

First-Generation College Students: The Influence of Family on College Experience

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Abstract

According to Bradbury and Mather (2009), in the 2003-2004 academic school year 45% of new students enrolling in four-year institutions were first-generation students. When compared to continuing-generation college students, first-generation students have been shown to find the college going experience to be more stressful (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Despite the knowledge that these students find the college going experience to be more stressful, prior research has failed to examine the relationship between the families of these students and their college experience. Qualitative data was collected through three semi-structured focus group interviews with first-generation college students. Of the 19 participants, 37% ($n=7$) were male and 63% ($n=12$) were female and all were between the ages of 18 and 25. Based on the coding procedures for this study, five categories related to family influence emerged: (a) support; (b) understanding; (c) motivation; (d) goal achievement and (e) expectations.

Introduction

According to Bradbury and Mather (2009), in the 2003-2004 academic school year 45% of new students enrolling in four-year institutions were first-generation students. Additionally, of the first-generation college students who enter into four-year institutions only 43% obtain a bachelor's degree, compared to 59% of continuing-generation college students. When compared to continuing-generation college students, first-generation students have been shown to find the college-going experience to be more stressful (Phinney & Haas, 2003). It has been suggested that the increased level of stress for these students may be attributed to factors associated with first-generation college students: ethnic minority backgrounds, poorer academic performance, lack knowledge of the university system (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005), lower critical thinking abilities, and less likelihood of persisting in higher education (Ishitani, 2003; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Additionally, first-generation college students are likely to work more hours per week than second-generation students (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), experience less help in planning for college (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen 2000), and also tend to be from lower income families (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Phinney & Haas, 2003).

Despite the knowledge that these students find the college experience to be more stressful, prior research has failed to examine the relationship between the families of these students and their college experience. In the literature regarding first-generation college students, researchers have examined the influence of families in subpopulations of first-generation college students and have quantitatively analyzed the college experience in general. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to qualitatively explore the influence of family on the college experience of first-generation college students.

Family Influences on First-Generation College Students

There are a limited number of research studies that examine the influence of family on first-generation college students and an even fewer number of studies that specifically consider their influence on college experience. Of the literature related to families and first-generation students, it has been suggested that one of the best predictors of postsecondary aspirations is family support (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Despite this important contribution, there are varying definitions of family support, which has led to conceptual confusion in the field. Quantitative research measures family support based on ratings on a likert-type scale in which participants indicate the level of support felt from families when facing college-related problems and the level of understanding expressed from family members (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Other areas of family support have been highlighted in the literature, including parental involvement. This form of family support relates to parental support in the students' educational development and attendance at students' extracurricular activities (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). These items are also measured based on the student's response on a likert-type scale. These quantitative analyses neglect to develop a deeper understanding of how first-generation college students view family support.

One qualitative study examining the role of family involvement and the postsecondary success of first-generation college students sought to develop a deeper understanding of first-generation college students' college experience (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). This study found that first-generation college students do not receive the same levels of support from their families as continuing-generation students, largely because of the family's lack of knowledge about post-secondary education. This lack of knowledge and resulting decrease in support was found to evoke feelings of anxiety and frustration in first-generation college students. This study also found that family relationships play a key role in the social development and academic success of first-generation college students. This study's population included 10 students from the Appalachian counties of Kentucky who all had participated in a particular early intervention program for Appalachian students. Nine of these participants were Caucasian and one was Korean-American. According to the authors, this sample of 10 students was unrepresentative and gathered by convenience sampling. Because this study collected data from a largely rural area, utilized convenience sampling, and included primarily Caucasian students, the knowledge that can be generalized from it is limited.

Similarly, Bradbury and Mather (2009) conducted a qualitative study examining the experiences of first-generation college students in an effort to understand the factors associated with college integration. The sample for this study including nine first-generation college students in their first term of college from the Ohio Appalachia regions of the United States. Participants were selected based on either their participation in the institution's summer

orientation sessions or enrollment in the introductory psychology course at the institution. This study found that relationships with family played a critical role in student success. Connections with families provided these students with identity and security. Families were also shown to influence these students' decision to attend college through encouragement and support (Bradbury & Mather, 2009).

