WHITE, NON-PELL GRANT ELIGIBLE, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AND THEIR INTEGRATION INTO COLLEGE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess what factors—first-generation student status, socioeconomic status, or a combination—most impacted first-generation students’ experiences in college. The central research question for the study asked how white, first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible described their academic and social experiences during their transition to college. The study sought to examine a subsection of the first-generation student population that had not yet been studied in isolation. Existent studies revealed that first-generation college students struggle more academically and socially than their continuing generation counterparts. Those studies also demonstrated that first-generation students were more likely to come from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds. Using a qualitative approach guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six participants at a private, highly-selective research university in the northeast. The participants, all of whom identified as white, non-Pell Grant-eligible, and first-generation, did not experience the same struggles seen in existent literature on first-generation college students; participants did, however, experience instances of isolation and discomfort due to their first-generation student status. The study revealed that social class and socioeconomic status had a greater impact on the participants’ experiences than did first-generation student status. The following dissertation presents the findings from the study as well as recommendations for future research and for professional practice in the field of higher education.
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

This research study sought to understand how white, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible made sense of their academic and social transitions to and experiences in college. The student participants represented a small but important subset of all first-generation students. First-generation students generally struggle more and experience more roadblocks in their college careers than do continuing-generation students (Stuber, 2010). This study combined prior and new research on first-generation college students with literature on social class, social capital and whiteness in order to understand the unique experiences of white, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible. This chapter will state and define the research problem before offering historical context and background on the topic. Next, this chapter will define key terms that will appear throughout the study, define the goal of the research and provide rationale for the research goal. Finally, the chapter will outline the central research question.

Statement of the Problem

The percentage of college-going high school graduates has increased over the years, and so has the percentage of students classified as first-generation. A 2013 research study conducted by the College Board indicated that more than a third of the 5- to 17-year-olds in the United States would become first-generation college students if they decided to enroll in a college or university. As secondary schools nationwide focus their efforts on college access and preparedness, more first-generation students will enter college over the next fifteen years than ever before. Underrepresented minorities have very high percentages of first-generation students; however, white students make up a solid portion of first-generation students. The US
Department of Education (2014) noted that 28% of white, or majority, students are first-generation. Relatively little research has been completed regarding first-generation students, and most of the existing research focuses on students who identify as underrepresented minorities and who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Current literature reveals that first-generation students struggle more, both academically and socially, than their continuing-generation peers when they arrive on campus (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Stephens et al., 2012). Until recently, the studies have been largely quantitative in nature, focusing on statistical analyses instead of tuning into students’ individual voices and experiences. It makes sense that the existent studies focus on underrepresented and/or low-income students because they are generally representative of the first-generation population; however, white students are not lifted out and studied as a unique sub-group in most of the literature on first-generation college students in the United States.

**Context and Background**

The few studies that examine white first-generation students as a sub-group low-income students as well as higher income students (Lightweis, 2014; Stuber, 2010; Thering, 2012). Those studies suggested that the college transition is as much social as it is academic, thereby demonstrating that first-generation students have to negotiate their own social capital, or lack thereof, much differently than continuing-generation students (Morris, 2005; Stephens et al., 2012). White students can be overlooked in research studies on first-generation students because the majority persist in their quest for a college degree; however, they face many of the same transitional challenges as do minority first-generation students (Lightweis, 2014; Stuber, 2010). Current studies fail to examine how socioeconomic background, family status, upbringing and social capital affect white first-generation students who do not come from lower socioeconomic
backgrounds, but existing literature suggests that such research is needed. Retention and graduation rates are important for universities, and first-generation students are often more difficult to retain and graduate than their continuing-generation peers (Chen, 2005). Colleges and universities may be failing to support a small but important population of students who do not fit the more traditional first-generation mold because they are white and of higher socioeconomic status. More importantly, there is a lack of information on how this population experiences the college transition or adapts academically and socially.

White, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible offer an important glimpse into the role social class plays in education and the extent to which researchers and educators need to understand and work within education as a classed affair (Stich & Reeves, 2016). This topic goes relatively unexamined in current literature, and talking about social class is still more taboo than talking about racial, gendered, or other types of inequities. Though American higher education often talks about fair opportunities and an equal playing field, studies demonstrate that students from higher social class backgrounds are more likely to succeed in college. This is especially true at the most selective institutions where students from high social classes not only have a better chance at gaining admission, but are also more likely to succeed academically and report greater levels of satisfaction with their overall collegiate experience (Martin, 2011). Even though lower-class students may be offered the opportunity to attend college – perhaps even at an Ivy League or research-based institution – they may not ultimately be able to reap the full benefits of such an opportunity because they do not possess the necessary social or cultural capital.

The students who were selected as participants in this research study found themselves in the middle of the two extremes: these students did not come from the uppermost echelons of
society, and but they also did not come from extreme poverty. Some students could afford SAT prep courses and to go on road trips to visit multiple schools during the application process. The participants did not feel overwhelmed with the academic transition like many first-generation students often do, but all participants still struggled with their transitions to college. Some, more than others, grappled with their status as first-generation students when they arrived on campus, and all participants had to work to mitigate their families’ lack of understanding of their lives in college and had to find their own resources, since calling home for help was rarely an option. While some participants came from more well-to-do homes and others had to take out loans and work part-time to afford college, all participants talked at length about their understandings and experiences of social class and socioeconomic status. This small but mighty cohort of white, first-generation colleges students who were not Pell Grant eligible provided insight into first-generation students’ experiences and into the role social class plays within higher education.

**Definitions of Terms**

It is important to define the following key terms of the study: white, majority students, underrepresented students, first-generation, continuing generation, and non-Pell Grant eligible. The National Center for Education Statistics follows the guidelines set forth by the Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Education to define racial and ethnic categories. According to those guidelines, *white* refers to “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). People who are white or Caucasian and non-Hispanic are normally identified as majority; according to U.S. Census Bureau data, the term minority refers to other racial groupings that are not white or Caucasian non-Hispanic (United States Census Bureau). Syverson, Franks and Hiss (2018) explained that there are many
categories within the umbrella of underrepresented (synonymous with the term “underserved”) students. Institutions of higher education often refer to students who are not white or majority students as underrepresented, but depending on the enrollment demographics at a specific institution, some racial or ethnic groups may be left out of the underrepresented category and instead placed into the majority category. For example, in recent years, many institutions have moved to using the term URM, which stands for underrepresented minority, to describe only Black and Hispanic/Latino students on their campuses (Syverson, Franks, & Hiss, 2018) because Asian and Indian-subcontinent students are not underrepresented in their campus numbers. Other examples of underrepresented students include women in the science, math, engineering and technology fields and students who identify as LGBTQA who are attending historically religious universities. For the purposes of this study, majority refers to students who identify as white or Caucasian, and underrepresented refers to non-white students. The term underrepresented does not appear very frequently in this study because race was isolated as a participant selection parameter.

First-generation students are defined differently by various educational organizations. TRIO, a federally-funded organization that provides college access assistance to low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities defines first-generation students as “neither parent has earned a four-year degree” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). This means that the parent(s) could have earned an Associate’s degree, but as long as the parent(s) never attained a Bachelor’s degree, the student is considered first-generation. The National Center for Education Statistics takes a more stringent approach and defines first-generation students as students whose parent(s) does/do not have a degree higher than a high school diploma (Chen, 2005). This study used the latter definition to
identify which participants qualified as first-generation because it was understood that those students had little frame of reference or set expectations for their understanding of the college transition; college was new to them and to their families.

Pell Grant eligibility ensured that research participants were not from the lowest income levels. The Pell Grant is rather vague when defining which students are eligible for funding, but the statistical evidence demonstrates that it is extremely rare for a student from a household income of $50,000 or more to be eligible for a Pell Grant (Congressional Research Service, 2016). Mullin explained that the Pell Grant slowly developed from a string of federal support systems beginning with the GI Bill in the 1940s and a student loan program via the National Defense Education Act in the late 1950s (2013). Mullin added that the 1960s brought an increased interest in creating equal educational opportunities for all citizens, and in the early 1970s, Congress created the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant, most commonly known as the BEOG. It was renamed the Pell Grant in 1980. Funding for the program went from $1.5 billion in the 1976-1977 academic year to $2.5 billion in the 1979-1980 school year alone. According to the Congressional Research Service, the Pell Grant program “provided approximately $31 billion to approximately 8.2 million undergraduate students” (2016, p.1) during the 2015 academic year. The minimum Pell Grant award for the 2015-2016 school year was $581, and the maximum was $5,775.

What makes the Pell Grant rather curious is that there is no income ceiling to determine student eligibility for the Grant. The Congressional Research Service stated that Pell Grant eligibility “may be based on a combination of familial circumstance, income, and assets. Nevertheless, Pell Grant recipients are primarily low-income” (2016, p. 1). The Pell Grant uses the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to calculate the family’s Expected Family
Contribution (EFC) in an upcoming school year; and the Pell Grant is a stackable award, which means that a student receives the Pell Grant on top of, not as a portion of, an existing financial aid package (Congressional Research Service, 2016). During the 2013-2014 academic year, about 61% of Pell Grant recipients came from a family with an income equal to or under $30,000 per year. As of the 2011-2012 academic year, only an estimated 7% of students from a family with an income of $60,000 or higher were eligible to receive a Pell Grant (Congressional Research Service 2016), demonstrating that while there could be a case in which a student from a middle-income family receives a Pell Grant, it is extremely unlikely. This made the Pell Grant a fitting parameter for this research study.

**Research Goal**

The goal of this research study was to understand how white first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible described their academic and social experiences during their transition to college.

**Rationale and Importance**

First-generation college students make up a substantial portion of the college-going population. The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2016) noted that as of the 2011-2012 academic year, 34% of undergraduates were the first in their families to attend any type of college, and another 28% of undergraduates were the first to attain a Bachelor’s degree, as their parents may have started college or taken some courses but never persisted to Bachelor’s degree attainment. While literature on first-generation students is scarce, almost all that literature is focused on the struggles first-generation students face during their transition to college. First-generation college students are much less likely to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree (Chen 2005), are historically underprepared for college, earn poorer grades and exam scores than
continuing-generation students (ACT, 2015; Choy, 2001), and return to college for their sophomore year at a lower rate than their continuing-generation peers (Stuber, 2010). Research on first-generation students primarily examined the students’ academic performance in college; however, the little research that does exist regarding first-generation students’ social experiences in college introduced the notion of social capital, which Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012) defined as “the information, values, norms, standards and expectations for education as communicated to individuals through the interpersonal relationships they share with others” (p. 246). Students from higher socioeconomic households have access to more resources throughout the college process than low-income students; however, higher income first-generation students still have difficulties negotiating the newness of their collegiate environment. For continuing-generation students, college is an expectation and a normal occurrence, whereas for first-generation students and their parents, college represents an unchartered territory and a new set of social rules and norms to learn (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011).

College as an overarching whole in the United States reflects middle-class values and ideals (Miller & Kastberg, 1995). Given that, it makes sense that the low-income majority first-generation students who are present in the existing literature struggle when they transition to college because they come from a different class and environment (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). There is a lack of research on social class and related identity with regard to college students; to understand how to best position students to survive and thrive inside and outside of the collegiate classroom, there must be a better understanding of the social structures implicit in the students’ environments and how students negotiate their past with their current surroundings (Martin, 2015). Majority first-generation students who came from non-low-income backgrounds made excellent and interesting subjects for this research – for example, one participant came from a
high enough income bracket that she did not qualify for need-based financial aid from the university, but her parents worked in clerical and skilled trades – more commonly known as blue-collar professions. These two pieces of the participant’s identity challenged her notions of normalcy surrounding who from her parents’ generation attended college and informed her values and how she viewed money.

White first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible had not previously been studied in isolation. Ostensibly, if these students came from a middle- or upper-class background and lifestyle, and if the American collegiate system reflected middle-class values and ideals, it is easy to assume that these students would have had an easier transition to college than first-generation students who were from underserved backgrounds. Majority first-generation students from higher-class backgrounds may have even had access to preparatory tools and resources such as an independent college counselor, a high school with a more rigorous curriculum, and private test tutoring for standardized exams. Yet, the social and emotional transition to college cannot be overlooked, and college still represents a completely new chapter in the lives not only of these students, but also of their families (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011). This research study examined to what extent first-generation student status and socioeconomic status impacted a student’s experience in college.

This study isolated a group of students whose socioeconomic backgrounds aligned with those of continuing-generation students and with the selective American collegiate system. The study focused on the students’ statuses as first-generation students to provide an understanding of the role that status played in their transitions to college. The study also provided a nuanced view of social class and how it played out among college students at a selective institution.

Central Research Question
The question that formed the nexus of this study is:

How do white, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible describe their academic and social experiences in college?

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was the Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM). The Social Class Worldview Model was developed by Liu et al. (2004) in a counseling psychology context, but the model has applicability for education and other fields. The Social Class Worldview Model was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher and participants to explore social class from a variety of lenses and unearth nuances and differences that may be present within similar social class backgrounds and experiences. The Social Class Worldview Model will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this study.

**Summation**

This chapter defined the goal of this thesis and gave initial context for the rationale behind selecting white, first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible as participants in the research study. The information in this introduction to the research study also provided important background knowledge and context for understanding why the researcher wanted to explore this specific population of first-generation students and how the research can add a new area of content to existing studies on first-generation students. Before explaining the research design and describing the study’s participants, the next chapter will review the current literature on first-generation students and examine social capital and social class theories as they pertain to higher education. This will set the stage for an exploration into first-generation student status and social class status and how they contribute to how a student adapts to and finds success academically and socially in college.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides in-depth information from the current literature that covers first-generation college students and social class as the topical areas related to the study, and it demonstrates areas in the literature to which this study contributes. The review provides a comprehensive exploration of the topical areas that are necessary for a clear understanding of the subject at hand. This literature review begins with an overview of first-generation college students, including the most recent data that examine general trends in college-going behaviors, academic performances, and transitional experiences. Next, the literature review explores social capital as a key concept in first-generation students’ transitions to college. This section also covers the notion of the American collegiate experience as a classed endeavor and examines modern-day understandings of social class. Finally, the literature review focuses on white first-generation college students by examining Jenny Marie Stuber’s and Georgianna Martin’s dissertations and subsequent publications. That section focuses on elements that both distinguish white first-generation students from other first-generation students and create the same challenges that many first-generation students experience during their transitions to college.

This literature review is not exhaustive, particularly in the realm of social class literature; rather, the works and subjects that most directly pertain to this proposed research study were carefully selected. Every effort was made to use recent literature; but given the scarcity of literature on first-generation students, some older data may be used.

Defining the Literature

This chapter includes a combination of quantitative and qualitative studies to formulate a well-rounded literature review. There are three main quantitative studies in which the bulk of the
data were found. First, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) serves as an excellent resource for comprehensive data breakdowns on postsecondary education and the students pursuing it. The NCES compiles its Profile of Undergraduate Students every four years, and the most current edition available to the public is the 2011-2012 version (2014). The NCES Profile allows educators to understand enrollment trends and sheds light on patterns that coincide with student demographic information. These trends and patterns provide quantitative evidence for qualitative studies on the inequalities in the American collegiate system, and the Profile was especially useful in demonstrating the areas in which first-generation college students were clearly at a disadvantage when compared to their continuing-generation peers. Second, the NCES also published a report in 2005 that specifically examined first-generation college students, their transcripts, and their academic behaviors during college (Chen, 2005). This is, unfortunately, the most recent quantitative data set that provides a deep and comprehensive look at first-generation college students in isolation; an updated report is long overdue. The report revealed first-generation college students’ major choices, tendencies toward course remediation, GPA trends, and credit-earning behavior. Finally, the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education’s 2016 Historical Trend Report developed a detailed report of the higher education inequities across income levels and socioeconomic groups. The Pell report provided important data on the Pell Grant and its recipients, but perhaps more importantly, it spoke to “family income, parents’ education [and] social class” (Cahalan et al., 2016, p. 7) as major unanswered and unmitigated educational inequalities, and it sought potential answers to and solutions for these inequities.

