & Mak, Y. (2020). The psychological impacts of a COVID-19 outbreak on college students in China: A longitudinal study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(11), 3933–.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17113933>
- Liu, C., Pinder-Amaker, S., Hahm, H., & Chen, J. (2020). Priorities for addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health. *Journal of American College Health*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print), 1–3.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1803882>
- Lochmiller, C.R. & Lester, J. N. (2017). *An introduction to educational research: Connecting methods to practice*. Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). SAGE.
- Mayhew, J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., Wolniak, G. C., Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T., (2016). *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works* (Vol. 3). Jossey-Bass.
- McCallen, L. S., & Johnson, H. L. (2020). The role of institutional agents in promoting higher

- education success among first-generation college students at a public urban university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 13(4), 320–332. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000143>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Milner, H. R. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. *Educational Researcher* 36(7), 388–400.
- National Center of Education Statistics (2016). *The Condition of Education 2016*. <http://nces.ed.gov>
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Schelbe, L., Swanbrow Becker, M., Spinelli, C., & McCray, D. (2019). First Generation College Students' Perceptions of an Academic Retention Program. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 19(5). <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v19i5.24300>
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103>
- Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9), e21279–e21279. <https://doi.org/10.2196/21279>
- Soria, K., Horgos, B., Chirikov, I., & Jones-White, D. (2020). *First-generation students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium. <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru/about-seru/seru-surveys/seru-covid-survey-reports>

- Strayhorn, T. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654304500108>
- Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 254–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917>
- Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gullotta, T. P. (2015). Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (p. 3–19). The Guilford Press.
- Woo, & Jun, J. (2021). COVID-19 Racial discrimination and depressive symptoms among Asians Americans: Does communication about the incident Matter? *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-021-01167-x>
- Wyatt, J. B., Bloemker, G. A. (2013). Social and emotional learning in a Freshmen Seminar. *Higher Education Studies*, 3(1), 106–114. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1081322>
- Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>