The findings of an additional qualitative study examining first-generation college students and family were consistent with prior research that demonstrate the importance of family on academic achievements (Gofen, 2009). This study was conducted in a university in Israel on 50 first-generation college students from rural areas or urban neighborhoods. The criteria for participation included that the students be first-generation and that their parents or grandparents had been born in North Africa or Asia. In addition, McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found that there was a positive relationship between parental involvement and the educational aspirations of first-generation college students. Using the National Educational Longitudinal Study's sample of students from the final wave of the study, 1,879 first-generation college students and 1,879 continuing-generation college students were sampled (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Although this information is useful in understanding the impact of family on first-generation college students' attrition, persistence, and academic aspirations, the research available is primarily quantitative. Those qualitative studies that focus on the family's influence largely pertain to subpopulations of first-generation college students, such as the Appalachian student studies. The information regarding the college experiences of first-generation college students seems to be less available as specificity increases. In other words, there is a wealth of knowledge regarding various aspects of first-generation college students, their persistence, their attrition rates, and their academic preparedness (Bryan & Simmons 2009; Ishitani 2003; Ishitani 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman 1991), but few qualitative studies related to families and first-generation college students; and, even fewer studies that are specific to how families influence the college experience of these students.

The Current Study

This study draws upon the initial efforts of Bryan and Simmons (2009), Bradbury and Mather (2009), Gofen (2009), and McCarron and Inkelas (2006) to describe how families influence the college experience of first-generation college students. More directly, the current study builds upon previous research in three important ways: (a) it examines the influence of family on ethnically diverse individuals; (b) develops an understanding of the influence of family on the college experiences of first-generation college students; (c) thematically analyzes the influence of family on the success of first-generation college students. This study, using a constant comparative method was guided by the following research question, "How do families influence the college experiences of first-generation college students?"

Method

Procedures

Qualitative data was collected through three semi-structured focus group interviews with first-generation college students. These interviews took place during summer 2010 at a large predominantly white Middle-Atlantic university in the United States. Focus groups were

selected due to their ability to elicit in-depth thought and discussion in participants (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). The focus group interviews lasted for approximately 90 minutes. During the focus groups, the participants were asked to complete a demographic survey as well as an informed consent form. Demographic survey questions included topics related to the participant's major area of study, ethnicity, grade point average, and their guardian's highest level of education. Each of the three focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Categories and themes related to the relationship between family and the experiences of first-generation college students were then generated from transcription and data collection.

The focus group participants were identified based on their membership in various university programs offered to provide services to first-generation students. The primary researcher was responsible for contacting the program directors. In this initial contact, the researcher requested that a recruitment email be sent to any individuals who fit the criteria for the study. In particular, criteria dictated that participants be first-generation undergraduate students who were 18 years of age or older. The recruitment email provided individuals with details regarding the importance of the study as well as the process for participation. The email also instructed individuals to contact the primary researcher if they were interested in participating. Those individuals who expressed interest in participating in the research study were reminded approximately one week prior to their participation via a reminder email that specified the date, time, and location of each their particular focus group interview.

Participants

In total, 19 individuals participated in one of the three focus groups. Of the 19 participants, 37% ($n=7$) were male and 63% ($n=12$) were female and all were between the ages of 18 and 25. The semester standing of the individuals included sophomores (16% ($n=3$) of the total individuals), juniors (11% ($n=2$) of the total participants), senior and fifth-year seniors (68% ($n=13$) of the total participants) and 5% ($n=1$) of the participants graduated one month prior to the study. Overall, the racial and ethnic breakdown of the participants was: 21% ($n=4$) Asian or Pacific Islanders, 58% ($n=11$) African Americans, 10.5% ($n=2$) Caucasians, and 10.5% ($n=2$) Hispanic or Latino Natives.