The sections of this literature review that focus on social class, social capital, and white first-generation students as specific subsets of the overall first-generation student population are
mainly theoretical and/or qualitative in nature. A solid understanding of social capital is rooted in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, a renowned French sociologist who wrote at length on social class, social capital, and how these ideas are constructed within the modern world and perpetuated by the people who live in it. Nearly every study that merely makes mention of social capital refers to Bourdieu as the originator of the term. There are qualitative studies that examined small groups of first-generation students to understand how the students, especially those who come from lower socioeconomic and class backgrounds, made the transition to American college life. Those studies generally demonstrated that because the American university system largely reflects normative middle-class values and practices (Miller & Kastberg, 1995), first-generation college students are doubly disadvantaged when they embark on their university journey: college is a foreign experience in their and their families’ lives, and since many of the first-generation students in the aforementioned studies come from lower class backgrounds, the students have to adjust to learning and living in an environment with new terminology, expectations, and norms.

Jenny Marie Stuber and Georgianna Martin serve as the researcher’s key works for this literature review and the research study at large. Stuber (2006) completed her dissertation on the class perceptions of working-class and upper-middle class college students; and she later (2010) studied white, working-class first-generation students in isolation to understand how they persisted in college. Martin (2012) completed her dissertation on white, low socioeconomic status first-generation students and their experience of social class throughout college. Martin also used some elements of the Social Class Worldview Model as the framework for her study. Stuber’s and Martin’s works are rich with resources and served as a solid foundation for the researcher’s understanding of social class conversations among college students.
First-Generation Students’ College-Going Patterns

In the college admission world, students and parents often point out that the Bachelor’s degree is the new high school diploma, and the Master’s degree is the new Bachelor’s degree (Rampell, 2013). A high school diploma was once the highest level of education listed as a prerequisite for many jobs that require at least a Bachelor’s degree today. For example, law firms and other companies only hired employees with a college degree even if the jobs did not require college-level skills (Rampell, 2013). Haveman and Smeeding (2006) projected that 42% of new jobs created by 2010 would require a Bachelor’s degree or higher. As more high school students completed their secondary education and opted for a college degree rather than direct workforce entry, the expectations for formal education increased across industries. Similarly, as technology advanced and machines replaced humans who used to perform skilled or semi-skilled labor tasks that did not require a higher education degree, the gap widened; there are now fewer jobs that require a high school diploma (or even an Associate’s degree) as the highest level of education attained.

College application process.

First-generation students often have difficulties understanding the college application process because their parents are unable to give them as much guidance and support as can continuing-generation students’ parents (Wohn et al., 2013). While the college process has changed and families must adapt to online applications and extensive financial aid forms, continuing-generation families have a basic understanding of deadlines and requirements, whereas it is not uncommon for admissions professionals to start with the most rudimentary definitions and explanations when guiding first-generation students through the college application process (Balemian & Feng, 2013). Thus, before first-generation students even make
it onto campus, they must navigate what often feels like an entirely new language throughout the application process; given their lack of understanding throughout the process, first-generation students may miss out on scholarship opportunities or special programs because they simply do not know where to look for help.

**Degree attainment and school selection.**

The majority of first-generation college students do not attain a Bachelor’s degree. According to the NCES 2011-2012 Profile of Undergraduate Students, only 41.9% of first-generation college students attended a four-year institution, while 47.7% attended a two-year institution and the remaining 10.4% attended a less-than-two-year institution or completed a certificate program (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Only 37% of first-generation college students officially earned their Bachelor’s degrees, whereas 59% of students whose parent(s) earned a Bachelor’s degree and even 42.6% of students whose parent(s) attended some college earned their Bachelor’s degrees. Retention is important for colleges and universities, and first-generation college students are historically more difficult to retain than their continuing-generation peers. Stuber (2010) explained that while nearly 90% of continuing-generation students return to college for their second year, less than 75% of first-generation students return. Students in the NCES study were generally more likely to attend a public school than a private school, but continuing-generation students were much more likely to enroll at a four-year doctoral-granting institution than their first-generation counterparts: only 13% of first-generation college students attended a four-year doctoral-granting college or university, while 26.3% of students whose parent(s) attained a Bachelor’s degree attended the same type of institution. What is most troublesome for educators who work at non-profit institutions is that higher percentages of first-generation students enrolled at for-profit colleges: the NCES study indicated
that 18.5% of first-generation college students enrolled at for-profit institutions, while only 7% of students whose parent(s) attained a Bachelor’s degree did. Simmons (2011) explained the phenomenon of under-matching: students who are first-generation and/or who come from more vulnerable racial or socioeconomic backgrounds are often counseled by their high school guidance staff and teachers to apply to less-selective institutions than their peers who identify as continuing-generation and who are from wealthier, majority backgrounds. Simmons noted that two-thirds of students whose parents have a graduate degree attended a selective institution, but “students from families with no previous higher education experience under-matched at a rate of 64%” (2011, p. 220). Selective institutions typically provide more resources – financial and otherwise – to their attendees, which means that first-generation students are missing out on supportive and academically-enriching experiences at selective colleges and universities.

**Academic experience.**

First-generation college students are underprepared compared to their continuing-generation counterparts (Stephens et al., 2012). Choy’s (2001) and Chen’s (2005) in-depth examinations of high school preparation and college performance revealed many important characteristics of first-generation student performance. The majority of first-generation students did not complete a math class higher than Algebra II in high school; but aside from undeclared or an unclassified major, the most popular major amongst first-generation college students was business. At competitive colleges and universities, students must complete trigonometry or pre-calculus at a minimum to be considered admissible and prepared for an undergraduate business degree, and students are advised to complete calculus if they want to be viewed as most competitive in the admissions process and considered most prepared for business courses. Only 12% of first-generation students completed calculus or an equivalent math class prior to high
school graduation, whereas 34% of continuing-generation students completed the same coursework (Chen, 2005). In a 2015 study, the ACT found that only about a tenth of first-generation students achieved the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, whereas a third of continuing-generation testers met the same benchmarks. The ACT also revealed significant point gaps between first-generation testers and non-first-generation testers; this reinforces that across the board, first-generation students are less prepared for college than their continuing-generation counterparts (ACT, 2015).

The NCES Profile showed that 35.6% of first-generation college students pursued remedial coursework prior to enrolling or while enrolled in college, while only 27.7% of continuing-generation students had to pursue remedial coursework (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Despite being more likely to take remedial courses, first-generation college students consistently underperformed compared to continuing-generation students. Chen’s 2005 study on first-generation college students and their transcripts revealed that first-generation students earned an average GPA of 2.5 after their first year of college and an overall GPA of 2.6. Students whose parent(s) obtained a Bachelor’s degree earned a 2.8 GPA in the first year and a 2.9 GPA overall. While these GPAs do not seem terribly far apart, the gap becomes clearer when the numbers are converted to letter grades: the first-generation students struggled to stay over a C+, while the continuing-generation students comfortably approached a B average.

First-generation students also progressed toward degree completion at a slower rate than continuing generation students. Chen (2005) studied students who entered postsecondary education in 1992 and found that by 2000, continuing-generation students completed an average of 112 credits, nearly double the mere 66 credits that first-generation college students accrued. This confirms that first-generation students entered college with less preparation, but it also
substantiated what other researchers have claimed: first-generation students had lower expectations and/or goals than students who came from a college-going family (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Orbe, 2008; Stuber, 2010).

The next section examined first generation students’ social experiences in college. It demonstrates that first generation students face roadblocks – attending college on a part-time basis, working and caring for family while in school – when combined with the aforementioned academic struggles, make it much difficult for them to persist to graduation and enjoy their college experiences.

**Social experience.**

While academic preparation and barriers to college are important factors to consider when studying first-generation college students, it is equally important to examine the students’ integration into the non-academic aspects of college life. Many first-generation students are unable to take advantage of residential campus offerings such as living on-campus in residence halls or participating in social activities after class. According to the NCES Profile, only 31.5% of first-generation college students were classified as full-time students for the entire year, but nearly half of continuing-generation students attended on a full-time basis (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The average age of first-generation college students was 28.6 compared to an average age of 24.3 for continuing-generation students (p. 61), and since first-generation students are often older than their continuing-generation peers, they may have work and familial responsibilities that younger students do not have (Cooke, Barkham, Audin & Bradley, 2007; Inkelas et al., 2007). The NCES also projected that 62.6% of first-generation college students were financially independent from their parents and guardians, and nearly 60% had dependents and families of their own (p. 60). Stebleton and Soria (2012) explained that because first-
generation college students are often unable to attend school full-time and must prioritize their education alongside their work and family commitments, they may have more difficulty finding time to engage with their classmates inside and outside of their campus communities.

The next section will examine other factors that could impact a first-generation college student’s academic and social experience. First-generation students have family dynamics and expectations that differ from those of continuing-generation students. First-generation students may also struggle more with confidence and self-doubt issues than their continuing-generation peers.

**Family dynamics.**

First-generation students may experience tensions with their parents and family members during their college transitions (Coffman, 2011; Orbe, 2008). Some first-generation students believe they are betraying their parents by working towards white-collar jobs that represent a remarkably different lifestyle and livelihood than the working-class, blue-collar jobs they were accustomed to while growing up (Lubrano, 2004; Olson, 2014). Some first-generation students, even if they come from modest but good upbringings, are ashamed of being the first in the family to attend college and hide this piece of their lives from their friends and classmates (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Orbe, 2008). This feeling can be conditioned by family ideals and values; it is not uncommon to hear the parent of a first-generation student implore his/her son or daughter, “don’t be like me…make something of yourself” (Gofen, 2009, p. 111). First-generation students may also feel pressure from their families to be the first to achieve the milestone of earning a college degree, which may lead to stress and anxiety for the student (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Similarly, first-generation students may hide their collegiate lives from their families and friends back home. First-generation students who attend prestigious selective universities may
especially feel as though their stories about study abroad experiences and on-campus traditions will make their family members jealous (Stuber, 2010). Consequently, first-generation students can feel isolated during their transition to college as they struggle to find an equilibrium between their home and college lives (Lubrano, 2004).

**Self-esteem and confidence.**

The first-generation student struggles that have been examined in this section just scratch the surface of the issues these students could potentially encounter during their transition to college. Oftentimes, first-generation students come from racial, social, and economic backgrounds that compound their experiences and make their transitions more difficult (Fischer, 2007). As discussed earlier, first-generation students achieve at a lower academic level and have lower retention rates than their continuing-generation counterparts. Students do not learn, study, and earn their grades in a bubble; experiences inside and outside of the classroom influence how students perform academically (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Collier and Morgan (2007) conducted a research study examining students’ abilities to understand their professors’ expectations and how that ability impacted the students’ performance in the class. They found that even if a student’s academic abilities indicated that the student should have been able to perform well in the coursework, if the student was unable to understand and actualize the professor’s expectations, the student would not have been able to demonstrate his/her full academic capacity (Collier & Morgan, 2007). The student became frustrated because he/she could not see or understand the underlying issues that caused his/her academic failures (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Students’ inabilitys to properly adapt and perform academically can lead the students to doubt themselves, their abilities, and their deservedness of their spot in their institution. Research indicates that first-generation students often “have lower
self-images of their academic ability” (Stebleton & Soria, 2012, p. 9) than their continuing-generation counterparts, and this lack of confidence and academic self-esteem can impact the students’ academic performances and overall happiness during their college careers.

The next section will examine social class, which undergirds the experience of all undergraduate students (whether they know it or not) and can have a profound impact on first-generation students depending upon the class from which they come.

**Social Class and Capital in College**

Lubrano (2004) is a journalist and first-generation college graduate. His book *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams* was intended to tell his own story and the stories of others who earned college degrees and crossed the threshold from blue to white collar, becoming lawyers, businesspeople, journalists, and professors, among other professions. While Lubrano insisted that his book was not a work of sociology (p. 1), he hit on many important sociological elements that undergird the literature on social class and social capital. More importantly, Lubrano gave life to theory and personality to statistics. He and the subjects of his book began their lives in blue-collar families: most of them grew up relatively poor, and most of their parents were uneducated. Their families had varying views on college: some insisted that college would be the only way to a successful and happy life, while others did everything in their power to prevent their children from going to college. Lubrano called himself and his subjects “straddlers” – they had a foot each in the blue and white-collar worlds, and they spent their lives trying to figure out where they fit and how to fully assimilate into the blue or white-collar realm.

While class is rarely discussed in America, Lubrano stated that “you take your class with you wherever you go” (p. 87); for better or worse, others know (or assume they know) which class a person comes from and make judgments because of it. Lubrano knew that social class
undergirds education, especially at selective and elite institutions, and that attending college is perhaps less about becoming an expert in a subject area and earning a degree than it is about figuring out how to navigate social class structures. Lubrano’s book, while not a dissertation or peer-reviewed journal, is a fitting place to begin gaining an understanding of social class and how it affects college students.

**Social capital.**

The aforementioned struggles first-generation students may face in college demonstrate how their social capital is most often not aligned with what is expected of students who matriculate into the American university system (Lubrano, 2004). In order to understand the particularities of majority first-generation students’ struggles throughout the college transition process, it is important to know the background theory of social capital and learn how social capital plays out within American colleges and universities. Renowned sociologist Bourdieu (1986) first defined social capital as:

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (p. 21)

Anheier, Gerhards and Romo (1995) distinguished social capital from other types of capital that Bourdieu also defined. The researchers explained that economic capital mainly refers to income, assets, and other financial resources; these resources are tangible and manifest themselves in money, possession, homes, and so on. Cultural capital, as initially explained by Bourdieu and further refined by Anheier, Gerhards and Romo, encompasses symbols, habits, norms, and even possessions. The authors cited museums and artifacts (p. 862) as forms of cultural capital, and within a specific family unit, cultural capital can also include the family’s
traditions and modes of behavior. While little can be done to modify or affect economic and cultural capital, individuals can manipulate social capital through networking and strategically positioning themselves within certain groups of people. Sandefur, Meier, and Campbell (2006) explained that higher-income families typically have the ability (and desire) to put more money and resources into their children’s education. Similarly, Perna and Titus (2005) stated, “middle- and upper-class individuals possess the most valued forms of cultural capital” (p. 488); such individuals have the upper hand in institutions dominated by middle- and upper-class values and norms.

For first-generation students, college is perhaps the only way to climb social and economic ladders (Coffman, 2011; Gofen, 2009; Terenzini et al., 1995). First-generation students from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds believe, and their families agree, that college is the way for them to escape what Gofen (2009) called the “intergenerational cycle” (p. 104). First-generation students and their families view a college degree as a means to increase socioeconomic status and achieve social class mobility (Orbe, 2008; Thering, 2012). But for any college student to find academic success and earn the magical piece of paper (Thering, 2012) that holds the key to their future success, they must be able to integrate into all aspects of the college community. It is understood among education professionals that student integration into college life requires the student’s ability to navigate academic and social tensions and relationships while reconciling the student’s own background and personal experiences within his/her new environment (Clarke, 2005; Fischer, 2007). First-generation students enter college with inherent disadvantages: unlike their continuing-generation counterparts for whom college is “an established experience in their families and a predictable stage in their life” (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011, p. 36), first-generation students must not only learn to navigate a new campus and
professors’ expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2007); they must also adjust to an entirely new social class and set of behaviors and social rules (Stephens et al., 2012). Continuing-generation students have a distinct advantage from having heard their parents’ stories and perhaps even witnessed their parents’ relationships with classmates from college (Pascarella et al., 2004). The collegiate integration process presents an entirely new experience and separate set of challenges for first-generation students, especially since they represent a smaller percentage of the collegiate student body and likely come from backgrounds that do not mirror those of the rest of the student body.

