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Dr. Who?

Trials and Triumphs of First-Generation Doctoral Students

Identifying Support Systems for Successful Completion of Doctoral Degrees

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Cassandra Areli González

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dr. Who?

Trials and Triumphs of First-Generation Doctoral Students

Identifying Support Systems for Successful Completion of Doctoral Degrees

by

Cassandra Areli González

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Robert Teranishi, Chair

This study sought to add to the limited existing literature regarding the experiences and challenges of first-generation doctoral students. Amidst fifteen interviews with first-generation doctoral students, who completed their doctoral degree at an R1 research institution in California, the research provided information about the journey students endured to complete the doctoral program when facing challenges and seeking support from their communities. Themes such as the importance of community support, discovering the unknown in education, and overcoming obstacles in their path shed light for institutions of higher education on ways to build intentional support for first-generation doctoral students. As the fifteen participants share their stories, the conversation pivots towards what can be accomplished despite the hurdles and what

institutions of higher education can do to support a population that is growing among doctoral

students.

The dissertation of Cassandra Areli Gonzalez is approved.

Patricia Gandara

Molly Morin

Cecilia Rios Aguilar

Daniel Solórzano

Robert Teranishi, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION

A mi mami, María, y papi, José, quienes estuvieron a mi lado desde el primer día, siempre empujándome a perseguir mis sueños, gracias por todo. Esta carrera es para todos nosotros porque, sin su amor incondicional, no estaría donde estoy hoy. Gracias por todo el amor y apoyo que ambos me brindan, los amo a los dos y siempre estaré agradecida por lo que han hecho por mí.

To my mom, Maria, and dad, Jose, who have stood by my side since day one, always pushing me to pursue my dreams, thank you for everything. This degree is for all of us because, without your unconditional love, I would not be where I am today. Thank you for all the love and support that you both give me, I love you both and I will always be grateful for what you have done for me.

And to all my fellow First-Generation College Students, this one's for you too. Reaching your dreams takes time and dedication, and at times, some sweat and tears. If I did it, so can you!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

First-generation college students encompass one-third of current college students, yet little is known about their experience in graduate programs. The issues lay in the lack of information about the access to resources for first-generation students pursuing a Doctor of Education degree. Research shows that support programs, such as TRIO McNair and Student Support Services serve a limited number of undergraduate students (100-150 students a year per grant awarded) by helping guide students towards graduate programs. However, due to funding limitations, these programs can only support students during their undergraduate journey and cannot continue to offer support once they graduate. Beyond federally funded TRIO programs, there is a lack of formal programs at institutions of higher education that gear first-generation students toward graduate programs or guide current first-generation students within graduate programs (Holley & Gardner, 2012).

Many first-generation college students, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, face uncertainty and doubt. In a blog post written by a first-generation college student who completed their doctoral program, they describe the challenges associated with being the first in their family to attend college and to complete their doctoral degree:

> Sometimes I wonder where I would be at now if I had come from an academic family or had strong mentors in my high school and undergraduate education...My story sounds more like, 'holy shit I can't believe what I've been able to accomplish even though I had no idea what I was doing.' (Boegehold, 2018)

Being a first-generation college student comes with many challenges, but being a first-generation doctoral student pursuing a leadership role is an arduous task that many do not quite understand. There are fewer resources and less guidance available for first-generation

college students pursuing a doctoral degree. It is a tough road but one with many accomplishments that students should always be proud of.

Statement of the Problem

Background of the Problem

The educational pipeline for first-generation college students is one with limited resources and support, especially for students continuing into graduate programs. Research has found that undergraduate first-generation college students tend to be disadvantaged in the admissions process, underrepresented on campus, and less likely to complete their degrees (Kniffin, n.d.). Beyond undergraduate programs, the enrollment and completion of professional and graduate programs for first-generation college students continue to be disproportionately lower compared to non-first-generation college students. According to a study, only four percent of first-generation college students obtain a doctoral or professional degree after obtaining their bachelor's degree (Forrest Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Obtaining a doctoral degree is becoming essential for professional stability, as occupations requiring degrees beyond a bachelor's degree are growing rapidly, and the median wage is $103,820 for doctoral and professional-level positions (Torpey, 2018). The importance of obtaining a doctoral degree goes beyond monetary value. First-generation college students pursuing doctoral degrees become leaders among their co-workers and help strengthen their field of study (Zambo, Buss, & Zambo, 2015). The more essential it is to obtain a doctoral degree, the more important it is to address the barriers first-generation college students face in their academic journey.

First-generation college students continue to face social-cultural barriers in graduate school, similar to those faced by their counterparts in undergraduate programs. First-

generation doctoral students are also more likely to be female and individuals of color. The characteristics reflected among the population are those of students who are more likely to drop out of higher education or graduate with higher debt. Gardner and Holley (2012) conducted a study that highlighted three themes around first-generation college students' decision to pursue a doctoral degree: the influence of disciplinary and institutional characteristics, the influence of finances, and the role of family and community. In this study, several participants shared that they were surprised when they realized that an advanced degree was required to fulfill their career goals and that it was something no one ever told them until it was too late to change their major. A common theme among first-generation college students in graduate programs was that the pathway to a doctoral degree was unknown, but through their social connections (e.g., counselor, professor, continuing generation peer) they found one person who helped them navigate the path to higher education beyond a bachelor's degree. It was through these limited informal connections that students could navigate the path toward a doctoral degree, but with limited resources, they faced additional challenges (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Financial obstacles created another barrier for first-generation college students pursuing doctoral degrees as many students stated having to work and obtain loans to fund their education. The additional debt from obtaining a doctoral degree was justified by first-generation college students based on the idea that an advanced degree would lead to a career that would provide financial stability to pay the additional debt (Gardner & Holley, 2012).