In the literature regarding college students, there are typically two different groups of students, first-generation and continuing-generation students. First-generation student status is attributed to students who are the first in the family to attend college. In other words, the parents of these particular students did not attend an institution of higher education or attended an institution and did not obtain a degree (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho 2009; Bryan & Simmons 2009; Choy, Horn, Nunez, Chen 2000; Ishitani 2003; Ishitani 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen 2005; McConnell 2000; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, Terenzini 2004; York-Anderson & Bowman 1991). In contrast, continuing-generation students are those students who have at least one parent with a postsecondary degree (Lohfink & Paulsen 2005). For the purposes of this research study, first-generation college student was defined as any college student who does not have a parent (or primary caregiver) with a postsecondary degree. In order to ensure that the participants met the criteria of first-generation college student, they were asked to identify their guardians' highest level of education. For this question, participants were to label the educational level of their guardian with the highest educational attainment. The responses included: grade school (grades kindergarten to fifth), which 16% ($n=3$) of participants identified as the highest

level of education for their guardians; middle school (grades six to eighth), which 5% ($n=1$) of participants identified as their guardian's highest level of education; and high school (grades nine to twelve), which 42% ($n=8$) of participants identified. Some participants also identified that their guardian had some college education, in which no degree was obtained 26% ($n=5$) of participants), while some guardians were certified in a specific area (5% ($n=1$) participant). Some participants (5% ($n=1$)) did not provide any information related to their parent's level of education.

Researcher Focus and Data Analysis

Due to the importance of the researcher in coding the qualitative data, it is crucial to become more familiar with the researchers. The first author is an undergraduate at the university in which the data was collected (located in the Middle-Atlantic region of the United States). The first author is also a participant in the federally funded Ronald E. McNair Scholars Trio program and is a first-generation college student. As a result of the research requirement for the program and her personal experiences as a first-generation college student, the first author developed an interest in examining the experiences of this particular population of undergraduate students and the factors related to their success. The second author is a faculty member in counselor education at the same university. Based on her research that considers the contribution of school-family-community collaboration for addressing educational, social, and mental health inequalities, the second author is also interested in understanding how families impact the success of first generation college students. The second author also has expertise on how family systems impact academic outcomes for youth. Given our personal and professional backgrounds, we share an interest in first-generation college students and families.

The influences of family on the success of first-generation college students were analyzed using the constant comparative method. After the focus group interviews were transcribed by the first author, both authors worked together to analyze the data. Beginning with open coding, we independently analyzed the first transcript to identify key concepts related to how families influence the academic success of first-generation college students. After coding the first transcript, we met to examine the results of our coding, discuss discrepancies, and came to a consensus about areas of disagreement. We repeated this process for the remaining focus group transcriptions, which resulted in new codes and the refinement of previous codes. After a codebook was finalized, each transcript was recoded.

After recoding each transcript, we used axial coding to examine the relationships among the codes and to identify relevant categories for the data. More specifically, we sorted previously identified codes based on similar meanings to identify higher-level categories. Coding of the transcripts continued by each author until we reached saturation of findings; when no new categories or ideas about conceptual relationships emerged.

Several actions were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of our findings. More specifically we: (a) used investigator triangulation (first analyzing the responses separately and then together; (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002); (b) recruited multiple participants to triangulate the data (Creswell, 2008; Patton 2002); (c) continually recoded the transcripts to verify our findings and evaluate researcher bias; and (d) identified rich descriptions from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Based on the coding procedures for this study, five categories related to family influence emerged: (a) support; (b) understanding; (c) motivation; (d) goal achievement and (e) expectations. Each category and their relevant themes are discussed below. Quotations from participants are included to illustrate findings. In addition, the most frequently discussed categories are presented first.

Support

This category emerged from conversations related to the different levels of support the participants received from their families. The themes discussed related to support include the presence of support and the lack of support. The presence of support varied from unconditional support in which the family supported the decisions made by the participant, direct support in which the family directly assisted the participant, and indirect support in which the family sought out sources in order to assist the participant. As one participant notes:

My parents always made it clear “you are going to college. Wherever you want to go, just pick the place, pick the state.” ...It didn’t matter to them where I went because my mom had a lot of resources and a lot of different people. So she said, “I am going to have you talk to this person today.” Or she would take me on visits and plan college trips to expose me to what I needed to see to make my decision where I wanted to go. But ultimately the decision was mine. She would review my college applications but I filled them out. I researched the schools that I wanted to attend and chose the best choice for me. But I think that by her support system there was someone else I could go to that she could reach out for help as well.