According to a 2017 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds. The study examined a group of 2002 high school sophomores who went on to higher education after graduating high school. The study determined that first-generation students generally came from lower-income households: 27% from a household that made less than $20,000 annually, 50% from a household that made between $20,000 and $50,000 annually, and only 2% from a household that made over $200,000 annually. In contrast, only 6% of continuing-generation students came from the lowest income bracket, and 48% came from a household that made anywhere from $75,000 to $200,000 or more annually. Income plays an important role in determining students’ options for their college careers. Haveman and Smeeding (2006) discussed higher education as it relates and contributes to social mobility within today’s society. In 2001, they found that nearly 80% of students from the upper income quintile were enrolled in college after graduating high school, whereas 44% of students in the bottom income quintile were also enrolled in college after graduating high school. As it pertains to the discussion of social capital, the researchers stated that ability, motivation, and preparedness are some of the traits that students must cultivate and
rely on to find success in college. Such traits “are all linked to the economic position of the children’s families. Children from well-to-do families tend, on average, to have more of all three traits[.].” (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006, p. 129). Haveman and Smeeding referenced Ellwood and Kane’s (2000) study, which investigated college-going students’ familial backgrounds; the study found that 74% of the incoming class at the 146 top-tier institutions came from the highest income quartile, and only 3% of students came from the lowest. These findings align with previously-discussed data, demonstrating that first-generation students – who are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic statuses – matriculate at less- or non-selective institutions such as community colleges, while students from higher socioeconomic statuses are more likely to matriculate at more competitive (and more resourced) institutions.

**Cultural mismatch.**

There is no doubt that the American university system, especially at the most competitive and prestigious tier, reflects majority and middle-class ideals and attitudes (Miller & Kastberg, 1995). American colleges and universities espouse independence as “the widely accepted American ideal for how to act as an appropriate person or college student” (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 4). First-generation college students are more familiar with interdependence, especially if they come from working-class backgrounds that have made them aware of and dependent on social and economic support networks (Stephens et al., 2012). Those students, then, have a more difficult time adjusting to expectations of independence from professors and other members of the campus community.

Stephens and her colleagues (2012) called the phenomenon of interdependent first-generation students encountering an educational model built on independent structures the “cultural mismatch theory” (p. 4). The cultural mismatch theory highlights just one way in
which first-generation students feel an inner tension between their “old” identities (their backgrounds and upbringings) and their “new” identities (becoming members of a college community and the academic middle-class). First-generation narratives reveal that students feel like they are outsiders within their school communities (Coffman, 2008; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco Jr., 2011; Orbe, 2008). Some first-generation students cannot identify with the backgrounds and experiences of their classmates because of racial, social, or economic barriers (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco Jr., 2011). Other students suffer from the “little fish in the big pond” effect: these students are likely revered as superstars and pioneers in their family communities because they are the first to attend college, but once they reach college and encounter students who are better prepared and more well-adjusted to collegiate life, they begin to doubt their abilities to succeed academically and socially (Orbe, 2008). The social capital the students once enjoyed disappears, and they must learn how to form a new network and establish themselves within an unfamiliar situation.

Beattie and Thiele (2016) researched what they called academic social capital by looking at the impact of large class sizes on both continuing and first-generation college students. Academic social capital, according to the researchers, consists of behaviors and interactions on the part of both the students and the professors that will help the students integrate into the college classroom setting and achieve academic success. Examples include talking to a professor one-on-one during or after class and discussing career goals with a professor or a teaching assistant. Professor-student relationships can eventually grow into networking opportunities and post-graduate mentorships, but since networking is often a) a middle-class construct and b) frowned upon in working-class communities (Hinz, 2016), first-generation students may miss out on opportunities that are critical for fostering their academic social capital. Ultimately,
Beattie and Thiele found that larger class sizes had a negative impact on all students, but they also learned that minority first-generation students struggled the most in larger classroom settings. While a continuing-generation student may understand the importance of creating relationships with professors and may feel empowered to speak up in a large classroom, first-generation students may not know how to approach the professor or may not feel confident enough to ask a question in a large classroom setting (Stephens et al., 2012).

Martin’s 2011 study on students at a highly-selective university introduced the notion of class fractioning, a concept he learned from Bourdieu’s analysis of the French educational system. Class fractioning suggests that multiple stratifications can exist within one larger social class. For example, Martin separated the upper class into the professional group and the executive group, arguing that while both were more advantaged than the middle and working classes below them, the professional group was even more affluent and educated than the executive group. Students within the professional group possessed the most cultural capital, had the greatest access to opportunities for success in college, and were the most satisfied with their time in college. Social capital and social class are delicate topics that have gone relatively unexamined in educational literature, but the information that has been presented thus far demonstrates how the constructs can impact a student’s transition to and experience in college. The next section will focus specifically on white student identity and review the studies that focus on white, first-generation college students.

**White First-Generation College Students**

White first-generation college students are predicted to make up a considerable portion of the first-generation student population over the next decade (Balemian & Feng, 2013). White students are noticeably absent from much of the literature on first-generation college students
and it does not seem as though white first-generation students experience difficulties with social class and capital to the same extent as their underrepresented classmates. A deeper look at this group revealed that white first-generation students, especially those from low-income or working-class backgrounds, experienced many of the same struggles that have been discussed in this literature review.

**Whiteness and white culture.**

Morris (2005) asserted that “whiteness often signals middle-class status” (p. 101), so it could be assumed that because colleges and universities often espouse middle-class values and ideals (Miller & Kastberg, 1995), white first-generation students will not struggle because they, due to their whiteness, have a better understanding of middle class (and therefore collegiate) culture than underrepresented first-generation students. This is a common phenomenon: racial groups are lumped together and stereotyped; therefore, it is assumed that individuals belonging to the same race share similar experiences and backgrounds (Lewis, Chesler & Forman, 2000). Lubrano (2004) stated, “any blue-collar kid who works in a bakery can take a trip to the Gap and buy clothes that would make him indistinguishable from a sophomore at Bryn Mawr” (p. 4). Lubrano’s quote speaks volumes to the extent to which class and identity, especially for white students, is easily covered up or copied.

Wilson and Kittleson (2013) suggested that white culture is homogenous, even invisible. Yet even within white social class and culture, there are sub-stereotypes that stem from socioeconomic or social class status. One example of a stereotype assumed that students from New England who attend prestigious boarding schools or come from wealthy areas of Connecticut or Massachusetts are all “rich white kids,” easily identified by their khakis, polo shirts, and nice cars (Stuber, 2006). The New England prep-school student carries negative
connotations for young people from the middle or upper-middle class, portraying them as snobby, spoiled brats. Another stereotype calls some white people “white trash” or “trailer trash,” which typically refers to individuals who appear low-income because of their clothing, homes, cars, and unrefined behavior (Morris, 2005). Martin (2015) interviewed a white first-generation student for her study on social class-consciousness in college, and the student explained that her family members referred to themselves as “white clutter” (p. 479) instead of white trash because while her family was poor, they believed themselves to be a level above the people who were stereotyped as “white trash.” The terms “blue-collar” and “white-collar” could also carry inherently pejorative connotations. White-collar often refers to middle or upper-middle class jobs that require more education and, presumably, more skill, and the presence of the word “white” in the label automatically infers generalized perceptions of the white middle-class majority. “Blue-collar,” then, is lesser, representing work that is considered less skilled and less important than white-collar work, especially since a blue-collar worker usually does not need to attain a college degree to be qualified for his/her work.

**Spotlight studies on white first-generation students.**

Martin (2012) and Stuber (2006) both wrote doctoral dissertations on white first-generation college students, examining how they understood and negotiated social class during their time in college. Both researchers emphasized the importance of social class and how it undergirds the American collegiate system, and both researchers also focused on white first-generation students. Most dissertations on first-generation students either examined all first-generation students regardless of race or isolated underrepresented minorities and only studied students from specific (and non-white) racial groups (Gable, 2016; Olson, 2011; Truong, 2016). Martin discovered that while her research participants tried to downplay the important of social
class in their lives, they revealed the frustrations they felt towards their upper-class peers who did not have to work to pay for tuition and who seemed to focus more on the social aspects of college than anything else. The participants understood where they stood within society and expressed varying emotions – pride, embarrassment – towards their social class status. Stuber contrasted the social class perceptions of white, working-class, first-generation students and white, upper-class, continuing-generation students. Stuber found an interesting juxtaposition: the working-class students could easily see how they differed from their peers who came from higher social classes, but they also failed to notice other students who shared their social class status. The upper-class students, on the other hand, easily identified small factors that differentiated them from students who were part of an even wealthier social class group, but they did not take much notice of the lower-class students on campus. Harkening back to the previous discussion on social class in higher education, it is no surprise that this phenomenon occurs. The lower-class students are used to finding themselves in unfamiliar environments and viewing themselves as outsiders within a system that is incongruent to their backgrounds, whereas upper-class students have been taught and conditioned to see the details within their dominant class system.

Stuber’s post-doctoral research studies provided an in-depth examination of white first-generation students and their responses to college. Her 2006 study, a direct offshoot of her dissertation, contrasted the experiences and narratives of first-generation, working-class white students and continuing generation, upper-middle-class white students. Stuber’s 2010 study examined the experiences of white, working-class, first-generation students and focused specifically on how the students persisted through their collegiate journeys. Across both studies, Stuber gathered various experiences and reflections from the first-generation students. Among
the first-generation students who were most “persistent” in her study were students from more financially stable, though working-class, homes; the students who experienced the most hardship in their college transitions came from homes with financial struggles (Stuber, 2010).

Despite their overall ability to integrate into the community, when Stuber asked first-generation students to describe social class and its visibility on campus, she found that the first-generation students were much more aware of social class and status than were the continuing-generation, upper-middle class students (Stuber, 2006). The upper-middle class students said that they could not differentiate between classes, but the first-generation working-class students quickly noticed which students looked like they came from a wealthy neighborhood or drove a nice car (Stuber, 2006). Many of the first-generation students in the 2006 study felt as though they had to work harder than their continuing-generation, upper-class peers, and many stated that they while they wanted to be successful and happy in the future, they did not want to become like their peers (Stuber, 2006). The first-generation students viewed parts of the middle-class lifestyle as undesirable even though they were in college to attain a degree that was supposed to lead them to a similar lifestyle and economic status. Stuber (2010) provided an excellent summation of the paradox that white students, particularly first-generation, working-class white students, faced:

*Combined with the literature on cultural capital, these insights suggest that white, working-class students may have complex experiences. On the one hand, they may be expected to experience class-based disadvantages due to their lack of valuable cultural and economic capital. On the other hand, they may be expected to experience race-based advantages due to their whiteness, an asset that helps them blend in with the mainstream (p. 120).*

Stuber’s findings reinforced much of what has been discussed in this literature review. First-generation students often lack academic preparation and flexibility in their personal and
social lives that will enable them to fully realize their potential and succeed in college. Due to social and cultural stereotypes as well as research studies that, in part, support the stereotypes, underrepresented students who also identify as first-generation are expected to enter college with clear disadvantages. White first-generation students, however, may not appear as though they come from academically or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Since white culture is, as stated previously, invisible, white first-generation students are likely to blend in with the rest of their classmates, and it will likely be assumed that they do not identify as first-generation students. This could cause students to experience anxiety or difficulties as they try to balance the lives they left behind with their new lives in college.

**Summation**

This literature review has provided the reader with a comprehensive overview of first-generation students and a focused description of white first-generation students as a small but important subset in need of more research. The review also incorporated a foundational understanding of social class and how it impacts the American college student’s academic and social experience. For first-generation students, social class could be the difference between persisting and dropping out, and this review has demonstrated that the lower the student’s social class, the more likely the student is to experience academic, social, and personal difficulties in college. This literature review concluded that white first-generation students can provide an example of what the researcher calls *layering*. All students come to college with complex backgrounds and various contexts that impact how they will perform and integrate. To understand the student experience in college and especially the interaction between collegiate success and social class, it is important to peel back the students’ individual layers and learn what experiences and characteristics have impacted them before and during their collegiate
experiences. Educators cannot assume what a student’s experience will be based on one isolated factor, such as a race or family income level.

The next chapter contains the design for the research study. The chapter explains the methodological paradigm and framework chosen for the study and outlines the details of the research design.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how white, first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible described their academic and social experiences during their transition to college. The research design for this study is presented in this chapter. Recognizing that the population of white first-generation college students is relatively small, the researcher chose a qualitative methodology rooted in the constructivist paradigm and examined through the lens of interpretative phenomenological analysis. After the key elements of qualitative research and the chosen paradigm and methodology were highlighted, the details of the research design were explained. This overview includes a description of the selected institution, parameters participants had to meet to be eligible for the research study, the methodology used to obtain participants for the study, the positionality and bias of the researcher, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

Qualitative Research

Creswell (2012) explained the key differences in quantitative and qualitative research: whereas quantitative research utilizes predefined variables and a large data sample to answer questions and/or a specific hypothesis, qualitative research relies on a central phenomenon and utilizes a small data sample to explore perspectives on a problem or question. Qualitative research relies less heavily on a literature review than does quantitative research, and qualitative research is often carried out through interviews with or observations of the chosen participants. In qualitative research, the research problem is used to establish the central phenomenon and not to dictate the hypotheses posed as is the case in quantitative research (Creswell, 2012). Quantitative research can be understood as predefined and lockstep; once a researcher
determines the hypotheses and formulates the research questions, there will be no deviation from the design. While a qualitative research study should not be completely redesigned halfway through, Creswell (2012) noted that the interview protocol questions and prompts may shift during the interview and data collection phase and stated that qualitative research questions should be “open-ended” (p. 19) so that the participants can truly drive the data collection process.

A qualitative methodology was fitting for this research design for three reasons. First, this study worked with a category of students that had not yet been studied in isolation from the lenses of understanding first-generation students or understanding how social class impacts their college transition. There were more unknown variables than known variables when examining the population, so the open-ended nature of qualitative inquiry revealed new and valuable insight from the participants. Second, white first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible make up a small subsection of first-generation students, thus, it would have been difficult to gather a large data set such as would be necessary for a quantitative research study. Third, the focus of the research was on students’ experiences and their interpretations of those experiences, which was best captured by in-depth, semi-structured interviews that are commonly found within qualitative research designs.

**Choosing a research paradigm: constructivist-interpretivist.**

Ponterotto (2005) outlined four major paradigms – positivism, post-positivism, constructivism-interpretivism, and critical-ideological – used to undergird research studies. Though Ponterotto wrote from the perspective of counseling psychology, the paradigms are also well-suited to research inquiry in education. A paradigm may be defined as a “set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework
for the organized study of that world” (Filstead, 1979, p. 34). Drawing on this definition of paradigms, Ponterotto provided detailed explanations of each of the four. Positivism and post-positivism both profess an objective reality; positivism holds that reality is perfectly knowable, but post-positivism differs because it views the reality as “only imperfectly apprehendable” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). In both positivism and post-positivism, the researcher is detached from the subjects and normally uses quantitative research methods. Constructivism-interpretivism focuses on perceived reality; instead of one ultimate reality, reality is constructed by the individual, and all realities are valid. In constructivism-interpretivism, Ponterotto explained that the researcher interacts with the research participants to best understand their realities, and the two parties “jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation” (p. 129). Finally, the critical-ideological paradigm is similar to the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm because it professes multiple, equally valid realities, but that paradigm goes a step further by seeking to free oppressed persons from the structures and realities that oppress them. Critical theorists examine current power relationships and use their research to free those who are held down by said power relationships.