Another common obstacle facing first-generation doctoral students was dealing with imposter syndrome, a sense of not belonging among the perceived majority at an institution (Gardner & Holley, 2012). First-generation doctoral students faced self-doubt despite having

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strong academic scores and being prepared for the rigor of the programs. Many first-generation students felt they were part of the academic world by accident or because someone made a mistake admitting them into the program and they had to maintain this secret from the world (Gardner, 2013). These types of barriers are the reason for programs such as McNair Scholars, which support undergraduate first-generation college students prepare for graduate programs and help reduce enrollment and completion disparities among this population (Kniffin, n.d.).

Narrowing of the Problem

Research showed first-generation college students face a plethora of challenges as undergraduate students (Gardner & Holley, 2011), and many of these challenges persist as they pursue doctoral studies. The present study focused on support systems that lead first-generation college students to pursue and complete their doctoral studies. There is limited research on available resources that support first-generation students in doctoral programs. Although first-generation college students encompass 30% of doctoral degree recipients, very little is known about their educational journey and experience (Roksa, Feldon, & Maher, 2018). This study focused on the experiences of alumni first-generation doctoral students to explore the support systems essential for their success.

There is a lack of formal programming at many institutions of higher education that support first-generation students' access to graduate school and that support current first-generation students in graduate programs. Formal programs are limited in the number of students they can support or are limited by the funding available to be able to support the number of first-generation college students who seek assistance with graduate and professional degrees (Gardner & Holley, 2011). It is essential to examine not only formal

support systems established by institutions but also informal support systems like informal mentoring, peer support, and unexpected experiences that lead first-generation college students to complete their doctoral program.

Existing Gaps in the Research

Leading researchers, Gardner and Holley (2011, 2012), focused on the experience of first-generation students during their doctoral program, specifically the challenges and opportunities faced by this population while completing their degree. Other research has examined the experience and outcomes of first-generation doctoral students and show the experiences faced as undergraduate students continue to impact them while pursuing doctoral degrees (Kniffin, n.d; Roksa et. al., 2018). Much of the literature on first-generation college students pursuing doctoral studies focuses on those who are not completing programs or the negative experiences they face. Research on first-generation doctoral students is slowly growing, but little is known about the resources that influenced their path toward their doctoral studies and supported the completion of their degree. Although TRIO programs have been around since 1964, limitations on the number of students they can support because of federal regulations (Department of Education, 2015) hinders them. TRIO programs have shown success in supporting first-generation students, but with limited participants, their success rates only impact a small percentage of the population. Studies need to include first-generation doctoral students who may or may not have been TRIO participants to examine their educational journey and determine what drove them toward success and address the impact of formal programmatic support.

Statement of the Purpose

This research is focused on investigating various support networks that were impactful for first-generation students in pursuing and obtaining their Doctor of Education degree. The study focused on an R1 research institution that offers a Doctor of Education program in Educational Leadership. I was interested in exploring the experiences of first-generation college students who completed their doctoral studies in educational leadership to explore the resources utilized to help them complete their program of study. As a first-generation college student currently enrolled in a doctoral program, I understand the struggles of continuing your education and thinking about what is next for you without having any guidance. This research provided a deeper understanding of the educational journey that first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree face and how institutions of higher education can better walk alongside these students to prepare them for this new path.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the focus of this qualitative study:

RQ1: What factors led first-generation college students to pursue a doctoral degree in education?

RQ2: What are the support networks that were impactful for first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) in pursuing and obtaining their doctoral degree in education?

RQ3: What barriers, if any, did first-generation doctoral students identify and overcome while pursuing and obtaining a doctoral degree in education?

RQ4: According to first-generation doctoral students, what resources would have been helpful while completing their doctoral programs?

Overview of the Research Design

The research was conducted using qualitative methods to better understand the impact specific events, situations, or actions had on participants and their experiences (Maxwell, 1996). This research was designed to understand the experiences of first-generation students from deciding to pursue a Doctor of Education degree to the completion of their program. Individual interviews allowed me to go in-depth with each participant to capture any patterns or common characteristics in students' personal experiences. Through interviews, I learned more about unique experiences, key support avenues, and gaps in the support present in their educational journeys. Participants were selected from a pool of alumni who self-identified as first-generation college students who completed their Doctor of Education program at a research-intensive institution. This population provided further insight into the experiences of first-generation college students who attend research institutions and the resources that lead this population to pursue historically competitive programs. Participants were contacted via an initial email to help identify participants. Fifteen participants who self-identified as first-generation college students who graduated from a Doctor of Education program were interviewed for this study.

Study Significance

This study expanded on the needs of first-generation doctoral students and highlighted what formal support programs institutions of higher education can develop to guide first-generation students toward successful admissions and completion of doctoral programs. Current literature focuses on first-generation college students before and during their journey to obtain their bachelor's degree, but little is known about their road toward a doctoral degree. The research provided by this study can assist institutions in developing

additional resources to support first-generation college students in understanding the process of obtaining a doctoral degree. Educators in institutions of higher education can also utilize this study and its findings to help provide adequate support for their students. This is especially important for faculty who serve as advisors as they tend to become mentors for first-generation college students through informal relationships and can be an important influence in their decision to pursue doctoral degrees (Gittens, 2013). The findings will be disseminated through conferences and publications to provide the information to as many institutions of higher education and educators as possible. Through the voices of first-generation doctoral students, it is possible to learn more about the resources that students deem essential to their success. As the population in institutions changes, campuses must be ready for the diversity among their student body to provide the necessary support for student success.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As postsecondary education becomes more accessible and diverse, the demographics of post-secondary institutions will change (Anderson, 2003). Students and parents hold institutions accountable for the success, retention, and graduation of all enrolled students, encouraging institutions to develop programs to assist historically marginalized populations. However, the experiences of first-generation college students pursuing their doctoral degrees are typically unmentioned in discussions surrounding topics of access and student success (Gardner, 2013). The discussion of first-generation college students often focuses on the shortcomings and limitations of their experience and knowledge, with little understanding of the resources supporting their educational success. The language used to describe their experiences in the literature often stems from a deficit-thinking framework. Using an anti-deficit academic framework to plan questions allows researchers to investigate the skills, qualities, and experiences students contribute to the campus and their success. In a study that investigated the academic and social experience of non-traditional students, Goings (2016) stated that an anti-deficit academic framework allowed researchers to develop questions that emphasized students' success rather than their failures. Harper (2012) reminded researchers to reverse questions regarding educational shortcomings, lack of preparation, underrepresentation, underperformance, and disengagement in pre-college socialization, readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. In reframing the conversations about first-generation college students, the literature provides a new perspective on the experiences that first-generation college students have in their pursuit of doctoral programs.