This statement exemplifies the interaction between unconditional support, direct support, and indirect support. Her parents supported her decision when it came to selecting a college and, her mother in particular, displayed direct support by planning college visits and assisting with college applications. Her mother also indirectly supported the participant by seeking other resources in order to expose the participant to various sources of information in order for her to make the best decision for her future.

In terms of lacking support, participants exhibited a yearning for familial assistance and feelings of sadness and solitude as a result of the lack of support. For these participants, their families did not provide access to college information directly nor indirectly prior to enrolling in college and also did not provide support once the participant began taking courses. In some instances their families provided conditional support; in other words, their parents were more concerned and more supportive of the achievements, goals, and behaviors that they wanted to see and less concerned and supportive of the things that made the participant happy. For example, one participant shares:

I told my dad I’m going to travel and that’s my job. He goes, ‘finish school then you can travel as much as you want.’ [He is saying,] “Work your ass off then travel” and I’m like ‘Wait, but that’s my job, I want to travel.’ But he doesn’t

understand. [He wants me to] work really hard for what [I] want then do what [I] want later but I'm like "No!" That makes no sense to me. I can have all the money but I'm not going to be happy so what's the point... Their definition of happiness is money can buy you happiness. That's not true. That's not true at all.

For her it was difficult for her parents to support her decisions. Earlier in the interview the participant stated that her family does not understand what she is majoring in. As she explained earlier in the interview, her parents want her to major in a field that will make her more financially stable and, as a result, she has trouble sharing her goals with her parents. The participant states that she is waiting for the day when she finishes college and her parents can finally see that she is truly happy.

Understanding

The category of understanding surfaced as the participants discussed their college experiences. Many of the participants expressed a lack of understanding and knowledge from their parents. The participants discussed that their parents knew very little about the various aspects related to obtaining a college degree and the college experience in general. As a result of this lack of understanding, a number of the participants described feelings of frustration, annoyance, and jealousy. Some participants explained that they completely avoided conversations with their parents surrounding school-related topics in an effort to avoid the negative emotions elicited from these conversations. A participant illustrated these particular sentiments as she responded to a statement made by another participant. The participant stated that she does not find it important to share her college experiences with her family, she added:

Same here because half the time [my mom] is like "What?!...did you do that?!" and I say, "what do you mean why did I do that? I'm supposed to" then she says, 'Why would you have to do that?' It's just too much. It's overwhelming. Not overwhelming but annoying. So scratch all that, tell her I am doing fine, and call it a day.

Some participants described feeling jealous of continuing-generation students' family relationships. The participants' families displayed disengagement from, or indifference to, their college experiences, which resulted in the feelings of jealousy. One participant helps to demonstrate this point by connecting her current university employment experiences with her personal experiences:

For me...sometimes I do feel like I wish my parents could be more involved and know about what I'm going through here at college. Like all the challenges I have to go through, all the internal struggles, or all the stuff I'm going through here... Through working with [the university's orientation program] I see a lot of parents coming with their kids. They were in the family session learning about all those kinds of resources [the university] has to offer and how the parents can get involved by helping their kids to gain a more successful experience here at [the university]. By observing all this I feel like I wish my parents can be more involved."

Later in the interview she shares that, as an incoming student, she attended her orientation alone and was surprised that most other students arrived with a parent or guardian. In response to this participant's comment, other participants shared that they too attended the orientation program alone.

Motivation

This category emerged from discussion among participants in all three focus groups about how families did, or did not, play a direct role in motivating them to go to college. When considering a student's motivation to attend and perform well in college the findings suggest two primary themes: personal and family. In terms of being motivated to attend and perform well in college for personal reasons, students shared that their family did not play a role in their decision to enroll in post-secondary education; instead the students enrolled because they wanted to attend college. As one participant noted,

I've been pretty self-motivated most of my life so I pretty much did everything on my own...my parents have guided me along the way but I pretty much made my own decisions...they had both finished high school and I decided to come to college but none of them had even thought about college until I got into college.