The constructivist-interpretivist approach was appropriate for this research study because it fit well with the qualitative methodology and aligned with both the Social Class Worldview Model, which will be explained in the next chapter as the conceptual framework, and with the lens of interpretative phenomenological analysis. By conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the researcher was able to gain entry into the individual research participant’s reality and respect the integrity and validity of that reality, as well as draw powerful insight and meaningful explanations related to the research question.

Choosing a methodological framework: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis served as the methodological framework for this study. Rooted in, but different from, phenomenology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is fairly new to fields such as psychology, counseling, and education. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis “is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” (Smith, 2011, p. 9). Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis distinguishes itself from phenomenology by focusing on the how rather than simply answering the what. Whereas phenomenology is focused on understanding lived experience(s), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is aimed at knowing how the participant experienced the experience itself; the focus is on the act of experiencing a situation or phenomenon and not the understanding of the phenomenon itself.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis also takes the reflection experience a step further: while engaged in this framework, the researcher is tasked with “trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, 2011, p. 10). This is the double hermeneutic. First, the participants not only experience something, but they must also determine how they are experiencing the experience. Second, the researcher seeks to understand how the participant experiences the situation or phenomenon, and then reflects to determine how the researcher is reacting to that understanding. This requires the researcher to tune into positionality and context while also retaining the integrity of the participant’s experience of and reaction to the phenomenon. Larkin, Eatough and Osborn (2011) stated, “Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis offers an established, systematic, and phenomenologically-focused approach, which is committed to understanding the first-person perspective from the third-person position, so far as is possible, through intersubjective inquiry and analysis” (p. 321).
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was a suitable methodology for this study because many of the participants had never fully and intentionally thought about how their status as first-generation students impacted their lives and experiences in college. As the participants talked during their interviews, they were reflecting on how they experienced being first-generation and simultaneously experiencing it in the moment. The researcher was also able to experience how the participants reacted to their own words, experiences, and reflections.

Larkin and Thompson (2012) argued for qualitative methodologies within Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research. They suggested data collection “in the form of a semi-structured, one-to-one interview” (p. 103) followed by a “verbatim transcription” (p. 103). Larkin and Thompson also encouraged the use of a small sample size to ensure that ample time be given to each interview, thereby ensuring rich and detailed accounts that allow the researcher to extract themes and create narratives. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research ensures that themes are not being created at the detriment of the individual stories and experienced-experiences present in the interview transcriptions. Larkin and Thompson encouraged free coding, followed by detailed (or line-by-line) coding, and finally another look at the codes and transcripts to identify emerging themes. Smith (2011) reinforced the importance of a balanced research study: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research cannot focus too heavily on overarching themes, nor can the research only look at participants in isolation. A strong Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research study balances a detailed treatment of each interview and identifies themes and patterns across all interviews.

In upcoming sections, this chapter will outline how data collection and analysis occurred in a manner that was in line with IPA methodology.

**Institutional Review Board Approval**
 Approval for this research study was sought from the researcher’s Institutional Review Board. The IRB application was filled out and submitted, and all requirements and procedures were fulfilled and followed throughout the research study. NIH Human Subject Training was completed prior to IRB application submission. The IRB application required copies of fliers intended for recruitment and informed consent forms.

**Research Site.**

A private research university in New England was chosen for the study. The university was considered large and highly residential (Carnegie Classifications, 2017). The research site was a highly-selective institution that boasted a low admit rate and high retention rate. The students who attended this university were enrolled in challenging courses and were surrounded by other academically-accomplished students. Students from across the United States and numerous countries matriculated as undergraduate and graduate students, and while the university had over a third of students who identified as students of color, the undergraduate population at the institution was largely comprised of majority students. The university had high tuition, room, and board fees, but the institution also committed to meeting full demonstrated financial need for families who applied for need-based financial aid. Most undergraduates at the university qualified for and received either need- or merit-based financial aid, but nearly a quarter of the undergraduates did not receive any financial assistance and paid all fees in full to attend the institution.

**Research Participants**

The following parameters were used in the selection of research participants:
1. Identified as white and/or Caucasian (NCES, 2016). This study was limited to students who identified as white and/or Caucasian on their college applications to the university that was the research site.

2. Identified as a first-generation college student. This study defined first-generation college students as having parent(s) who has/have not pursued education beyond a high school diploma (Chen, 2005).

3. Identified as non-Pell Grant eligible. This means the student did not receive a Pell Grant as part of his or her need-based financial aid package when applying to college. Students who applied for and received other types of financial assistance were permitted to participate in the study so long as they had not received a Pell Grant.

4. Was currently a full-time, undergraduate student at the chosen institution at the time of the study. To be full-time, the student was enrolled in a minimum of 12 credits each semester or was participating in a cooperative education experience in lieu of taking classes. To be considered an undergraduate student, the student was pursuing a Bachelor’s degree for the first time and had not previously attained a Bachelor’s degree at the chosen institution or at any other institution.

5. Had enrolled in a minimum of three academic semesters at the chosen institution at the time of the study.

**Sampling participants.**

After approval was granted from the research site, an approved advertisement flyer was posted in the commonly-frequented academic buildings, and a call for research participants was posted on the university’s public and permission-granted private Facebook accounts. Participants were encouraged to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating in
the study. Once a participant reached out to the researcher to inquire about the study, the researcher sent the participant a detailed explanation of the study and a short demographic survey to gather information about the participant and to ensure that the participant fit the parameters of the study.

**Procedures**

Once the six research participants were selected, the research process began. Each participant agreed on a designated time and location on campus with the researcher for the first interview. Interviews took place either in the campus library or in an administrative building. Prior to the first interview, the researcher sent each participant a consent form that outlined the objectives of the study, informed the participants of any potential risks or benefits associated with the study, and provided the participants with contact information for the Human Subjects in Research representative at the research site. Each participant was given the opportunity to review the consent form and ask clarifying questions prior to the first interview to ensure that they were comfortable with the interview process. Participants were informed of the measures that the researcher took to keep their information confidential and were asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their privacy in the study.

**Interviews.**

Two sets of interviews were conducted with each participant: an in-depth interview and a follow-up interview focused on reflection. For the first round, in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted at least 90 minutes and consisted of questions that were structured enough to give the researcher the information that was needed, but also open enough to allow the participants to fully express themselves and elaborate where needed. Interviews were conducted as “a conversation with a purpose” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 57).
Each interview began with a review of the consent form. Once each participant had his/her questions answered, he/she was asked to sign the consent form. Interviews were recorded on the researcher’s phone, then uploaded to the researcher’s password-protected computer and deleted from the phone. The researcher personally transcribed each interview in a line-by-line format. Electronic copies of the transcriptions were kept in a password-locked folder on the researcher’s computer, and hard copies of the transcriptions along with the computer were kept in a safe in the researcher’s apartment. Pseudonyms were used on all transcriptions for the entirety of the research study to protect participants’ identities.

A follow-up interview with participants took place 7 to 14 days after the first interview. The second interview allowed both the researcher and the participant to reflect on their conversations from the first interview, and it served as a checkpoint for both parties to assure that the researcher was accurately portraying the participant’s thoughts and responses (Cope, 2014). At the start of the second interview, the participant was reminded that he/she did not have to respond to any questions with which he/she was not comfortable. The participant was also reassured that the same protocol for confidentiality and data protection from the first interview would also be used for the second interview. Responses from the second interview were recorded on the researcher’s phone and later converted to notes that were kept in a locked folder on the researcher’s computer.

**Research questions.**

The research question central to this study was: How do white, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible describe their academic and social experiences in college? In addition to the central research question, a research interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions and prompts was developed for use in each interview. According to Smith, Flowers,
and Larkin (2012), 6 to 10 open-ended research interview questions typically yield an interview that is between 45 and 90 minutes long for an adult participant. The interview questions were used throughout the first interview to gain insight into the students’ experiences prior to and during college. The follow-up questions, where applicable, were used to help students elaborate on their experiences and provide rich details. Appendix A contains the full list of interview questions and prompts for both sets of interviews. The Appendix also includes notes on the procedures that occurred prior to and after each set of interviews.

**Data analysis.**

After each interview, the researcher transcribed the recording by hand. The transcriptions were labeled with the participants’ chosen pseudonyms and were kept in a locked folder on the researcher’s computer. Hard copies of the transcriptions were kept in a safe in the researcher’s apartment. Two main types of data collection were conducted by the researcher: first, each individual interview was analyzed soon after the interview took place, and second, once all interviews concluded, the aggregate of all the data was examined. Larkin and Thompson (2012) offered guidelines for analyzing data from an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study; the following is a summary of the procedures that were used in the data analysis for this research study:

1. Once each interview was transcribed, the “free coding” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 106) process began. Free coding included writing down initial thoughts, feelings and reactions on the first transcript. This process identified early themes and prompted responses to the interview.
2. A second, clean copy of the transcript was used for a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcript.
3. Once the first transcription was coded and analyzed, emerging themes were identified and grouped.

4. Once all transcriptions were finished, overarching themes were identified across the interviews, and key individual themes were noted.

**Trustworthiness**

Scholars have sought to define how qualitative researchers can create high-quality research and maintain validity — known as trustworthiness — throughout the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1994) identified criteria that constitute trustworthiness in qualitative research. Cope (2014) summarized five criteria; these criteria were used by the researcher to ensure that the research study established trustworthiness.

1. **Credibility** refers to how the researcher can demonstrate that the participants’ views and perspectives are being portrayed accurately. This requires that the researcher check in with his or her participants to ensure that they agree with the findings. The second interview served as a credibility checkpoint in this research study.

2. **Dependability** can also be called “consistency” and speaks to the researcher’s findings in relation to other research studies that have been conducted in similar settings and contexts. Other research studies were consulted and cross-referenced as data were collected and analyzed.

3. **Confirmability** is demonstrated when the researcher is being true to the findings and does not let researcher biases impede the data’s truth. A journal exploring bias and assumptions was kept by the researcher throughout the data collection phase, and data analysis focused on the findings from interview transcripts and did not incorporate researcher bias.
4. *Transferability* is similar to confirmability; the outcomes of the research should be applicable to other individuals outside of the research study. Similar studies were examined throughout the data collection process for consistency.

5. *Authenticity* is similar to credibility as it refers to the researcher’s goal of accurately portraying both the words and the emotions of the research participants. The data analysis included direct quotes from participants, and the second interview gave participants an opportunity to reflect and indicate whether they would have said or done something differently during the first interview.

**Researcher Positionality**

I am a white, first-generation student. My father graduated high school and my mother dropped out of high school during her senior year. My father started his career as a carpenter before he even graduated high school, and my mother worked as a secretary until I was born, at which point she stopped working to care for me and her elderly parents. We have always lived comfortably on a middle-class income. My parents could afford to send me to a private Catholic high school and pay for SAT tutoring classes, and their number one goal was to give me the best education possible. I attended a competitive, medium-sized research university for my undergraduate and graduate degrees, and I struggled with my identity early on. During my undergraduate career, I excelled inside the classroom, but I had difficulties identifying with other students because they were more invested in the social aspect of college and less concerned with their studies. I encountered wealthy students and saw large differences in how we valued and spent money. I also began to understand that while I was one of the only people that I knew of who came from an uneducated blue-collar family, I did not fit the mold of the traditional first-generation college student. Most other first-generation students at my institution were
underrepresented students from low-income backgrounds. Unable to fully identify with my continuing-generation peers or my first-generation classmates, I did not quite know where I belonged. I began thinking more about social class backgrounds and how a student’s upbringing impacts her transition to college; that interest combined with my own experience as a “straddler” (Lubrano, 2004) inspired me to conduct this research study.

**Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge that this research study had limitations (Kornbluh, 2015). The institutional identity and sample participant group limited this study, but there is potential for future studies in similar topical areas. The limitations of the study will be revisited in Chapter 6 at which point concrete ideas for future research projects will be offered.

**Summation**

This chapter has presented the research design for the study that examined how white, first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible described their academic and social experiences in college. In the following chapter, the conceptual framework used as a lens for the study will be introduced.
Chapter 4: Conceptual Framework

Social Class Worldview Model

The Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM) served as the conceptual framework for this study. Liu et al. (2004) conceptualized the Social Class Worldview Model as a “schema that people use to make sense of their social class perceptions, feelings, economic environments, and cultures” (p. 103). The framework was originally developed for (and out of an understanding of) counseling psychology research and practices because there was a palpable void within the counseling psychology field when it came to understanding how social class and classism fit into patients’ lives. The authors acknowledged that traditional mental health diagnoses and treatments “tend to favor middle-class, educated individuals and worldviews” (p. 96), demonstrating that the field and those treated within it could benefit from an understanding of how social class is embedded within societal constructs and how the field could be unknowingly failing to properly treat individuals who come from different social class backgrounds. Liu et al. explained that social class and classism impact each other and are also impacted by constructs such as racism and sexism; the researchers noted that much like race and racism are co-con structs, so are social class and classism. The same process of “othering” (p. 96) that keeps non-white men and women in the margins of society also functions in classism as that which separates and maintains the “haves” and “have-nots.” Liu and his colleagues also pointed to the subjectivity inherent within individual understandings of social class and classism. For example, a student from a middle-class family who was taught to value travel and experiencing the world may be more likely to spend money on plane tickets and trips than a student from a middle-class family who was raised to value material goods from expensive stores. Although both students
come from similar class and socioeconomic backgrounds, they have internalized spending priorities differently.

**Framework Domains**

As they developed their framework, Liu et al. acknowledged that social class is an individual, subjective construct that is impacted by a person’s perceptions of him/herself and of his/her environment (2004). They also stated that individuals endeavor to “cope with the demands and expectations of their economic culture and maximize their opportunities to accumulate the valued capital within that economic culture” (p. 104). With these assumptions in mind, Liu and his colleagues developed a model of five interrelated domains. On the following page is a figure of the Social Class Worldview Model domains, and the domains are explained in detail following the figure.
Figure 1.1. Illustration of the five Social Class Worldview Model domains. The three referent groups (origin, peer/cohort, and aspiration) make up one domain; the other four domains are each represented in their respective circles. Adapted from “A New Framework to Understand Social Class in Counseling: The Social Class Worldview Model and Modern Classism Theory” by W.M. Liu et al., 2004, Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 32, p. 106.
1. *Consciousness, Attitudes and Saliency* refers to the individual’s ability to break down and understand what social class means. This domain begins with the individual’s awareness (*consciousness*) of social class’ work in the individual’s life, then moves to the individual’s reaction (*attitudes*) to social class, and ends with the emphasis (*saliency*) the individual places on social class.

2. *Referent Groups* refers to the people in the individual’s life who impact the individual’s baseline understanding of social class. This domain has three subgroups: the *group of origin* is comprised of family members and guardians; the *peer/cohort group* is comprised of friends, classmates, colleagues, teammates and other people who are “currently similar to” (p. 105) the individual and inform the present understanding of social class; and the *group of aspiration* refers to people like whom the individual wants to become.

3. *Property Relationship* points to the emphasis the individual places on material goods and how that emphasis relates to social class – the individual can use materials to attempt to move up in social class (i.e., wear specific brands to signify a certain level of wealth) or to demonstrate that social class does not matter (i.e., shop at thrift stores despite being wealthy to demonstrate that material goods are not important).

4. *Lifestyle* refers to how an individual spends time and resources to reflect or reject certain social class connotations.