This literature review explored research on the experience of first-generation college students with an emphasis on their experience pursuing a doctoral degree. The literature

review first examined the demographics of first-generation college students in undergraduate and graduate programs. It then explored the value of obtaining a college education and its impact on mobility and their contribution to society. The literature review moved into examining the obstacles first-generation college students face on their journey through higher education, both on campus and within their community. Finally, it offered a look at student support systems designed to engage students to increase educational success, especially for first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree. The literature review concluded with an examination of the Community Cultural Wealth Model and Validation Theory and a discussion of how together they can provide a theoretical framework for this study to help shape the themes found through the data collection.

First-Generation Student Population

First-Generation Student Traits

Although there are several iterations of the definition, first-generation college students are most commonly defined as students whose parents or legal guardians did not receive an undergraduate degree. First-generation college students have multiple traits associated with at-risk populations in higher education. Gardner and Holley (2011) state that this population is more likely to be from low-income communities, receive less support from their families when enrolling in college, work full-time while attending school, and have less interaction with faculty members. First-generation college students also tend to be more self-motivated, have strong self-efficacy, and have high motivation to persist. First-generation college students who continue into graduate and doctoral programs also share similar traits among the growing population (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Graduate Students

One-third of doctoral recipients identify as first-generation college students and more than half are students from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Roksa et. al, 2018). A substantial difference is seen among first-generation doctoral students from five primary racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, Black (56 percent), Hispanic (51 percent), and American Indian (57 percent) doctoral recipients were much more likely to be first-generation college graduates than Asian (26 percent) and non-Hispanic white (32 percent) doctorate-earning counterparts (Hoffer, et al., 2003). First-generation doctoral students also faced differences in debt, about 22 percent reported more than $30,000 of debt. First-generation college students also indicated that their main source of financial support for educational expenses was their own income; these financial constraints contribute to first-generation college students taking longer to complete their degree as they average eight years compared to 7.3 years for students with at least one parent with a college degree (Hoffer, et al., 2003). First-generation doctoral students are also less likely to attend research-intensive institutions as undergraduates and have less experience with conducting research (Roksa et. al, 2018). Although first-generation college students experience these roadblocks, the value of a doctor of education degree goes far beyond.

Values of a Doctoral Degree

Value of Degree Attainment and Mobility

First-generation college students pursue higher education to increase their career prospects and gain economic and social mobility (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Employment in doctoral and professional-level occupations are projected to grow by about 13 percent from 2016 to 2026 (Torpey, 2018). Obtaining a doctoral degree opens the doors for these

new opportunities and provides the knowledge to contribute and improve some areas of their chosen professional practice (Kumar & Dawson, 2013). For graduate students who pursued a doctoral degree with the intention of entering academia, their experience in the workforce results in temporary employment, as the workforce in higher education has changed significantly. 522 early career academics across three universities participated in a study about their experience and aspirations as five-year post-doctoral graduates and they expressed that their experience working in academia has been contractual and short-term employment, even though on average most were working for the same institution over five years (Bosanquet et al., 2017). Faculty in higher education expressed that their contribution to the workforce and what would move their career forward was their research and publications versus teaching, even if that is not their personal priority for personal growth (Matthews et al., 2014). Working in the world of academia is different for doctoral graduates as the focus has shifted to research and grants as their main contribution to the growth of their field versus teaching students in a classroom setting. With the opportunity for mobility, obtaining a doctoral degree opens the doors for leadership roles and the chance to impact their professional field.

Leadership Development

Students completing doctoral degrees frequently act as leaders and feel that others view them as leaders, especially when they can offer advice to help improve their professional field (Zambo et al., 2015). Graduate students feel the responsibility to apply their theories, skills, and knowledge obtained via their program in their work environments. A study of doctoral holders found that graduates wanted to increase their job security and enhance their leadership skills and contribute as leaders to their profession in a meaningful

way (Zambo, Zambo, Buss, Perry, & Williams, 2014). The impact a doctoral degree has on society as a whole was much greater than the personal gain the degree holder and their immediate employer saw. A doctoral recipient, when employed, generated productivity and growth for themselves and those who work alongside them (Casey, 2009). Buckles (2009) reported in a study that participants identified obtaining a doctoral degree as an integral part of being a leader and establishing themselves as leaders among their peers. As leaders, their career opportunities can lead to financial stability and economic mobility.

Financial Stability

Literature indicates that obtaining a doctoral degree can have an impact on one's salary and opportunities for career advancement. The financial gain from obtaining a doctoral degree has been seen as sufficient to justify the cost the individual pays to acquire the degree (Casey, 2009). The College Board reported that the average weekly income for someone with a doctoral degree is approximately $1,883 and the unemployment rate is 1.1 percent, which is lower than the average unemployment rate of 3.0 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). A study on the salary return for students who obtained a doctoral degree found that obtaining a doctoral degree demonstrated a significant increase in wages in all fields of study - but the rates of increase differ significantly depending on the career (Mertens & Robken, 2013). The economic stability provided by obtaining a doctoral degree can be an appealing factor for first-generation doctoral students and a reason to push forth despite the perceived roadblocks many face.