Those students who felt that their parents motivated them to attend and perform well in college typically acknowledged that their motivation was largely "invisible." Some of these invisible motivators included: not wanting to disappoint family members, wanting to support family members (primarily financially), wanting more than family members have achieved, and increasing the sense of family pride, among other motivators. One participant describes motivation:

My family, we're not really rich and stuff so I want to be something different, be something better even though my parents never come after me and say 'oh you have to do your homework or you have to get an A.' They never say anything like that but knowing that they work in a position where they don't want to be and [I] don't want to be like that, that kind of really invisibly motivates [me] to do better and want to be successful.

This participant was motivated to be successful primarily because of her family. She explains that she has never been directly told to do well but has determined that she must do well in order to achieve more than her family members have. This participant also speaks to the financial status of her family, which may indicate motivation to be successful in order to support her family in the future.

Goal Achievement

In this category participants discussed the relationship between the achievement of their personal goals and the goals of their families. In this category, themes related to the encouragement of goals defined by families or of personal goals emerged. Some of the participants described their families as more concerned with the achievement of predetermined goals. These goals tended to be what the family considered to be important. Often times this method of encouragement created a pressure to succeed within the participants. The pressure

was at times in response to the gap in ideas of achievement between the student and their family members and was also attributed to the discrepancy in the value and perception of the students' goals. One participant highlights his experiences of applying to college when he stated, "My mother came out with an itemized list of colleges and said, "pick one"...I only applied to one school...She wasn't happy about that. She wanted me to apply to 10 different schools, send in all those applications..." In his situation, his mother decided, without consulting him, what schools he would be applying to and how many applications he would send out. For other individuals experiencing this method of encouragement of goal achievement, family members were not as involved when it came to applying to school but had differing values and opinions regarding the student's major coursework. As one participant notes,

[My goals] are different than what they had in store for themselves. I think in the end they want the best for [me]. [They say], 'you're not going to get a lot of money in that [major]' but [my response is], "it's not your money so why are you worried about it?"

Other students discussed a different method of encouragement from their families. In some instances the family members and the students shared the same ultimate goals and, even when their goals did not coincide, the family encouraged the students to achieve the student's personal best. These participants seemed to feel less pressure to achieve a particular goal, which may be in response to this particular level of encouragement. To better illustrate this method of encouragement for goal achievement one participant speaks of her relationship with her mother:

Growing up my mom she generally pushed me to always do my personal best but never pushed me in any certain direction. If I wanted to go to college then that was fine but I had to be the best. If I wanted to go and do make-up, that would be fine but I had to do the best that I could possibly do. So, it didn't matter what it was that I was doing but she was always there to support me and to push me and make sure that I had the best backing to do whatever I wanted to do.

As many of the other participants who described this type of encouragement, this participant highlights the importance her mother placed on achieving her personal best. This participant does not speak of any pressure to attend college or be successful in one specific avenue of life; she states that her mother would have been fine with whatever path was selected.

Expectations

The participants also discussed familial expectations. From the focus group interviews, it seemed as though the parents of the participants either had higher expectations or lower expectations for their child. Those individuals who described their parents as having higher expectations also felt as though their parents encouraged them to achieve predetermined goals and felt as though their family added stress and pressure to achieve. One participant was expected to graduate by a certain semester but was forced to stay an extra year in order to fulfill all of her course requirements. She describes the reaction of one family member:

I had to tell my godmother I have to do another year. That was not processing in her mind at all...she didn't want to hear it because she's like, 'You're supposed to

be on time. You're supposed to be May 2010.' So, when I told her I'll be May 2011 she didn't want to hear that and it kind of got me frustrated because I came to grips with it now I just need [her] to come to grips with it because [she is] going to stress me out. [Now, I will be thinking in the back of my mind, "you are] not going to be there because I got to do an extra year." It's an extra year...I didn't say I was dropping out of college... I'm not ready yet so just accept it.