5. *Behaviors* speaks to the learned movements, actions, words and manners of speaking that the individual internalizes and uses to demonstrate belongingness to certain group or disassociation with a certain group.
The domains are interrelated and overlap with one another. For example, a young woman learns certain behaviors from her group of origin. These behaviors may include wearing expensive clothing (property relationships) and going on exotic vacations (lifestyle). But when the young woman becomes friends (peer/cohort group) with social justice advocates while in graduate school, she may begin to feel as though she has been wasting her time and money (consciousness, attitudes, saliency) on things that are less important than helping others. The young woman may then renounce her worldly possessions (property relationships) and instead of going on vacation to Bora Bora, she may opt for a service trip to the Dominican Republic (lifestyle) with the new group she hopes will accept her (aspirant group). Since social class behaviors are often implicit and internalized from a young age, many individuals may not even think about why they value certain material goods, behaviors and lifestyles until they leave home for the first significant period of time.

**How the framework fits the research study.**

While the Social Class Worldview Model framework was originally intended for psychological and mental health counseling research, it is widely applicable, and it was a particularly good fit for this research study. First, this study explored students’ perceptions of social class and how those perceptions have changed or remained the same since they began their journey in college. Leaving home to go to college is, for most students, the first significant shift in their understanding and perception of social class. The transition to college is an impactful event in any student’s life, and this study sought to understand how students grapple with social class and their changing environments while also navigating the academic and social transition to college. Second, this study presumed that most of the research participants came from middle, upper-middle, or upper-class backgrounds because one of the parameters was based on Pell
Grant eligibility. As the creators of the Social Class Worldview Model suggested, social class is constructed and contextual (p. 96); a middle-class family’s income in one part of the United States may be larger or smaller than that of a family that also identifies as middle class but lives in a different region. This study took into account the participants’ backgrounds and upbringings as considerations for how they understood their social class. Finally, various types of capital – social, human, and cultural (Liu et al., 2004) – present in an individual’s life also impact the individual’s class background and perceptions of class in general. Previous research on first-generation students drew on literature on social and cultural capital in particular and how it can both positively and negatively affect first-generation students as they transition to college. Since most of that literature focuses on students from lower class and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, this study gave insight into how social and cultural capital plays out in the lives of middle- to upper-class students.

**Summation**

Through in-depth interviews with the research participants, this study sought to understand how social, human and cultural capital have been present or absent in their lives and, subsequently, how their backgrounds may have affected their transitions to college life. The next chapter will present and analyze the findings from the qualitative study. The final chapter will discuss the emergent themes as they relate to selected works in the literature review and the Social Class Worldview Model; it will also present the study limitations and recommendations for future research and professional practice in higher education.
Chapter 5: Data Analysis

Introduction

The research study had two aims. First, the study focused on students’ status as first-generation college students to provide an understanding of the role that their status played in their transition to college. Second, the study provided a nuanced view of social class and how it impacted students and their experiences in college. The question that formed the nexus of this study was: How do white, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible describe their academic and social experiences in college? White first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible have not been studied in isolation; by doing so, the researcher was able to learn about a group of students who align demographically with the student populations that comprise selective private colleges and universities. The aim of this study was to assess what factors – first-generation student status, socioeconomic status, or a combination – most impacted students’ experiences in college.

The results from a qualitative research study are presented in this chapter. Charts outlining the emergent themes from the study and introducing the participants will be provided. Each participant will be briefly profiled, and a summary of the participants’ overall academic and social transitions to and experiences in college will be given. The themes that emerged from the study will be discussed in detail.

Emergent Theme Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible were not distinguishable from continuing-generation students.</td>
<td>Most first-generation and/or Pell Grant eligible students at the university came from underrepresented racial and low socioeconomic backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The university was largely comprised of continuing-generation students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First-generation students were not commonly talked about at the university.

White, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible found that their academic choices were impacted by their first-generation status.

Participants were focused on “practical” majors.

Participants wanted to ensure that they would have lucrative careers and the ability to pay back student loans after graduation.

Participants pursued majors that were both meaningful to them and perceived as prestigious by others.

White, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible lacked information and advice regarding academic and social stressors faced at the university.

Participants’ parents did not understand the academic and social stressors they faced at the university.

Participants’ parents could not help them navigate career or graduate school processes.

Participants wished the university had a club or mentoring program for first-generation students.

White, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible differed from those who were Pell Grant eligible, but they also resembled continuing-generation students of the same income level.

Participants described themselves as middle class and did not experience stereotypical correlations between first-generation student status and income level.

Participants expressed disappointment that lower-income students had more opportunities than they had due to the financial aid awarded to lower-income students.

Participants shared frustration about the college affordability problems that middle class students faced.

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**Participant Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year in college</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Parents’ occupations</th>
<th>Received need-based aid?</th>
<th>Estimated annual income level*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Civil engineering</td>
<td>Father: skilled trades Mother: clerical</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Did not disclose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 *Participants selected pseudonyms for the study. Participants were not required to disclose their parents’ occupations or estimated annual income levels.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Did not disclose</th>
<th>Parental careers</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| DJ     | 3rd  | Behavioral neuroscience + global health | Did not disclose | Father: pilot  
          |       |                                   |                  | Mother: insurance agency owner | Yes          | $50,000-$59,000 |
| Jennifer | 4th  | Health science                     | No               | Father: pilot  
          |       |                                   |                  | Mother: insurance agency owner | No           | $150,000+      |
| Lindsay | 2nd  | Marketing + management information systems | Yes              | Father: construction management  
          |       |                                   |                  | Mother: hospitality          | Yes          | $150,000+      |
| Jamie  | 4th  | Health science                     | Yes              | Father: skilled trades  
          |       |                                   |                  | Mother: clerical            | Yes          | $100,000-$109,000 |
| Adelyn | 4th  | Health science                     | Yes              | Father: skilled trades  
          |       |                                   |                  | Mother: clerical            | Yes          | $90,000-$99,000 |

**Participant Profiles**

*Katie* was a third-year undergraduate student studying civil engineering with the hope of becoming an engineer and passing the Professional Engineer Exam. Katie indicated that she grew up in a suburban area in the Mid-Atlantic region\(^2\) and attended a private Catholic high school with a strong college-going culture. On campus, Katie was involved in the Catholic Center, served a campus tour guide, and participated in Engineers Without Borders.

*DJ* was a third-year undergraduate student majoring in behavioral neuroscience and minoring in global health, while also following the course requirements for pre-med students. DJ once planned to apply to medical school, but was contemplating a career and further education in public health at the time of the interview. DJ stated that he grew up in a rural area in New England and attended a public high school where about a third of the students matriculated to college after graduation. On campus, in addition to serving as a campus tour

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\(^2\) Mid-Atlantic refers to the states of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.
guide, DJ was involved in student government, the Resident Student Association, and various sustainability and advocacy initiatives.

*Jennifer* was a fourth-year undergraduate student studying health science and following the course requirements for pre-med students; she indicated that she planned to apply to medical school after graduation. Jennifer stated that she grew up in a suburb in the Mid-Atlantic region and attended a public high school that mainly sent its graduates to state colleges and universities. On campus, Jennifer served as an ambassador and fellow in the university’s college of health sciences and was involved with the athletics’ marketing department.

*Lindsay* was a second-year undergraduate student studying business, with a dual concentration in marketing and management information systems. After college, Lindsay stated that she hoped to pursue a career in business, especially sports marketing or management. Lindsay indicated that she grew up in a suburban area in the Mid-Atlantic region and attended a large public high school that sent most graduates to state colleges and universities. On campus, Lindsay was involved in a professional business fraternity, a leadership club, and held an executive position in the Women in Business group.

*Jamie* was a fourth-year undergraduate student studying health science; she described her hopes to pursue graduate work and a career in public health. Jamie indicated that she grew up in a town that bordered between suburban and rural in New England, and she attended a public high school that sent most of its graduates to state colleges or universities. On campus, Jamie was involved and held leadership positions in Circle K, the Center for Community Service, and the Center for Student Involvement.

*Adelyn* was a fourth-year undergraduate student studying health science and following the pre-med course requirements to pursue a doctoral degree and career as a physician assistant.
Adelyn stated that she grew up in a suburb in New England and attended a public high school that was known for sending most of its graduates to selective four-year colleges and universities. On campus, Adelyn was involved in the Intervarsity Multiethnic Christian Fellowship group and the GlobeMed club, and she also worked as a Campus Visit Representative and as a Resident Assistant in a university residence hall.

The Transition to College: An Overview

The following sections will describe how the participants experienced their overall academic and social transitions from high school to college. All participants were asked to describe and reflect on these transitions at the beginning of their interviews.

**Academic transition: high achievers who continued achieving.**

The participants were smart, successful high school students. Jamie ranked third in her class, Adelyn, DJ, and Jennifer each applied to at least one Ivy League school, and all participants spoke about taking the most challenging honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses available to them while they were in high school. The participants talked about being part of the “smart” group in high school. Both Lindsay and Jamie referred to themselves as being “smart kids” and “jocks” at the same time, and DJ placed himself in “the college-going group that notoriously went to better schools.” The participants did not present examples of academic hardships such as feeling extremely underprepared for their classwork or finding themselves unable to earn good grades. Participants all had to make some sort of transition, but some found their overall academic transitions easier than others. Katie reflected on the differences between high school and college classes:

It was definitely a transition, like from taking high school classes. I think I was prepared for the workload itself, I knew how to study and how to take a test and I
was confident in those abilities, but I think it was hard to time manage and to only have 3 hours of class a day, and then you have the rest of the day. And you have to get work done – it’s not like a study hall where you have to be quiet in the library and do your work, you just have to do it.

For Katie, it was less about the difficulty of the work itself, and more about adjusting to a new environment. It took trial and error to determine how and where she studied best, but she noted that many of her classmates, including those who were not first-generation, had to adjust in the same way when they began their studies in college. Jamie surprised herself when she arrived on campus; she found her academic load more manageable than she expected:

I was surprised by how much I did feel prepared for college. But I think that was because I took 4 APs my senior year; so the workload wasn’t really that bad - it is what it is, and you just have to get the work done. It’s nice because you have more time in college. Because like in high school you’re stuck there from 7-3 and then there’s like 3 hours of sports.

DJ admitted to not feeling prepared for college, but he made no mention of his grades or overall wellbeing suffering from his perceived lack of preparation:

I was not prepared well for it, but I was able to figure it out. Like I had never seen a syllabus before, I literally had no clue, and I felt so embarrassed. I was like “Oh okay, this is when our test is! Cool!” And I guess for some of the work there was a learning curve, but…the intro level classes that were equivalent to APs, I guess I was surprised by how much they were like my high school classes…like in my Psych and Calc classes, I was like “I know all of this already.”
While DJ said he was not prepared, he also stated that he knew a lot of the material covered in his first-semester classes due to his preparation from Advanced Placement courses in high school. Across the board, participants were thankful they had the opportunity to take Advanced Placement classes in high school. Jennifer attributed her success in her academic transition to her Advanced Placement classes and stated that had she not taken them, she was not sure she would have had such a smooth academic transition.

Participants seemed pleased with their academic performance and with how well they had done since starting college. Jennifer explained that her grades improved after she began her college journey:

I’m doing much better grade-wise. I don’t know if the classes are getting easier or I’m getting used to it or what’s going on. But I was getting like a 3.4, 3.5 my freshman year into my sophomore year, and now I’m consistently getting 4.0s. I mean the classes are smaller so it’s easier to get to know the professor and what they’re asking for, I mean I’m just getting used to college in general, so academically things seem to be improving.

Jamie described feeling shocked by how well she performed academically, especially when she compared herself to her peers:

Like some of my friends will stay in [the library] until midnight and I’m like, “Bedtime is at 10:30!” I looked through the notes once, so…but even then, I always feel like I’m finessing things. Like I won’t do a ton of studying and still get a good grade on the test so I’m like, “Okay, I guess I understand all of these things?” I see people studying for hours and hours, and I’ll study for a day or two before the test and still do just as well [as them], or better, potentially.
The participants were excited about how their academic pathways in college could lead them to their future careers. Each participant spoke with passion about the courses they looked forward to taking in the coming semesters or the graduate programs to which they planned to apply. Lindsay reflected on her decision to switch from a science major into the business school:

I was strong academically, I got like a 3.926 my first semester and it wasn’t like I wasn’t doing well at all in my classes that I wanted to switch, it was that I came to the realization that I was so much more of a business person and that I didn’t want to go to school forever to be a doctor…and now I’m excited to be able to take classes in my major…next semester, I’m taking digital marketing and stuff like that which is what I wanna do.

Adelyn, while nervous about the actual feat of getting into school to become a physician assistant, spoke about her passion for healthcare:

The one thing I love about healthcare is that I will always be needed and I can always help a person find answers or cure them, just like help them in some way.

So my hope is that I can actually get [into PA school] and that I’m actually able to make an impact on a lot of people’s lives.

Similarly, Katie talked about her aspirations to become a Professional Engineer and how she wanted to be sure she used the rest of her time at college to help her achieve that goal by taking the appropriate classes for two sets of engineering exams. Katie, like the other participants, had lofty goals for the future: Adelyn, DJ, Jennifer, and Jamie wanted to go to graduate school immediately after finishing their undergraduate degrees, and Lindsay mentioned the possibility of going back for her MBA in the future. And while the participants expressed their fears of not
getting into medical school or other graduate programs, all showed more hope than fear when they discussed their academic trajectories and post-graduate plans.

In summary, the participants demonstrated few signs of academic hardship. While the participants came from a range of high schools – Jennifer called her high school “a poor high school” while Adelyn described hers as “a pretty competitive school” where applying to Ivy League universities was common – they all had access to preparatory and Advanced Placement classes. Each participant demonstrated a high level of intrinsic motivation; while some explicitly spoke about wanting to make their families proud during their time in college, they displayed their own personal pride and integrity as it pertained to their schoolwork and their desire to perform well during their time in college. The participants described being academically successful during their college journeys and demonstrated that they took advantage of the academic opportunities at the university.

**Social transition: “there’s a place for everyone here.”**

Participants’ reflections on their social transitions varied more than their academic transitions, but generally, the participants solidified their place at the university: they found and maintained good friendships, joined clubs and organizations, and learned to be intentional with their time.

Adelyn and Lindsay both presented feelings of being overwhelmed when they described their social transitions, but for different reasons. Adelyn was overwhelmed by the expectations she had for herself – and those she perceived from others – when she arrived on campus:

You’re pretty much just dropped in this foreign place not knowing like any single human and just like expected to do awesome things. And so it was overwhelming, not knowing anyone and trying to find friends that you really like
and clubs that you’re interested in. Like [the university] has so many opportunities that I had such a hard time picking which opportunities I thought I would really like so the transition was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I thought I would arrive here and like fully fit in, like, love it the first day, ready to conquer the world.

When asked about her social transition to college, Lindsay was most impacted by the social class differences she saw between herself and her classmates:

I think the first thing I realized once I got here is how wealthy everybody is…and like I made a really awesome group – I have a group of 10 best friends, pretty much split 5 guys, 5 girls that I love. But I’m the only one that is first generation and I’m the only one with loans, and so, there’s a lot of differences of like…they’re like “Let’s go eat out dinner here” “Let’s go do this” and I’m like “Ooo maybe I’ll just get an appetizer or maybe I’ll just shop the sale section.” So there’s like a lot of things, like, just trying to find my place but also not turn down opportunities to hang out with friends.

Even though Lindsay talked about loving her experience and her friends, she did experience discomfort in her social transition and struggled to fit in with her newly-found group. The participants expected to fit in right away, but they were surprised when it took them longer to adapt. Adelyn admitted that while she did feel more comfortable socially by her second semester on campus, it was not until she began her second year of college that she truly felt she found her place.
For other students, like Jamie and DJ, college represented an exciting new world with lots of possibilities. DJ, who described being involved and visible on campus as a high-level student government representative, shared his outlook on making friends in college:

I love meeting new people, like we don’t have to be friends long-term, but people can really benefit you if you develop close relationships with them. I used this analogy recently and I loved it. So life’s a book, and everyone in it is a chapter, and not every chapter spans the whole book, but you gotta read the chapters and make the later ones better.