Perceived Roadblocks

Knowledge of Higher Education

In a study of first-generation students participating in a mentorship program as undergraduate students, participants were surprised to learn that deciding to pursue graduate studies in their senior year was a late decision because of the process of applying (Lunceford, 2011). Many were unaware of the aptitude tests, letters of recommendation, and research experience some graduate programs require. Experience with research is important because students must be aware of their research interests since most students select graduate programs based on particular advisers or faculty versus the school's reputation (Lunceford, 2011). First-generation college students may not know if pursuing a graduate degree will enhance their career prospects, but many assume they must pursue graduate school to stand out, although they are unsure if that is the best path for them (Lunceford, 2011). Graduate school is more than an opportunity to better students' career path; it is a challenging endeavor that requires a passion for knowledge that will help them push beyond the difficult times. Not fully understanding the educational expectations for a doctoral degree can lead to other roadblocks for first-generation college students including experiencing imposter syndrome when admitted into a doctoral program.

The Imposter Phenomenon

First-generation college students face challenges with imposter syndrome, as they feel inadequate to compete against their peers intellectually. Although first-generation college students have strong academic credentials and receive praise from faculty and peers, many students felt they had to pretend to be someone else to fool others into believing they are adequate enough to be accepted into the world of academia (Clance & Imes, 1978, as cited in

Gardner & Holley, 2011). Gardner and Holley (2011) note in their study that first-generation doctoral students, when asked about imposter syndrome, shared their fear of being discovered as a "fraud" and the program realizing the mistake they made in admitting them. Feeling like they don't belong in a doctoral program may cause additional roadblocks with finances limiting first-generation college students from pursuing financial support to pay for their degree.

Financial Barriers

Financial resources are limited and impact first-generation college students in their decision to pursue graduate studies since they complete their undergraduate years with a higher level of debt compared to non-first-generation college students (Perna, 2004). A study showed that because of limited financial aid resources and a lack of information on pursuing financial assistance such as assistantships, approximately 34% of first-generation doctoral students funded their educational expenses (Hoffer et al., 2003). They were more likely to graduate with an average debt of $30,000, less likely to apply for and receive research grants or fellowships, and more likely to take longer to complete their degree, causing higher levels of financial debt (Kniffin, n.d.). With increased financial burdens, a supportive community is increasingly more important, but many first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree did not have the support they needed.

Sense of Community

In a study of 20 first-generation doctoral students from two institutions that rank in the top 10% of universities in the U.S., first-generation college students expressed feelings of being a part of two worlds but not belonging to either because neither world could fully support them through their educational journey. Some reported that their parents were

supportive of them attending college but questioned their decision to pursue a graduate degree (Gardner & Holley, 2011). First-generation college students also reported feeling out of place at home as they progressed through their degrees because they were "too educated" to fit in with their family and friends back home. Doctoral students also felt out of place among their peers and viewed other students as competition to be at the top of their class or obtain prestigious assistantships and awards (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). This level of competition can hinder degree completion and cause heightened levels of anxiety leading students to feel a loss of community among their classmates (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Although many roadblocks can prevent first-generation college students from completing their doctoral degrees, there are also support systems that can provide guidance and lead to success.

Student Support Systems

TRIO McNair Scholars Program

The McNair Scholars Program was established by the U.S. Department of Education in 1989 to serve first-generation and low-income undergraduate students in preparing for doctoral studies by providing undergraduate research experience, mentoring, and assistance with the graduate school admissions process (Perna, 2015). The program recruits participants who are least likely to be retained at the university, graduate within six years, and attend graduate school. Gittens (2013) found that program participation increased self-awareness, greater aspirations, and higher graduate degree attainment. A study conducted by Ishiyama and Hopkins (2003) found that McNair Scholars participants also entered graduate school at a 55.3 percent rate compared to other first-generation low-income students who entered graduate school at a 19.5 percent rate. The study also showed that the university retained

participants and they graduated within five years at a significantly higher rate than other first-generation, low-income students. TRIO McNair programs are limited by the number of students they can help, but within institutions, general academic advisors can be the guidance and support for other first-generation doctoral students who are not in programs like McNair Scholars.

Advising

Advising is often focused on course selection and degree completion, but to best support first-generation college students, advising must go beyond that and advisors must have the ability to develop relationships with their students to assess their desire to pursue graduate studies (Lunceford, 2011). Advisors should assist students in considering the pros and cons of graduate school and help students decipher what it means to be a graduate student and what is needed to prepare for the application process. Advisors, especially faculty advisors, can further help first-generation college students who are interested in pursuing graduate studies by offering them opportunities to participate in research and attend conferences where they may be co-presenters (Lunceford, 2011). Faculty advisors, at the graduate level, can provide students with encouragement, assurance of their work quality, and reassurance that they made the right decision to pursue graduate studies in the first place (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). The level of support a faculty advisor can provide can enhance the experience of graduate students, strengthen their support systems, and increase their chances of completion of the program. Advisors can become the mentors first-generation college students seek for further support on their educational journey towards their doctoral degree.

Mentoring

Mentors are role models, guides, and advisors for students who offer career and professional development, emotional support, and psychosocial support (Gittens, 2013). Mentoring for first-generation college students can be a formal and informal structure of support. Gardner and Holley (2011) shared that students who participated in their study identified at least one individual with a different level of social and cultural capital who was their connection to pursuing a graduate degree. Participants also noted that although these connections were impactful in their education journey, they were not a deliberate effort on behalf of their institution but rather an accidental connection with a significant individual on campus. First-generation doctoral students identified the support they received from faculty and other mentors as a crucial factor in their decision to pursue a graduate degree despite the challenges they face as undergraduate students (Gittens, 2013). The support from a mentor is even more crucial in navigating the complicated application process after selecting potential programs that fit their research interest and have resources to support their educational journey. Mentors, both formal and informal, are the connection to what it means to be in a graduate program. If a graduate program is the correct path based on the student's goals, only through truly knowing first-generation college students can mentors provide support and offer their guidance (Lunceford, 2011). Mentors become the bridge between the unknown world of higher education and first-generation college students' educational journey. Beyond mentors, first-generation college students look for support within their social circles as they move forward in their educational journey.