Her godmother, in particular, had a preset notion that this participant should graduate from college in four years and when that was not the reality of the situation, her godmother did not react positively. As the participant later describes, it took a while for her godmother to accept that she needed an extra year before graduating.

The portion of participants who described their families as having lower expectations shared that their parents also provided little to no direct or indirect support during the college application process. These participants frequently identified that they were more personally motivated to attend and perform well in college. For some individuals, their parents had not considered college as an option for them. Of the individuals with this sort of experience, one participant seemed to summarize the experiences of those who had parents with lower expectations when he said:

From my experience, I felt like I've met my mom's expectations. I graduated high school and she was happy about that and I actually went to college... And, now I feel like I passed that ceiling for her and now for me I am like 'all right, I'm in college now, what do I want to do? ...She never once mentioned [graduate] school to me, and if I were to mention that to her she would be like 'Oh do whatever you want to do' and I'm like 'Gee thanks.' So its like once you reach the top of their limit and you want to go beyond that you can't really rely on them as a source of information and you have to go around them or above them for that.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the influence of family on the experiences of first-generation college students. Far too often in the literature regarding this population of students researchers seek to examine the academic preparation of first-generation college students as well as their attrition and persistence rates (Bryan & Simmons 2009; Ishitani 2003; Ishitani 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman 1991) but focus little attention on the influence of families on the college experience. Through semi-structured focus group interviews, five categories emerged highlighting the role of family on college experience. The themes related to family and college experiences include: (a) motivation; (b) goal achievement; (c) expectations; (d) understanding; and (e) support.

As the current study found, participants were motivated to attend and succeed in college in two ways: family motivation and personal motivation. The invisible motivators associated with family motivation—such as wanting to financially support family members—is consistent with previous literature related to first-generation college student motivation to attend college. McConnell (2000) states that, when compared to continuing generation students, first-generation students are more likely to attend college in order to achieve financial stability. Additionally,

Gofen (2009) found that first-generation college students have a desire to please their parents. This is similar to the invisible motivator of not wanting to disappoint family members found in the current study. Conversely, there is scant literature related to personal motivation and first-generation college students. The literature regarding personal motivation to attend and perform well in college for first-generation college students largely assesses the extent to which motivation is attributed to persistence rates. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that personal motivation was predictive of college adjustment and commitment.

From the data, two dimensions related to familial encouragement of goal achievement emerged. The finding that first-generation college students experience pressure to succeed was consistent with prior research findings (Bryan and Simmons, 2009). Likewise, Gofen (2009) found that parents expected their child to attend college and saw college as an opportunity to achieve what they had not been able to. This may be connected to what the current study suggests as the cause for increased pressure—family members being concerned with the achievement of predetermined goals. This is also consistent with the finding in the current study and in the literature that family members have high expectations for their children (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001). For students in past research and in the current study, they felt obligated to fulfill the expectations of their families (Gofen, 2009). This obligation may be more characteristic of first-generation college students who are motivated by their family to attend and succeed in college.

The literature related to parental understanding suggests that first-generation college students lack the social support of individuals with college experience (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho, 2009) and, as a result, are uncomfortable with sharing their college experiences (Bryan and Simmons, 2009). Consistent with previous research, the participants in the current study shared that their parents had little knowledge related to the college application process, as well as the college experience in general. For some participants this lack of understanding led to feelings of frustration and annoyance and resulted in avoidance of school-related conversations with family members. Similarly, Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that first-generation college students form separate identities in which students keep their families separate from their college experiences. The students in the Bryan and Simmons (2009) study explained that their families had not spent a significant amount of time on campus. These students did not see their family's presence on campus as necessary. This finding contradicts what the participants in the current study expressed; instead, these students expressed jealousy of other students who had greater family involvement. This discrepancy may be due to the differences in the research samples. The Bryan and Simmons (2009) study utilized participants who came from Appalachian communities in which there was a high level of involvement between the students and their families and home communities. Of the 10 participants in the Appalachia study only one of them was an ethnic minority. The current study had a greater number of ethnic minority participants, all of whom came from various communities.