DJ’s excitement for college manifested itself in a positive and opportunistic attitude. During his interview, DJ spoke about the countless opportunities present at his university and how he sought to make the most of his time and take advantage of as many of them as possible. Similarly, Jamie recounted her excitement during the beginning of her freshman year:

I loved it. It was just the best thing ever. I was making friends in my classes and I was just like, “College is definitely the place for me. This is what I’ve been waiting for.” Because in high school and stuff I just didn’t feel like…I rode the line of “I fit in with these people but I also fit in with this group” and I just didn’t really have a good group of like MY people. And now I feel like I found people who have my same work ethic and vision and dreams and goals.

Both Jamie and DJ described their hometowns as rural places where most people stayed for life. Jamie stated that even her high school friends who went to the local state college did not have the same opportunities as she did, and they were surprised to hear that she spent her weekends exploring the city or her summer doing a service-abroad program in Africa. DJ and Jamie itched
for new experiences and a larger city, which led them to choose this university, and they felt they fit in better on campus and in the city than they did back home.

The university is home to over 400 student clubs and organizations; this equally excited and stressed the participants. Some participants, like Katie, who majored in engineering and enjoyed being a member of Engineers Without Borders, joined clubs that directly aligned with their chosen majors. Others, like Jennifer, preferred to keep the clubs non-academic, and she cited her involvement with the athletics marketing team and Zumba classes as good distractions from her otherwise academic-filled schedule. DJ also described how he wanted his clubs and activities to be different from his academic major and courses because he, too, was looking for something fun to take his mind off the content he spent hours learning and discussing in class.

The participants spoke about being too busy, and at certain points of the semester they were overwhelmed, but it was mostly because they chose to be busy and involved and not because of obligations they possessed prior to beginning their college careers, such as needing to work to send money home to their families. Participants either held a part-time job during the school year or worked during their summers off. Out of all the participants, Adelyn held two jobs and worked the most, and though she did express frustration that her friends who did not have to work had more time for studying and other activities, she maintained a positive outlook and was quick to mention that she has always enjoyed holding a job. DJ stated that he once held a part-time job at a coffee shop to fill his time in the early morning, but did not mention that he needed to work because he needed tuition money. Participants mainly used money from their part-time or summer jobs for weekend spending and living expenses. Adelyn stated that she used the money she earned during her cooperative education experiences – six-month, full-time, paid work positions - towards tuition.
Lindsay struggled with making time for her friends. While Lindsay was participating in this study, she was also rushing a professional business fraternity, and she spoke about having to attend events nearly every night of the week as part of the rush process, leaving her with little free time to hang out in the residence halls with her friends. Jamie, too, found herself getting pulled into more activities, making it hard to have time for herself:

I’m co-president of Circle K, which is a community service club on campus, and I’ve gotten very close to the people at the Center for Community Service, and then I was a Welcome Week Coordinator for their ACES Program and now I’m like a year-long mentor for ACES, still involved with Circle K…but then I also have like a district position for Circle K. Everyone wants to give me like this promotion and I’m like “I’m on it,” but it’s a lot.

When asked whether her level of involvement was anomalous at the university, Jamie quickly responded that *everyone* is heavily involved and *everyone* runs on little sleep and has too much on their plate. The participants agreed that being busy is the norm at the university.

This section has provided an overview of the participants’ academic and social integration into the university. The participants showed few signs of being negatively impacted by their first-generation student status. They performed well academically and took the necessary next steps for their respective career paths, and they became involved contributors within the campus community while also managing to fit in downtime (watching Netflix and taking long walks through the city were the preferred methods of relaxation for the participants).

The following sections will present themes that emerged from the study. The themes are related to the central research question of the study: how do white, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible describe their academic and social experiences in college?
Emergent Themes

The emergent themes were profiled in a table at the beginning of this chapter. Here, they are presented with supporting evidence from interviews with the participants.

The participants were not distinguishable from the continuing-generation students.

This theme addresses the participants’ experiences of being white, first-generation, non-Pell grant-eligible students at a university comprised mostly of white and continuing-generation students. Two-thirds of the student body identified as Caucasian, and a small percentage of first-generation students were enrolled: in 2017, 12% of incoming freshmen identified as first-generation. This theme will demonstrate how the participants blended in with the rest of the continuing-generation students at the university.

Most Pell-Grant eligible, first-generation students who enrolled at the university came from underrepresented and/or low-income backgrounds. The participants stated that when they thought of first-generation students, they did not envision themselves. Jennifer, for example, explained:

When I think of first-generation students, I don’t think of people like me… I think of the kids in my high school, like these really poor Black families where the kid gets an athletic scholarship and that’s how he gets to go to college… I don’t think of myself because I am wealthy, and I am white.

Jamie and Lindsay both said that it was “weird” for a white female to be first-generation at the university. Jamie stated that none of her friends or professors expected her to be first-generation, but she hypothesized that their reactions might have been different had she identified as an African-American student. She and Lindsay expressed the sentiment that when others think of a first-generation student, they envision a student of color. Jamie called white first-generation
students “run of the mill” and explained that there were support programs for low-income, underrepresented students, but she was disappointed that the university did not have an all-encompassing first-generation student support group.

Participants indicated that they had a difficult time finding other students who came from the same backgrounds as they did. Jennifer was shocked to learn that there were so few students who, like her, identified as white, first-generation, and non-Pell Grant-eligible. When asked if he had friends who were also first-generation students, DJ stated:

My closest friend [at college] who is also first-gen is Hispanic. And he’s one of a couple of [first-generation] people I’ve met and know of. Most of them are not my background.

Jamie, who knew many other first-generation students from her high school years, hypothesized about the absence of first-generation students on campus:

I don’t think it would have been as big of a deal if I’d been at [the state college] or something, because [the state college] is like a stepping stone, it’s a state school. But [the university], because it’s part of this like elite-ish bracket, [so] you don’t expect to see as many first-generation students here.

Here, Jamie expressed the notion that first-generation students are not expected to matriculate at private and selective universities.

Participants agreed that students attending the university were expected to come from a continuing-generation home and have parents who had earned, at the very least, a Bachelor’s degree. Katie described her reaction when she learned that her friend’s parents were doctors:

That was like, the first time I realized, “Wow, so your parents went to college, and then they went to like, a LOT of college!” And I think it’s just funny how we
both ended up here, like our parents are completely different. I don’t expect anyone’s parents to have gone to college – I don’t know if that’s just because my parents didn’t, but I wouldn’t have expected anyone’s parents to have gone. Katie also mentioned that her friend was surprised to learn that Katie’s parents did not attend college, demonstrating that at the university, students assumed that their peers came from continuing-generation backgrounds. Adelyn stated that she was sometimes met with shock, but not judgment, when her friends and peers learned that her parents did not attend college:

Most of the time when I tell them what my parents do, they respond with, “My parents are engineers” or “My parents are professors,” stuff like that. And they’re like, “Oh, your parents aren’t like that?” so I think it’s a little bit of shock but they’re always like, “Oh well I’m glad you made it here,” that type of thing.

Adelyn and DJ both explained that the norm at the university was to have parents who went to college, and a student who did not come from that background represented a student who beat the odds to get to the university. Fortunately, the participants were rarely met with hostility when others found out that they were first-generation students, but DJ had an unpleasant experience with a classmate who could not understand his status:

Or like one kid…I’m not really friends with him, to me and my other first-generation friend he said, “So why didn’t your parents go to college?” I remember that specifically and I remember after the fact me and [my friend] were like, “He’s crazy! You can’t just ask that!”…and I’m like, “We got to the same place, we’re literally at the same university.”

Students at the university assumed that their peers came from continuing-generation backgrounds. As a result of that assumption and the low number of first-generation students
enrolled, first-generation students were rarely talked about at the university. The participants agreed that many people on campus did not know that they were first-generation because it rarely came up in conversation. Katie mentioned that she did not think many of her friends or professors knew that she was first-generation because it was simply not talked about, and she felt she never had an opportunity to explain to others that she was a first-generation student.

Similarly, when asked if she knew other first-generation students, Adelyn said:

I definitely heard some of my friends say that they are first-gen, but I don’t think we barely ever talked about it. I’m a Resident Assistant, and um, a couple, I think one or two people on my staff are also first-gen, and just briefly we were like “oh yeah it’s really hard, right?” and we were all like “yeah” and that was the extent of the conversation. But…I don’t think we talk about it that much, just because we’re all in college and we’ve kind of made it, you know?

Like Adelyn, DJ made a similar comment that whether a student came from a first-generation background or a more privileged, continuing-generation background, both students “got to the same place” when they arrived at college. DJ and Adelyn also agreed that they did not heavily feel the impact of being first-generation students because other factors, such as socioeconomic status, had a greater impact on students at the university.

This theme demonstrated that the white, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible in this study blended in with continuing-generation students on campus. The participants knew few other first-generation students, and those they did know did not come from backgrounds like theirs. They affirmed that they associated underrepresented and Pell Grant-eligible students with first-generation student status. The participants were surprised that most of their peers’ parents attended college and indicated that being a continuing-generation
student was the norm at the university. Finally, the participants agreed that first-generation students are not often discussed by students or faculty members at the university.

**Participants’ academic choices were impacted by their first-generation status.**

The participants chose practical majors in healthcare or business-related fields, and they had defined career paths. They selected majors that ensured they would have stable (and lucrative) incomes as well as the ability to pay back their student loans after they graduated. Participants also discussed their desires to pursue majors and careers that were both meaningful to them and prestigious to others. Katie reflected on her thought process when choosing a major:

I felt like I needed to pick a major that was going to be really practical because my parents have both done really practical things with their lives since they didn’t go to college, like my mom worked as the bookkeeper for my uncle’s car dealership, and that was really practical, and my dad was a contractor. So I wanted to study something that would have a clear defined path after I graduated…I’m studying civil engineering and I want to be an engineer, working in an engineering firm.

Katie was partially influenced by her familial background when she selected her major, but she also stated that she always enjoyed science classes and was excited to learn that engineering allowed her to combine her passion for science with her desire to help others. Lindsay’s father only agreed to let her attend the university if she promised to minor in business. Lindsay eventually switched her major to business because it suited her future aspirations better than a science major. Lindsay also emphasized the practicality of a business major, indicating that her friends at other schools were not pursuing practical majors and were not as serious about how they used their time in college as she was:
My best friend who goes to [a state college] right now, she’s like an economics sustainability management major, but she’s like, “Yeah, I’ll probably just come out of school and be a realtor like my mom.” But for me, I need to go to school to have something as a background to go further, so I’m going to school for a purpose instead of going to school just to go to school.

Similarly, Jamie recalled her younger sister choosing to major in sports management when she went to college, and Jamie remembered being “harder on my sister than my parents were” about the difficulties her sister might encounter in finding a “good job” within a niche and male-dominated field after graduation.

The participants stated that after they finished college, they wanted to be financially secure and able to pay back their student loans. Jennifer, for example, hoped to make a quarter million dollars a year once she became a doctor. Jamie, who at the time of her interview was deciding between applying to medical school and going into a public health-related graduate program, reflected on the different outcomes for each option:

I came [to college] with the intention of doing public health…then I had the 3rd year freak-out of, “Am I really not gonna do med school? Is public health a valid career choice?” So that was a point I had to work through and justify it with myself that it was okay that I wasn’t gonna be pre-med…[but] in the back of my head I’m always like, “Make sure you’re in a career where you can pay back your student loans,” because public health isn’t always the most lucrative.

Adelyn used her own background as motivation for her academic and career pathways:

It definitely has made me pick a major where I have to be highly educated and where I can make a lot of money doing it. I always loved hospitals and surgery,
so I think it’s always been a big interest of mine, but the fact that like my parents don’t make a lot of money and kind of have entry-level jobs impacted me, like, “I want to go to as much school as possible, so let’s pick med school which is like 8 years of schooling!” So it made me strive for like a very high education job that makes a lot of money.

The participants were quick to explain that even though they wanted to be successful and make money when they graduated college, they also wanted to be employed in meaningful jobs. Katie and Adelyn stated that they were happy to be going into fields that would allow them to help other people. For participants like DJ, Jamie, and Adelyn, medicine had always been their dream, and they were excited to be able to pursue opportunities in or adjacent to the medical field after graduation.

The participants also alluded to having careers that would impress others, especially their families. Jennifer, who told the story of how she wanted to be an author when she was young but changed her mind after learning about forensic pathology in middle school, was asked how her family would react if she changed her major from health science to English:

They’d probably kill me! It is so expensive to go here…my grandparents pay for me to go here and they have a very specific vision of what I am supposed to be, so if I went to my grandparents and was like “I switched to English!” they would be horrified, especially this late in the game. And nobody in my family knows anything about English. Like, in pre-med we can be doctors, they’re important people, but authors, does anybody even care?

Jennifer liked the idea of having an important job title after graduating, as did Lindsay, who talked about how impressed her family was when they learned that she hoped to secure a
corporate job upon graduation, where she would be able to earn a lot of money and wear a “fancy blazer” to work.

The participants’ statuses as white, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible impacted their academic choices in college and aspirations for the future. Participants described feeling pulled toward practical majors with defined pathways. Participants wanted to be able to make money and pay off student loan debt after they graduated. Finally, participants wanted a career that fulfilled their passions and brought meaning to their lives, as well as one that impressed their family members.

**Participants lacked advice regarding the stressors they faced.**

Participants felt frustrated by the lack of support they had as they navigated their college transitions and journeys. They sometimes struggled with their parents’ inabilities to understand the academic and social stressors they faced, especially as their college careers progressed. As they navigated the graduate school application process, participants felt nervous about facing the process alone and stated that they did not know how or where to seek advice. Some participants also wished that the university had a support club or program for first-generation students.

Participants struggled with their parents’ expectations of how they would perform in college and what the college experience would be like. Jennifer, for example, recounted her mother’s reaction when Jennifer earned her first “B” in college:

She would like ask, “What did you get on your test?” and I’d be like, “Oh I got an 85” and she’s like, “Oh, yikes…” and I’m like, “But that’s what everybody got! I had the highest grade in the class and I had an 87.” And she didn’t understand what a curve was.
Jennifer was a high achiever in high school, and she mentioned that her mother was used to seeing Jennifer bring home “A” grades, so she did not understand why Jennifer’s grades dropped when she began college. In her second interview, Katie explained that she misinterpreted her parents’ expectations. When she earned a poor grade on a difficult exam, she feared her parents would be upset with her; but she was surprised when her mother told her that she was proud that Katie was simply in college and trying her best, and that she did not care as much about the grade.

Jamie discussed the difficulties she faced explaining to her parents how busy she was while away at college:

And even when certain things come up in college, like, “Oh it’s midterms week” or “Oh it’s finals,” like, they’ve never had to experience these things. Not that they…I don’t know, I feel like unless you’ve had to go through those experiences, it’s hard to relate to them. Um, so, they’re like managing the ridiculous schedule that I have and like everyone is busy – my mom and dad have both been super busy – but I just think that being busy as a college student is just a unique thing.

Jamie stated that she felt as though she was “balancing two worlds” – the further she got into her college career, the larger the gap grew between her and her parents. She explained that she talked “differently” when she went home because she did not want her parents to “feel stupid” if she used the intellectual vocabulary that she used in college. As a result, Jamie felt conflicted when she considered what her identity meant, and it caused her to feel stressed.