Social support comes from people whom students are socially tied to such as family, friends, and coworkers who influence their perception of their environment (Kelly, 2005). Social support can be emotional, professional, and practical, helping mediate stress for students. Research shows social support is an important source for doctoral students and a lack of social support can lead to higher levels of stress and lower levels of completion (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). A study conducted by Jairam and Kahi (2012) explored the various groups that provided social support for doctoral students. In the study, 31 participants ranged in age from 29 to 63 who completed doctoral degrees from multiple universities in the U.S. indicated their social support networks included academic friends (fellow cohort members or graduate students in their same field), family (spouses, children, siblings, and parents), and faculty (dissertation chairs, committee members, and professors) and each network offered various forms of social support to help support them during their educational journey (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Academic friends offered students emotional support through listening, being empathetic, and showing concern for each other (Nelson & Brice, 2008). Academic friends also offered professional support by providing advice on time and stress management and assistance with writing and research (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

Family support varies across cultural backgrounds and identities and has been shown to be an important factor in the educational journey of first-generation college students (Tate et al., 2015). Families offered emotional support for graduate students differently than the emotional support academic friends offered. Family provided encouragement, esteem building, and love for the graduate students (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Tate et al. (2015) found that the level of influence families had on first-generation college students in their pursuit of

graduate school correlated with their desire to honor their family through their educational

aspirations because of the support offered to them. Families also provided practical support

which included gifts, financial support, time and space to do work, and even assistance with

children allowing graduate students the opportunity to focus on their educational goals

(Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

Faculty also played an important role in social support as they offered graduate

students emotional and professional support. According to Jairam and Kahl's (2012) study

the most important form of support that faculty offered was professional support. Faculty are

subject-matter experts and can offer feedback, advice, and assistance to help students be

successful in completing their degree, especially in writing their dissertation.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

In this study, the first theoretical framework guiding the research is Yosso's (2005)

Community Cultural Wealth Model which shared that there are six forms of cultural capital

students of color bring with them from their community to their college environment. The

forms of cultural capital include aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and

resistance. For this study, there was a focus on familial, social, and navigational capital,

which explored first-generation college students' journey through their doctoral degrees.

Familial capital refers to the personal human resources that come from a student's family and

community network (Yosso, 2005). Social capital refers to students' peers and other social

circles that students utilize to gain access to college and help navigate through institutions

(Yosso, 2005). Lastly, navigational capital refers to students' ability to navigate through

various spaces including educational settings (Yosso, 2005). Although the Community

Cultural Wealth Model focused on the capital of undergraduate students, it is these forms of

capital that were used in this study to examine how students transcended through their educational journey and the interview questions asked participants about how the experiences from their undergraduate years may have influenced their decision to pursue a doctoral degree.

As a second lens, this study utilized Rendon's (1994) Validation Theory which explored validation agents that fostered academic and interpersonal development among first-generation college students. Validation has provided a theoretical framework for research that aims to understand the experiences of first-generation college students with key findings showing students can experience invalidation while in college, validation comes in multiple forms, and students benefit from validation that can impact them for years (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). The University of Texas at El Paso used Validation Theory to identified four components of access that were critical to validating students in their belief that they can and should pursue higher education (Ekal, Rollins Hurley, & Padilla, 2011). The four components included aspirational access, academic access, financial access, and participatory access, which demonstrated a positive impact on transitioning students into pathways to success when examined from a validation perspective (Ekal, Rollins Hurley, & Padilla, 2011). Utilizing Validation Theory as a framework provides an opportunity to examine the impact that in and out of classroom agents have on the academic journey for first-generation doctoral students.

Through the interviews, the study examined the support systems first-generation college students who obtained a doctoral degree found essential for their success. The Community Cultural Wealth Model and Validation Theory provided the structure for coding the findings into themes based on the experiences and areas of student impact that the

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participants shared. The interview questions focused on the support systems and experiences that first-generation doctoral students experienced in and out of class that influenced them to continue their educational journey. Whether the experiences were positive or negative, the questions asked the participants to reflect on how their experiences impacted not only their educational experience but also their journey as first-generation doctoral students. As the data was collected from the interviews the framework guided the study and provided a structure for coding and analyzing the findings.

Conclusion

The literature available on first-generation college students pursuing doctoral degrees has only scratched the surface. Through current studies, it is clear that the barriers first-generation college students face as undergraduates continue to be prevalent during their time as doctoral students (Gardner, 2013). Although barriers stand in the way of their educational journey, the value of a doctoral degree is worth the struggles they may encounter. In order for first-generation college students to be successful through their doctoral studies, institutions must be aware of the roadblocks that hinder their progress. These roadblocks include the lack of knowledge of higher education and its expectations, feeling inadequate as a doctoral student, financial barriers, and a lack of a sense of community (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Facing these barriers is a challenge and makes providing forms of support that much more important for first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree. Studies have shown that advising, mentoring, and programs, such as TRIO McNair Scholars, and having social support systems are key for success (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gittens, 2013; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). It is the responsibility of these institutions to provide adequate support for every student they accept into their doors and to create a more equitable educational pipeline for

the new diverse student population. This study provided the opportunity to examine further

how different forms of support impact first-generation college students toward and through a

doctoral program and how institutions of higher education can develop more intentional ways

of assisting their students through their educational journey.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Thirty percent of doctoral recipients in the United States are first-generation college students (Roksa et. al., 2018). Researchers such as Gardner and Holley (2011 & 2012) have explored first-generation college students' experience in doctoral programs, but in order to understand their journey through a doctoral program, researchers must explore the resources pivotal to their success. This study explored the formal and informal support networks that first-generation college students found instrumental in pursuing and completing a doctoral program. For the purpose of this study, participants are alumni from the University of California, Los Angeles, an R1 research institution, who completed the educational leadership program. The focus of the research was the experiences of this population and the resources they used throughout their educational journey toward their doctoral degree. The findings provided an in-depth look at the experiences of first-generation college students who pursued a doctoral degree and how competitive institutions, such as R1 research universities, can provide the adequate preparation and support needed for the successful completion of their doctoral programs.