While it has been suggested that family involvement, parental involvement in particular, is important in the decision to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education for first-generation college students (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001; Choy, Horn, Nunez, and Chen, 2000; Gofen, 2009; McCarron and Inkelas, 2006), research indicates that the students receive less support from their families than do continuing-generation students (Gofen, 2009; McConnell 2000). This lack of

support is consistent with the findings in the current study. Often times the lack of support was related to the limited parental understanding of the college experience. For the participants in the current study, as a consequence of a lack of support and understanding, the students shared less of their college experiences with their families. This has been identified as low levels of disclosure to family in prior research and is suggested to add difficulty to the college experiences of first-generation college students (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho, 2009).

The findings of the current study also indicate that first-generation college students experience support from their families on multiple levels including: unconditional support, direct support, and indirect support. These findings are consistent with the literature regarding family support. Gofen (2009) found that for some families, the child's abilities are not doubted and the child is viewed as important. In these families, members do not fear failure because they are given the opportunity to take chances (Gofen, 2009). This is similar to the finding of unconditional support in which family members supported the decisions made by the participant. Additionally, unconditional support was discussed in prior research as the level of support received from family members when students came to college. Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that while family members did not completely understand the college process they still showed support and happiness for their children when going to college. Direct and indirect support were also discussed in previous research as Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) highlight the components of parental encouragement. They indicate that first-generation college students benefit from proactive parents who are involved in, and discuss, the college experience with their children and save money to pay for college (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001).

Limitations

As with any research study, there are limitations to the current study, which should be considered when interpreting the findings of the study. One major limitation deals with the time period in which the study was conducted. Research was conducted during the summer months, which reduced the potential sample size. From an institution with over 40,000 thousand students enrolled during the Fall and Spring semesters, much of the university's population leaves for the summer sessions. As a result of the time period in which this study was conducted, only 19 individuals participated in the study. Students who were not able to participate as a result of their summer locations may have had different experiences than those who were able to remain in the university's surrounding county. Additionally, there was self-selection bias in that students had the option of whether or not to participate in the research study. Those who decided to participate may have had distinctly different experiences than those who decided not to participate. The sample was also primarily African American students, which may have also impacted the findings of the current study. As a result of this ethnic breakdown, there may be cultural differences among the participants that may account for these particular finding. A final limitation to the study is that many of the students were considered high-achieving students. Of the 19 participants, 10 of them were in graduate school preparation programs and 2 participants were members of the university's honors college. Their participation in these programs may influence their college experiences. There may be differences between high-achieving students and those students who may not participate in such programs.

Conclusions

Despite its limitations, findings from this study contribute to the knowledge-base regarding the influence of families in first generation college students. Although first-generation college students account for 45% of the incoming students at four-year institutions (Bradbury & Mather, 2009), few studies have specifically examined the influence of family on the college experiences of first-generation college students. The findings of the current study suggest that families have a significant influence on the college experience of first-generation college students.

Based on the current study, families motivate their children to attend and perform well in institutions of higher education primarily indirectly, or invisibly. These students are motivated to attend college for many reasons including to achieve more than their parents have achieved or to support their family members financially in the future. Likewise, families played an indirect role on the student's college experience through the expectations they had of their children. Some of the students felt that their families had high expectations for them, which may have contributed to their increased feelings of stress and pressure. Students also felt pressured when their parents encouraged the achievement of predetermined goals in which their families may not have valued the student's goals. The current study also found that for those first-generation students who had the presence of support were able to make decisions for themselves; whereas those who felt they lacked support were less concerned with the student's personal goals.

Research seeking to understand the influence of family on college experience is both necessary and important for the field of higher education. University administrators and staff serving first-generation college students can benefit from the findings of the current study. In an effort to better understand the college experience of advisees who identify as first-generation college students, advising personnel can utilize the findings of this study to better serve first-generation individuals. By understanding the pressures and stressors associated with being a first-generation college student advisors may be better able to direct their students to services. With this understanding of the role families may play in the college experiences of first-generation college students, university personnel may be better equipped to minimize the factors that have been shown to negatively influence these students' college experience.

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