At the time of the study, participants were beginning to think about applying to graduate programs such as medical school, physician assistant programs, and global/public health Master’s degree programs. Participants had to balance their parents’ expectations for their
futures while also determining the best paths for their lives after graduation. DJ entered the university with plans to go to medical school, but his interests shifted during his early college years. He described his mother’s reaction when she learned that DJ might not attend medical school:

"My mom was so devastated when I said that I don’t want to go to med school. I think part of it was like, she’d say, “Well, you were gonna be my doctor!” and things like that. And what she doesn’t realize, and I think it comes from her not understanding, is like a Master’s in public health, any Master’s degree program is like rigorous; it’s not a cake walk. And what if I went further and did a PhD? It’s still something you can brag to the lady down the street about…so that has been kinda frustrating, but I think it stems from like she has no clue about any of this, about the Master’s programs."

DJ was frustrated that his mother did not see his options – medical school or a Master’s in public health – as equally rigorous and impressive. Previously, DJ mentioned that his mother wanted to go to college, but she was not able to, and he acknowledged that he wanted to make her proud because he was getting the chance to do what she could not. Jennifer, who planned to apply to medical school during her final year of college, shared that her mother assumed Jennifer would easily be able to get into medical school:

"She doesn’t understand that some [medical schools] are just too good for me. Like I am not going to be able to get into Harvard Medical School, that is just a fact. And she’s like, “Oh you’re gonna go to Johns Hopkins for med school” and I’m like, “No I’m not!” I tried to bring up to my mom a couple of weeks ago that
I need a backup plan, like if I don’t get into med school…and she’s like, “Don’t talk about that, you’re gonna get in.”

Jennifer followed by explaining that her mother’s assumptions stemmed from two sources: her mother was proud of Jennifer and all she had accomplished academically, and her mother could not understand the level of competitiveness for medical schools. She assumed that because Jennifer performed well throughout college, she was guaranteed a place in a top medical school.

Participants acknowledged that they would have to navigate the graduate school application process alone. While their parents did their best to help the participants with the undergraduate application process by filing financial aid forms and joining them on campus tours, graduate programs were too complicated and virtually incomprehensible for the participants’ parents. Jamie felt isolated as she began her graduate program search on her own:

Especially now that I’m looking on to even higher education, I can’t call home for guidance. Like they don’t even know like how Master’s programs work or how to go get your PhD, so major hindrance there… just lately it’s been like I’ve felt it a lot which is why I think it finally came up in conversation with a professor, because I was just like, “I have no one to go to who can give me some piece of advice on what I should be doing to prepare myself for after graduation.”

Like Jamie, DJ mentioned not being able to call home for help, explaining that when he did call his father to ask for advice, his father suggested that he ask one of his friends instead. Lindsay knew that she could not rely on her family for advice on how to navigate the business world, and she intentionally joined a business fraternity so that she would be able to seek advice from upper-class student and their families who were more knowledgeable about the business field.
Participants lamented the lack of first-generation student support programs on campus. Since the participants knew few other first-generation students, they sometimes felt isolated because no one else shared or fully understood their experiences. Some participants were comfortable enough to talk to faculty mentors about their struggles and leveraged those faculty members as they navigated college and their future plans, but participants agreed that a mentoring or support program would be beneficial to them and other first generation students. Lindsay, who admitted to trying to find students who were “like her” and feeling excited to learn that one of her closest friends was also first-generation, stated:

I don’t know of any programs for first-generation students…so it would be awesome if they had something like that, or even if they had like a peer-mentor thing. Like, if I was a 4th year and I could help a 1st year, because I would have loved to have that mentorship as a first-generation student.

Jamie, too, wanted the university to do more for first-generation students:

I was so happy when I heard you were doing this study because I really wish [the university] would pay a little more attention to us because I’ve definitely found that I’ve had to be my own biggest advocate, and I think people who have older siblings or parents who went to college just know how to do these things. I wish [the university] would acknowledge it more because I’m proud of it and my parents are proud of it.

As stated earlier, participants acknowledged that the university had support programs for students from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds, so they felt that first-generation students from those backgrounds had a place to go for advice, but they specifically wanted a
program that supported *all* first-generation students, including those who, like them, identified as white and non-Pell Grant-eligible.

The participants’ statuses as white, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible made them feel isolated and like they had nowhere to go for help and advice. Participants struggled with their parents’ lack of understanding of their lives at college, and they were nervous to navigate the graduate school process alone. Participants tried to find advice from their friends and professors, but they also wished that the university had an official support program dedicated to helping first-generation students like them.

**Participants differed from Pell-Eligible, first-generation students.**

The participants described how they differed from students who were low-income and/or Pell Grant-eligible, but they also described how they resembled continuing-generation students of the same income level. Participants described themselves as middle class and did not experience strict correlations between first-generation student status and specific income levels, but they did agree that first-generation students were typically assumed to have come from low-income backgrounds. Participants expressed disappointment that lower-income students, some of whom were also first-generation and some of whom were continuing-generation, received more financial support from the university and therefore had more opportunities to participate in programs such as summer study abroad. Participants also shared frustration about the college affordability struggles that middle-class students faced.

The participants were asked to reflect on social class, the role it played in their lives, and the connections (or lack thereof) between social class and first-generation student status. Participants agreed that they came from middle-class backgrounds. Adelyn first understood what social class meant when she was in high school; she recalled thinking, “these people are
rich, these people are poor, and my family is in the middle.” DJ spoke about growing up “on the lower side of things” and reflected on how his social class shifted from lower to middle class while he was in high school. Jennifer called her family “comfortable middle, maybe upper-middle class.” The chart at the beginning of this chapter showed variations in participants’ income levels; however, all of the participants understood their social class position as middle class.

The participants were also asked to comment on the perceived connection between first-generation student status and social class or income level. Participants confirmed that generally, it was assumed that, as Katie said, “if you say you’re first-generation, people typically expect a lower class.” Adelyn added that first-generation students were expected to come from lower-middle or lower-class backgrounds because their parents’ jobs and earnings were restricted by their lack of higher education. DJ explained that in his experience in high school, most of his friends who also identified as first-generation came from poorer backgrounds, but he added that his town was rural and, historically, home to lower-income and less-educated families. Despite these assumptions, the participants also indicated that in their experience, first-generation student status was not automatically indicative of a lower social class. Katie shared her experience:

I was able to go to private school and we lived near [the fancy, expensive part of town] my whole life, but my parents never went to college, so it’s not like…I think there’s less of a correlation than normally perceived.

Like Katie, Lindsay mentioned that her experience had been different because her parents had been successful and she grew up middle class even though her parents did not have college degrees. Jennifer, too, explained that her parents have had successful careers – her mother “makes boatloads of money” as the owner of an insurance agency, and when her father worked
as a mechanic, he “made fantastic money” – despite their lack of education. She also shared that her boyfriend’s parents were highly educated, but they were struggling financially and had recently lost their home. Jennifer juxtaposed her family’s situation with her boyfriend’s family’s situation and stated that it was difficult for her to make a strict connection between first-generation student status and lower-class status because of her experiences.

Participants were frustrated that lower-income students at the university had more opportunities than they did. Jennifer stated that one of her friends came from a single-parent, low-income background and received a generous financial aid package. Jennifer made the following observation about the advantages her friend had because of her status:

The thing with [my friend] is that she is so poor that she can afford to do nice things. She can afford to study abroad because she gets so much aid. So people might look at her and think…because she did a month here, a month there, like, people might think she’s living the dream, and she is. And she only had to pay $500 for that whereas I would have to pay, I think $15,000 if I wanted to do that.

Jennifer was frustrated by this, just as she was frustrated that she could not hold a work-study job on campus because she did not qualify for financial aid and was therefore ineligible for an on-campus job. Lindsay, too, lamented that she wanted to participate in a summer study-abroad but that she was struggling to determine how she would fund the trip:

I have to pick a country that’s not expensive. And there’s a bunch of scholarships that the school gives but it’s also hard because they give them to the low-income kids, and in my heart I’m like, “You already give them a lot of money, can I have some?”
During her follow-up interview, Lindsay reported that she had started being more open about her first-generation student status with her continuing-generation friends, and she was surprised (and relieved) to learn that some of her upperclassman, continuing-generations friends had, like her, taken out loans to finance their educations. Her friends also shared Lindsay’s frustrations over struggling to afford the university’s summer study abroad programs.

Participants were upset by how they experienced college affordability and financial aid, and they attributed their frustrations to their statuses as middle-class students. Lindsay shared her family’s financial situation and her feelings about her status:

A lot of my friends here are paying full tuition or I have a friend who’s coming here basically free. And I’m that friend in the middle where on paper, we look a lot better but my parents didn’t have any savings at all. It’s like the wealthy kids, they’re fine. Lower-income kids, they get a lot of money to come here. Like I have a friend who, her mom is a single mom, and she comes here for $2,000 a semester and I’m like, “That’s so nice, that’s awesome for you,” but the middle class kinda gets screwed all the time.

Participants distinguished between themselves and the lower-income students on campus, but they also differentiated themselves from what Jennifer called “the truly wealthy” on campus. The participants believed they fell in a middle ground; they received no aid or not enough aid but still could not afford the full cost of the expenses. Jennifer explained that her family technically fell into the same “FAFSA bracket” as the family of a wealthy CEO whose son also attended the university because neither she nor the son received financial aid, but she also made a clear distinction that while her family was comfortable, they were not “rich” like the CEO’s family.
Jamie, too, indicated that she expected to receive more assistance with her college costs than she actually did:

The FAFSA is horrible, it really puts you in your place. I was really surprised by how little aid I qualified for when I was applying to college. Like [the state college] didn’t give me a single dollar. So like here’s $30,000 to pay for a state school, and [the university] was like, “Pay $25,000 and come here.” But it’s still really expensive and I was just surprised we didn’t get more [financial] aid.

White, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible were frustrated by the financial situations in which they found themselves at the university. The participants differed from Pell Grant-eligible and low-income students, and they more closely resembled continuing-generation students who shared their social class status. The participants understood their social class as middle-class, and while they did not experience strong connections between first-generation student status and low socioeconomic status, they did agree that generally, first-generation students came from lower-income backgrounds. The participants were disappointed that lower-income students received more financial assistance from the university and were thereby afforded more opportunities, and the participants were also frustrated with the lack of financial aid they and other middle class students received to fund their college educations.

**Summation**

This chapter has presented an analysis of the data from the research study that examined how white, first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible described their academic and social experiences in college. Participants’ general reflections on their academic and social transitions were shared, and four emergent themes were identified and explained. The
final chapter discusses the findings from the research study and presents recommendations for future research and contributions the study is likely to make to the education profession.
Chapter 6: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the research study. The research question that guided the study was: How do white, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible describe their academic and social experiences in college? This chapter will briefly review the Social Class Worldview Model and discuss how the findings of the study relate to the framework. Key studies presented in the literature review will also be discussed in light of the findings. The chapter will offer recommendations for future studies and discuss programs and tactics colleges and universities can implement to improve first-generation students’ undergraduate experiences.

Conceptual Framework and the Research Findings

The conceptual framework used for this study was the Social Class Worldview Model, which was developed by Liu et al. (2004). The Social Class Worldview Model is “a schema that people use to make sense of their social class perceptions, feelings, economic environments, and cultures” (Liu et al., 2004, p. 103). In the framework, social class is understood to be impacted by various factors in an individual’s life, including familial background, upbringing, race, and gender; and the framework underscores the subjectivity inherent within an individual’s understanding and experience of social class. The Social Class Worldview Model consists of five interrelated domains: consciousness, attitudes, and saliency; referent groups; behaviors; property relationships; and lifestyle.

The study used the Social Class Worldview Model to determine the participants’ understandings of social class and how those understandings shifted during the participants’ transitions to college. The Model informed how the participants’ backgrounds and upbringings
impacted their perceptions of social class. Compared to studies on first-generation college students who identify as working- or lower-class, the participants in this study did not experience heavy negative side effects from their social class statuses and backgrounds. The Social Class Worldview Model was useful in understanding how the participants understood social class and in determining how the participants’ understandings of social class deepened and shifted during their first years in college. The participants largely defined social class by income; and because the participants described themselves as middle class, they did not have strong reactions to some elements of the Social Class Worldview Model. Studies that examined low-income or working-class students demonstrated that those students had stronger reactions – both positive and negative – to property relationships and lifestyle, but the students in this study experienced property relationships and lifestyles that were like most of their peers at the institution.

The following sections will discuss the findings from the study as they relate to each of the Social Class Worldview Model domains.

**Consciousness, attitudes, and saliency.**

Participants became more aware of social class as they progressed through their college years, and they could articulate how their understandings of social class changed as they learned more about the factors that impact social class. Participants explained that in their classes, especially those focusing on healthcare and politics, they learned the extent to which factors such as geography, ethnicity, and education levels impacted an individual’s social class status. Even though participants knew that income and money did not fully dictate an individual’s social class, they still relied on income levels and wealth indicators such as whether an individual lived in a “nice” or “bad” neighborhood when they were asked to define what social class meant in their own lives. Participants stated that money was not everything, but they emphasized that
they want to be successful when they graduate college, and they directly equated success with making money and having high-profile professions. Generally, participants called themselves middle-class, but some participants explained that they experienced shifts in their own social class when they came to college. For example, participants perceived their class as upper-middle in comparison to their high school classmates, but lower-middle compared to their college classmates. Participants’ reflections indicated that they placed more emphasis on social class status – especially as social class relates to income and wealth – than on first-generation student status.

**Referent groups.**

When asked to talk about their referent groups of origin, participants’ focused on their parents’ roles in their educational journeys. Participants explained that their parents were supportive and encouraging; the parents wanted their children to have the opportunity to go to college because they did not have the same chance, and while some parents expected or hoped for their children to pursue certain professions (specifically, medicine), they were generally pleased that their children were going to college and wanted them to study what most interested them. Participants wanted to make their parents proud and sometimes felt guilty for leaving their parents behind as they went further into their college careers. Participants made friends and found their peer/cohort groups with relative ease when they arrived at college. In some cases, participants felt intimidated by their peers who had attended wealthy private high schools, and some participants chose not to be friends with peers who lived extravagant lifestyles. Participants knew few, if any, peers who also identified as first-generation students, and if they did know other first-generation students, those students did not identify as white and/or non-Pell Grant-eligible like the participants did. Participants did not indicate that they placed much
emphasis on groups of aspiration; while some were initially intimidated by their professors or peers’ highly-educated parents, they rarely indicated that they aspired to move into a “higher” social class group or bracket. The participants did not indicate that they viewed the wealthy students on campus as people toward whom to aspire.

**Behaviors.**

Participants did not indicate that they experienced huge shifts in their behaviors as a result of going away to college or interacting with students from different (and typically higher) social classes than their own. Some participants indicated that they talked differently at school than they did at home and that they learned to hide their regional accents so they did not sound different from their friends. Participants easily learned the behaviors that continuing-generation students already knew to practice in college, such as going to office hours to meet with professors and learning how to network. While participants were sometimes frustrated that they had no one to teach them about these behaviors before they entered college, they were able to figure things out on their own. Participants described themselves as being similar to white, continuing-generation students who were non-Pell Grant-eligible students at the university.

**Property relationships.**

Participants indicated that they placed little emphasis on material goods. The participants mainly noticed that the international student population at the university wore expensive designer brands and they could not believe how many students owned Canada Goose jackets, which cost around $1,000. Participants could identify students who were extremely wealthy because of what they wore and the extravagant vacation photos they posted on social media. Otherwise, participants agreed that the rest of the student body blended in, and it was difficult to tell who was lower-class versus upper-middle-class because many students shopped at the same stores
and did not get dressed up to go to class. Participants did express frustration over not being able to afford the university’s popular summer study abroad programs, lamenting that the wealthier students were able to pay out of pocket for the programs and the poorer students received financial aid and scholarships that funded the programs, but as middle-class students, the participants did not have the means or extra assistance to pay for the programs.