Research Questions

RQ1: What factors led first-generation college students to pursue a doctoral degree in education?

RQ2: What are the support networks that were impactful for first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) in *(pursuing and)* obtaining their doctoral degree in education?

RQ3: What barriers, if any, did first-generation doctoral students identify and overcome while pursuing and obtaining a doctoral degree in education?

RQ4: According to first-generation doctoral students, what resources would have been helpful while completing their doctoral programs?

Research Design and Rationale

This study was a qualitative design utilizing one-on-one interviews with selected participants. The study utilized a semi-structured interview to understand individual perspectives, views, and feelings about their experience as first-generation doctoral students, which required a more inductive approach. This study needed to be a qualitative research design because it provided the opportunity to collect data directly from participants who experienced the educational journey through the lens of a first-generation college student (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative researchers, in most cases, work inductively, allowing me to examine patterns and themes among the data collected, which provided this research with a better understanding of the student experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With there is little to no resources available for first-generation college students pursuing doctoral degrees, it is important to capture student voices about what resources were key to their success through retroactive probing that only a qualitative design would help discover (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Though it would be possible to solely survey first-generation doctoral students about their experience, a quantitative study would not have allowed me to dive deep into their experiences and examine the level of impact that resources had on their journey.

Site Selection

The first Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree was granted at Harvard University in 1921, which was established by Henry Holmes for students who had a successful teaching experience but sought to expand their prior knowledge and experience to obtain a higher

position within the school system such as school leaders (Cremin, 1978; Perry, 2012). The Ed.D. and Ph.D. have minimal distinctions in both curriculum and dissertation requirements, though the Ed.D. is a degree designed to prepare current educational practitioners to solve educational problems using existing knowledge (Shulman et al., 2006). For the purpose of this study, the site selected was the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), an R1 research institution in California, that offers an educational doctoral degree in education leadership. UCLA's Educational Leadership Program (ELP) recruits mid-career professionals from the PK-16 educational pipeline: K-12, Community College, 4-year institutions, and non-profit educational organizations. The program is guided by nationally acclaimed faculty who not only develop theory but also work in multiple educational settings. UCLA's ELP is a three-year program using a cohort model of 24-30 students selected each year with Thursday evening and Saturday courses.

The Educational Leadership Program at UCLS is distinct because it is designed to deepen the understanding of social justice leadership and is committed to merging theory and practice to address leadership challenges in educational organizations. The program is committed to advancing social justice and understanding the diversity of students. The curriculum integrates research methods, leadership development, and dissertation support over the course of three years. Courses are designed to support the growth of students as practitioners through conducting rigorous empirical inquiry and using data to understand complex issues in the educational system preparing them to be leaders that drive change and support the diverse student populations in their sphere of influence.

Access and Recruitment

In order to obtain access to the site and recruit participants, I connected with the program director of Educational Leadership Programs at the University of California, Los Angeles. As a current student in a R1 institution, I built a relationship with the program director who connected me with alumni from their doctoral program in educational leadership. The program director and faculty offered to help me connect with alumni from the Educational Leadership Program. I explained to the program director that I was interested in connecting with their alumni who were first-generation college students and completed a doctoral degree in education/educational leadership to explore their support systems that led to the successful completion of their program. I let the program director know that I would provide feedback from the research conducted after my study with suggestions for student support based on my findings.

Sample Selection

The participants selected for this study were first-generation college students who obtained an educational doctoral degree from the University of California, Los Angeles Educational Leadership Program (ELP) within the last five years. Twenty-three alumni from the Educational Leadership Programs at the University of California, Los Angeles responded to the inquiry of which 15 were selected for the interviews based on their availability and their desire to share their story for this study. Once selected I contacted them individually via email to invite them to participate in the interview for the study. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants that were interviewed, with their pseudonym, cohort, year Ed.D. was completed, whether they attended community college, type of institution attended for

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their undergraduate degree, the year their bachelor was completed, and whether they were TRIO participants.

Table 1

Description of Participants

	Pseudonym	Cohort	Year Ed.D. Completed	Attended Community College	Type of Institution attended for Undergraduate	Year Bachelor's Completed	TRIO Participant
1	Tanya	23	2018	Yes	Private, 4-Year	2011	Yes
2	Hillary	23	2018	No	Private, 4-Year	2004	Yes
3	Roger	21	2019	No	Private, 4-Year	2004	No
4	Summer	24	2019	Yes	Private, 4-Year	2008	No
5	Sarah	22	2017	No	Private, 4-Year	2002	No
6	Laura	22	2017	No	Public, 4-Year	2001	No
7	Joseph	22	2017	Yes	Public, 4-Year	2004	No
8	Jennifer	23	2018	No	Public, 4-Year	1999	No
9	Ben	23	2018	Yes	Public, 4-Year	1998	No
10	Erica	21	2017	Yes	Public, 4-Year	1995	No
11	Julius	23	2018	Yes	Public, 4-Year	2018	Yes
12	Julia	21	2016	No	Public, 4-Year	1985	No
13	Joshua	22	2017	No	Public, 4-Year	2003	No
14	Ryan	22	2017	No	Public, 4-Year	1997	No
15	Melissa	22	2017	No	Public, 4-Year	1989	No

The 15 alumni selected span across four different cohorts. Six of the participants began their educational journey at a community college. Ten of the participants attended a 4-year public institution while five attended a 4-year private institution. The participants selected all had powerful stories to share about their experience being a first-generation college student that completed their doctoral degree at the #1 public school, UCLA. Six of

the participants completed their doctoral degree much later in their professional career and

shared that they made the decision to pursue a doctoral degree because they felt they had

reached a point in their career where they needed to be competitive with so many entering the

field already with their doctoral degree. The other nine participants shared that they decided

to pursue their doctoral degree because had faced barriers in their careers when it came to

being selected for leadership positions. Two participants, in particular, shared that they

submitted the questionnaire for this study but doubted that they would be selected because

they did not fit the mold of first-generation college students and thought they would never

have the chance to share their stories. Each participant offered their unique stories and were

vulnerable when asked about their experience, their words were powerful and offered insight

to this study.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted primarily through one-on-one interviews. For this

study, I sent a recruitment email (see Appendix A), via the program director, with a short set

of questions to first-generation college students who obtained a doctoral degree from an R1

institution. For this study, first-generation college students were defined as students whose

parents or legal guardians did not receive an undergraduate degree. The questions (see

Appendix B) included what year they graduated from their doctoral program, where they

attended their undergraduate program, what year they completed their undergraduate

program, whether or not they participated in a TRIO program as undergraduates, and their

availability for interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured to lend themselves to more of an open-ended

conversation (see Appendix C). The interview questions focused on the resources and

support systems the participants used to successfully obtain their doctoral degrees. The questions utilized during the interview were field tested with three doctoral students attending a different institution and questions were adjusted based on the types of responses received during the practice interviews. The final interview questions selected allowed the participants to share the resources they lacked during their educational journey. The interview questions allowed participants to discuss their educational experience from their undergraduate years to completing their doctoral degree. During the interview, I also explored their support networks such as family, mentors, and peers, and their role during their educational journey. The interview explored barriers and challenges the participants faced during their educational journey and how they overcame those challenges to be successful in their programs. The interview started with warm-up questions to get to know the participants, followed by questions walking me through their educational journey, and ending with an opportunity for participants to offer advice to current students and to institutions about successfully obtaining their degree. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half and were conducted via Zoom meeting. The interviews were recorded utilizing the meeting recording option on Zoom and the recordings were saved on a hard drive and Google Drive. While conducting the interview, I also took notes on what I was hearing for additional precaution.

Data Analysis Methods

The responses to the questionnaire were stored in an encrypted Excel sheet and were used to select the participants for the interviews. The recordings of the interviews were reviewed initially for notes and then submitted for transcription using REV.com and were then reviewed for accuracy. Once the interviews were transcribed, I took additional notes to

help develop themes from the data and analyze the responses that are associated with each research question. My findings were strengthened by identifying possible themes shared by multiple participants such as mentoring, family support, programmatic support, community resources, and inequity in college access.

Positionality

I positioned myself as a fellow practitioner who is also a doctoral student researcher. Although the institution I studied was the institution that I was attending, I needed to position myself first as a researcher. I kept this study voluntary and confidential so that participants did not feel pressured to participate. I shared with my participants that I am a first-generation college student attending an R1 institution and that the focus of my research is driven by hearing the stories of others who have experienced higher education through similar backgrounds to show the journey they have conquered. I clarified that I was there to hear their stories and perspectives, whether positive or negative and to provide a more holistic perspective of the educational journey a first-generation college student faces when obtaining a doctoral degree.

Ethical Issues

This study possessed some ethical issues around confidentiality. The study included multiple participants from one site who shared private information about their experience through their educational journey, including their time at specific institutions. All participants signed an informed consent to be part of the study where I explained that their responses would be kept anonymous. No identifying information was shared and participants were only mentioned using pseudonyms assigned to each of them. All data was kept utilizing password-protected devices. Data was labeled only with pseudonyms and a key that shows the real

names was stored separately from the transcripts and recordings. Upon completion of the research, transcripts were stored in an encrypted file for safekeeping.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To mitigate potential threats to the credibility of this study, I addressed potential threats such as my bias and small sample size. To address my bias as a first-generation college student pursuing a doctoral degree at one of the institutions in the research project, I utilized a multi-case study to strengthen the validity of my study. By interviewing alumni from multiple years, it allowed me to compare the data from all the various cohorts and determine if there were common themes across all the years while providing details about each of the participants so readers can decide if the results are transferable to other student experiences. I had a limited sample size from one R1 research institution in California, which can threaten the credibility of my study. In order to mitigate this threat from the limited sample size, I conducted interviews with alumni from multiple cohorts over the span of five years. This allowed me to triangulate data sources and methods across participants, which helped to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Study Limitations

This study does not intend to claim the results are indicative of the experiences of all first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree at a R1 research university. As mentioned previously, a threat and limitation to this study is that the study had a small sample size of alumni from an R1 institution in California. Therefore, the results simply indicate trends and patterns among the experiences of these students in their educational journey that provide useful information for institutions wishing to support their diverse student populations. Given that this research brings forth the voices and experiences of first-

generation college students who successfully completed doctoral programs in education and educational leadership at highly competitive schools, this study adds to the literature around support systems deemed important by students themselves. Further research will be needed to make broader claims about the institutional support required for the success of first-generation college students in doctoral programs.

Conclusion

This research study used qualitative methods to explore the support systems deemed important by first-generation college students who completed a doctoral program at an R1 research institution. This study helped to further understand the unique needs of first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree. By sharing the experiences of these students, institutions can begin the conversation around providing the proper support for all students in their educational journey toward a doctoral degree.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

First-generation college students refer to individuals whose parents/guardians do not have a bachelor's degree. They face numerous challenges, including navigating academia and balancing the demands of their personal and professional lives. However, despite these challenges, many first-generation college students have been successful in their academic pursuits of a doctoral degree, and this success can serve as an inspiration for others. This chapter reports the findings of a qualitative research study that focused on 15 first-generation alumni from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) who completed their doctoral in educational leadership. For this study, the site selected is UCLA because it is a competitive R1 research institution in California that offers an educational doctoral degree in educational leadership. The participants selected for this study were first-generation college students who obtained an educational doctoral degree from the UCLA Educational Leadership Program (ELP) within the last five years. This study, although focused on one institution, is not designed to examine the success of the program, but the students, within a specific context, to shed light on how programs can better help support first-generation doctoral students' unique needs. The interview data was collected via one-on-one interviews and explored 15 individuals who described their educational experience as first-generation college students and their journey through the doctoral program. Through this study, I sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors led first-generation college students to pursue a doctoral degree in education?