**Lifestyle.**

Participants spent most of their time in college studying and being involved in clubs, activities, and organizations. The participants had busy schedules, but they enjoyed their high levels of involvement. Participants either held part-time jobs during the school year or worked over the summer months, and the money they earned went towards spending money for weekends or, in some cases, towards tuition or living expenses. Participants sometimes felt that they had to be more intentional and careful with their spending than their peers. Participants did not have to work so much that it impacted their grades or their ability to participate in extracurricular activities, and they were able to maintain balanced lives in college.

In summary, the participants became more aware of social class as they progressed through their college careers, but they did not indicate that their relationships with others, behaviors, lifestyles, or property relationships changed significantly because of their increased social class awareness. Participants placed more emphasis on social class status than first-generation student status when they talked about their transitions to college. The next section will discuss the research findings in light of selected works from the literature review.

**Literature Review and the Research Findings**

The findings from this study demonstrated that white, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible did not share many of the characteristics and struggles that were
described in the literature review as typical of the first-generation college student population. The existing literature on first-generation college students focused largely on students from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds who are most likely to identify as first-generation students. The National Center for Education Statistics (2014) provided data demonstrating the scarcity of first-generation students at private, selective undergraduate institutions and the high likelihood that first-generation students would need to complete remedial coursework (but would also still achieve lower GPAs) than their continuing-generation counterparts. The National Center for Education Statistics (2014) also referenced other barriers first-generation students face: working part- or full-time while in college, financial independence from parents, living away from campus and commuting, and other responsibilities such as caring for family members or children. The participants in the study experienced none of these hardships; they were high academic achievers who took challenging courses in high school and were well-prepared to succeed in college. The participants all lived on campus, attended full-time, and spent most of their time outside of the classroom involved in clubs and activities. Although the participants did not share many of the characteristics of the larger category of first-generation students, selections from the literature review help highlight the findings that demonstrate how the participants experienced being first-generation as well as how they were able to blend in with continuing-generation students.

Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta (2011) conducted a research study to “examine the variation in motivation, academic success, and satisfaction levels between first-generation and continuing-generation students” (p. 34). In the study, Forbus et al. hypothesized and found that first-generation students were more likely than continuing-generation students to be practical with their educations: they wanted to maximize their time in college to graduate as quickly as
possible, they emphasized earning good grades in all their courses, and they wanted to attend reputable universities. The first-generation student participants in this study shared some of these pragmatic traits. The participants showed high levels of motivation and emphasized getting good grades and taking advantages of opportunities such as cooperative education so they would be successful in applying to graduate school and finding jobs after graduation. The practical tendencies of first-generation students also manifested in the participants’ desires to select practical majors with defined career paths. The participants, in some cases, compared their motivation to that of their continuing-generation peers, stating that they felt more motivated to succeed in college because there was more at stake for themselves and their families as the first to attend. While the participants in the study are more dissimilar than similar to most first-generation students, their traits of pragmatism and motivation align with those of the first-generation students in Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta’s study.

Stephens et al. (2012) proposed the cultural mismatch theory. That theory holds that colleges and universities were built to value and emphasize independence, thereby favoring students from continuing-generation and middle-class backgrounds as they were raised within independent norms. By contrast, first-generation students, especially those coming from working-class or blue-collar backgrounds, were taught to value interdependence, and therefore would experience a cultural mismatch when they began college. The participants in this study experienced both a cultural match and a cultural mismatch during their college journeys. Participants explicitly stated as well as demonstrated that they were independent. They did not have the ability to call home and ask their parents for help, they learned to be resourceful and build networks at the university to help them navigate their academics and social lives. Participants willingly and frequently took advantage of new opportunities, and they were
comfortable academically and excelled inside the classroom. They also discussed the roadblocks they encountered during their college experiences, all of which directly related to college as unchartered territory for themselves and their families. At times, participants doubted their abilities to keep up with their classmates, whom they imagined to be more qualified because of their continuing-generation and higher-income backgrounds. Participants indicated that their friends who came from wealthy, continuing-generation backgrounds had advantages because their parents helped them secure internships and taught them how to navigate the business world. Participants struggled to navigate the graduate school and job search processes on their own; not only could they not rely on their parents for advice, but they also did not know where to go at the university for help. It is worth noting that the participants who struggled the most with feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome came from blue-collar backgrounds; while no students classified themselves as working-class, the students from blue-collar upbringings had different notions of hard work and belongingness in a university setting than the students whose parents held white-collar jobs.

Stuber (2006) examined working-class first-generation students’ and upper-middle-class, continuing-generation students’ social class awareness and salience and found that the first-generation student group ultimately was more aware of and placed more emphasis on social class than the continuing-generation students. When compared with the two groups, the reactions and reflections of the participants in this research study more closely align with those of the upper-middle-class, continuing-generation students in Stuber’s study, but they shared some characteristics with the first-generation students as well. In Stuber’s study, the continuing-generation students viewed college as a level playing field – once the students had all arrived at college, their backgrounds did not make a difference because they were all expected to perform
the same tasks. The continuing-generation students also failed to see strong differences between themselves and the rest of the student body and agreed that it was difficult to tell what class a student came from. Similarly, the participants in this study agreed that while they had some challenges as first-generation students, they also saw themselves as equal to the rest of the students at the university because they all made it to the same place. The participants also generally agreed that while the wealthiest students on campus stand out, most students blend in, and it is hard to tell who has money and who does not.

The first-generation students in Stuber’s study were quick to pick up and pass judgment on students from higher classes and noticed both small and large class-based differences between themselves and their peers. The first-generation students also reflected on their financial difficulties; many were struggling to pay bills and tuition and recalled being on public assistance growing up. Their overall experiences were different than those described by the participants in this study, and while the participants were slightly judgmental of the international students at the university, who they believed were all rich and spent too much money, they did not demonstrate that they cared as much about social class as the first-generation students in Stuber’s study. While the participants in this study did not directly align with either group of students in Stuber’s study, they more heavily leaned towards the continuing-generation group, demonstrating further that white, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible are more likely to look and behave like a continuing-generation student from the same income level than a first-generation student from a lower income level.

In summary, the participants in this study experienced few of the negative side effects typically associated with first-generation college students. At times, the participants struggled with having no one to go to for advice and feared navigating future graduate school and job
searches on their own. Some participants doubted their abilities, others struggled with balancing the worlds they left behind and their new worlds in college. Overall, participants passed through their college years with relative ease, and they saw few differences between themselves and their continuing-generation peers. The existing literature largely focused on students from underrepresented and/or low-income backgrounds; this study affirms that students’ college experiences are largely dependent on their backgrounds as a whole and that it is difficult to isolate one factor (i.e. first-generation student status) as a determinant for success or failure in college.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This section will present the limitations of this study and recommendations for future studies that can build upon the work that has already been done. This study was limited by the sample size and it was also limited because only one university was used as a research site.

Future research could construct a similar research study at different types of universities. For example, students attending a public state university where living on campus is not as prevalent and where more students identify as first-generation and/or Pell Grant-eligible could impact the participants’ experiences of being first-generation and non-Pell Grant-eligible. The research site was a selective, private institution; this impacted the participants’ academic experiences. Conducting a similar study at a less-selective institution could reveal different academic behaviors in first-generation students. The research site was in an urban, Northeast city; future studies could choose universities in suburban or rural locations as well as in other parts of the United States to determine if geography and size impact the findings.

Whereas this study focused on white, first-generation students who were not Pell Grant eligible, future studies could consider comparing the experiences of white, first-generation
students who are not Pell Grant eligible with those of students who are white, first-generation, and Pell Grant-eligible to determine if there are substantial differences in their academic and social experiences in college. Similarly, future studies could also consider comparing white, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible with white, continuing-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible. While this study demonstrated that the participants had more in common with continuing-generation students than with the first-generation student population at the university, continuing-generation students were not interviewed or asked to share their perspectives or experiences in this study. A study that invites white, continuing-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible to directly share their experiences will help understand the similarities and differences between their experiences with those of white, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible.

While this study isolated race and focused on white students, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) holds that there are multiple characteristics that work together empower or oppress people. First-generation student status could be studied alongside race, ethnicity, or geographical background to yield an understanding of how different individuals experience first-generation student status. The participants in this study experienced their first-generation student status differently from the students present in most of the existent literature on first-generation students. This demonstrates that first-generation status studied in isolation yields incomplete results, and individuals from different racial, social class, and geographical backgrounds could experience being first-generation in varying ways. Researchers could consider performing similar research studies with underrepresented, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible and/or white, continuing-generation students who are Pell Grant eligible to understand how race and
social class impact those populations as well as how their experiences compare with the participants in this study.

Future studies could include white, first-generation students who are not Pell Grant eligible who have already graduated from college and who have either entered the workforce or started graduate school. Participants who are older and have had more life experiences than students who are still in college may have a different perspective on how their status as white, first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible impacted them in college and how it continues to impact them in the present day. Participants may have also had new experiences that caused them to reflect more on a specific aspect of their identity or see their status as white, first-generation college students who were not Pell Grant eligible through a new lens.

Finally, future studies could be conducted by researchers from backgrounds that are intentionally dissimilar to those of the participants. The researcher identified as a white, first-generation college student. The researcher took steps to mitigate her biases during the data collection and analysis processes. Future studies could consider including a team of researchers who identify in different ways than the participants. A researcher from a different background could also add an additional perspective on the findings and could provide additional reactions to how the participants described their experiences in college.

**Recommendations for Professional Practice in Higher Education**

This study has demonstrated that white, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible experience few of the struggles typically seen in the general first-generation student population. The participants did, however, express their disappointment that the
university did not have a center or club devoted to first-generation students: they sometimes felt alone in navigating their college journeys, unsure of where to go for advice.

Colleges and universities could create programs for first-generation students if they have not done so already. First-generation student centers could be staffed by administrators who were either first-generation students themselves or who have a deep understanding of the specific needs of first-generation students across the spectrum. The centers could include career and graduate school counseling, as well as ongoing consulting with first-generation students on any questions they may have. Programs on topics of importance to first-generation students could be offered by the centers. A dedicated financial aid staff member who could assist the students with negotiating their aid packages and creating student loan repayment plans would benefit first-generation students, as well.

Colleges and universities could also consider creating first-generation mentorship programs through which a third- or fourth-year first-generation undergraduate can act as a mentor to incoming first-year first-generation students. The participants wished they could have talked to an older student who went through the same experiences as they did; this program would allow students to have peer interactions with students who know first-hand what it means to be first-generation college students. Such a program could carefully pair students with mentors who are from backgrounds like theirs. For example, a first-year student from a rural background and blue-collar family could be paired with a fourth-year student from the same background. This could allow the first-year student to feel better understood in his or her struggles during the college transition.

Colleges and universities should continually reexamine and reevaluate their financial aid strategies and costs. As more middle-class families send students to college and feel strained by
growing tuition bills, colleges and universities should determine how they can give more aid to families who are not wealthy enough to afford full tuition but who make too much money to be considered for larger grant aid packages. Institutions can move towards more inclusive aid strategies by decreasing merit-based scholarships and instead offering more significant need-based aid packages to families across the financial spectrum. When possible, institutions should limit the size of federal loans they include within a student’s financial aid package and, wherever possible, replace those loans with grant-based funding.

Finally, institutions can seek to make the experiences they offer available to all. One of the key complaints among the participants was that they were unable to pay for a summer study-abroad program out of pocket, while lower-income students could cover the program costs with their financial aid and scholarship awards. Institutions should work to provide cost-effective opportunities for global engagement for all students who attend. Future research could examine how financial aid offices award merit- and need-based aid to first-generation students across income levels. Institutions could also offer institutional scholarship or university hourly work opportunities specific to first-generation students to allow them to have additional opportunities and feel supported on campus. An example could include first-generation student-specific fellowships in key campus offices, including Admissions, Financial Aid, University Advancement, and Athletics, to give first-generation students an inside view into the life of the university while also allowing them to earn extra funding towards study-abroad programs or other opportunities that could enhance their collegiate years. While all first-generation students could benefit from the opportunity to learn more about university life through working on-campus, the non-Pell Grant eligible first-generation students could also gain additional financial resources.
Summation

This study explored how white, first-generation college students who are not Pell Grant eligible described their academic and social experiences in college. The study found that while the participants found success inside and outside of the classroom, at times they struggled with navigating university life, figuring out where to go for advice, and finding other students who were like them. The findings demonstrated that first-generation student status cannot be used as the sole determining factor for a student’s success or failure in college. Instead, colleges and universities must consider students’ racial, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds as well to determine what factors may help or hinder students’ success.

This study has shed light on a small but important cohort of first-generation college students, demonstrating that all first-generation students will, in varying degrees, experience identity and cultural shifts when they arrive at college. As more first-generation students graduate from high school and pursue higher education, colleges and universities should look after these students and help them – academically, socially, and financially – as they pave a new path for themselves and their families.
References


Balemian, K., & Feng, J. (2013, July). *First generation students: College aspirations, preparedness, and challenges.* Presented at the meeting of College Board AP Annual Conference, Las Vegas, NV.


Lightweis, S. (2014). The challenges, persistence, and success of white, working-class,


Appendix A: Interview Guides

Interview Guide: First Interview

Prior to beginning the interview:
- Begin by thanking the participant for participating in the study and reiterate the study description which has previously been provided to the participant.
- Explain to the participant that the questions are open-ended and that he/she does not have to answer any questions that make him/her uncomfortable
- Review the consent form and sign with the participant; remind the participant that his/her identity will be kept confidential throughout the process
- Answer any clarifying questions the participant may have about the study

Interview questions:
1. When did you first begin thinking about going to college, and what was that process like for you?
   a) Who is/was in your familial group during that process? How, if at all, did they influence this decision?
   b) Who is/was in your peer or friend group during that process? How, if at all, did they influence this decision?
2. Please tell me about your first few months of college – what was your transition from high school like?
3. Please compare your academic experience during your freshman year of college to your current academic experience – how have things changed? Remained the same?
4. Please compare your social experience during your freshman year of college to your current academic experience – how have things changed? Remained the same?
5. Please tell me about how being a first-generation student impacts you – positively, negatively, or not at all.
   a) How much, if at all, did you think about your status as a first-generation student prior to beginning your career in college?
   b) How much, if at all, do you think about your status as a first-generation status now that you are in college?
6. What kind of role, if any, has social class played in your life, and in particular, in your education?
   a) Has your awareness of social class changed since you began college? If so, in what way(s)?
7. Please talk to me about how you believe college will impact your future
   a) How will college impact your socioeconomic and social class status?
   b) How will college impact your relationships with others (family, friends) in the future?

After the interview:
- Ask the participant if he/she has any follow-up questions
- Ask the participant to choose a pseudonym for the study
- Explain what will happen in the second interview
- Set a time and place for the second interview
Interview Guide: Second Interview

Prior to beginning the interview:
- Ask the participant if he/she has any questions or thoughts about the first interview
- Ensure that the participant has received and reviewed the interview summary I sent them after the first interview
- Remind the participant that he/she does not have to answer any questions that make him/her uncomfortable and that his/her identity will be kept confidential throughout the process

During the interview:
1. Since your first interview, have any of your answers or thoughts changed? If so, how and why?
2. Do you feel that the information presented in your interview summary is an accurate representation of your words and thoughts during the first interview?
   a. If not, why?
3. Is there anything you have thought about since your first interview that you wish you had expressed during that time?
4. Overall, how did you find the experience of interviewing for this research study?

After the interview:
- Ask the participant if he/she has any follow-up questions
- Thank the participant for his/her time
- Give the participant the $50 gift card
- Remind the participant what will happen with the data from the interviews from this point moving forward