RQ2: What are the support networks that were impactful for first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) in *(pursuing and)* obtaining their doctoral degree in education?

RQ3: What barriers, if any, did first-generation doctoral students identify and overcome while pursuing and obtaining a doctoral degree in education?

RQ4: According to first-generation doctoral students, what resources would have been helpful while completing their doctoral programs?

To examine the experiences of successful first-generation doctoral students at UCLA, I conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with a sample of first-generation doctoral graduates, and the interview data was analyzed thematically to identify common experiences and themes related to the participants' success using both Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model and Rendon's (1994) Validation Theory as frameworks for the data collected. The results of the study revealed several common themes related to the success of first-generation doctoral students at UCLA. These themes included the importance of strong social support networks, the role of mentors, the development of strong academic skills, and the importance of perseverance and determination. Many of the participants in the study reported that their success was due, in part, to the support of their families and friends. The participants emphasized the importance of having a strong support system to help them navigate the challenges of academic life, including the demands of coursework, research, and other responsibilities. Another common theme that emerged was the role of mentors in the participants' academic journeys. Participants reported that having an individual who was invested in their success and provided guidance, advice, and support was essential to their success. Several of the participants in the study emphasized the importance of developing strong academic skills, such as time management, organization, and effective communication, in order to succeed in their doctoral programs. Finally, the participants in the study emphasized the importance of perseverance and determination in

overcoming the challenges they faced in their academic journeys. Despite setbacks and obstacles, the participants remained committed to their goals and continued to work towards their doctoral degrees.

Factors for Pursuing a Doctoral Degree

In contemporary academia, the journey toward obtaining a doctoral degree is often a complex and multifaceted one, particularly for first-generation college students (FGCS). These individuals navigate the academic landscape with unique challenges and aspirations. Understanding the motivations behind FGCS pursuing doctoral degrees in education is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive academic environment. The first research question focused on unraveling the factors that propel FGCS toward pursuing a doctoral degree in education, shedding light on their motivations, and the underlying dynamics of their decision-making process.

Stable Decision Making for Future Aspirations

Opportunities for Upward Mobility. The first finding underscores the collective understanding among FGCS that obtaining a doctoral degree is a pivotal step toward unlocking doors in leadership and ensuring competitiveness in their chosen professional domains. Through in-depth interviews, eight participants revealed a shared conviction among FGCS that obtaining a doctoral degree is pivotal for opening doors in leadership and ensuring competitiveness in the professional realm, especially in facilitating upward mobility. The eight participants also shared that upon completing their program they were offered a new position in leadership at their current institution highlighting to them even more the opportunities that were now available to them because of a doctoral degree. Tanya encapsulated this sentiment, articulating,

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I understood that obtaining a doctoral degree is crucial for opening doors in

leadership and ensuring competitiveness in this world. I knew what I had to do to be

the one selected for new opportunities and to reach the professional goals I had set for

myself. (Tanya)

She continued by stating:

At the time, I was working for an organization where they were very invested in me

and I was growing in the organization, receiving promotions and more responsibility.

My boss at the time told me that I didn't need to go back to school and that it was a

waste of time. I was sharing this conversation with an ELP alum and she shared with

me that this statement was easy for him to say, as a white man who's always had

access to top tier institutions and to let's not forget that he himself has an MBA. She

just said 'look the reality is there going to be some people who are not going to take

us seriously, unless we get the degree right' and that made me realize that if I wanted

to be competitive anywhere else I needed this degree and I need to be able to prove

my worth through the doctoral degree. (Tanya)

This acknowledgment emphasizes the participant's strategic recognition of the inherent value

of a doctoral credential in a competitive professional landscape especially for leadership roles

where they will find others with similar experiences and with higher levels of education.

Hillary further reinforces this viewpoint, stating:

I know that a doctoral degree provides opportunities for upward mobility, and that

was a driving force in my decision to pursue one. I knew I would eventually hit a

roadblock in my career and that it would come down to whether or not I have my

degree. I would eventually compete against others who did have it and it was up to

me to be prepared and be just as competitive as them. (Hillary)

Here, the participant views the pursuit of a doctoral degree as a deliberate and informed

choice, aligning with their aspirations for professional advancement. This finding is

supported by Blackwell and Pinder (2014) who addressed that FGCS pursue higher education

to increase their career perspectives and how important it is to see the value of each degree as

it relates to upward mobility in their career.

Sustainability in Their Career. The second piece of evidence delves into the

influential role of parental guidance in shaping the career perspectives of FGCS. Insights

from five participants shed light on how parental emphasis on the importance of a stable job

has significantly influenced their decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Sarah reflects on the

impact of parental guidance, stating:

My parents always emphasized the importance of a stable job to provide for myself

and my future family. They always encouraged me to work hard because that meant

that I would be rewarded in my career and that I would never have to fear losing my

job if I would show them how much I was worth. (Sarah)

This insight underscores the intergenerational transmission of values related to career

sustainability and stability. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model addressed

familial capital for FGCS as a form of resource via their lived experiences and it is through

their understanding of struggle that they push their student to pursue stability in their career

through their education. It is the experiences of their families that FGCS understand the

importance of having a stable career, and although they are the first to go to college, they see

that it is those degrees in education that will open the doors that previously were closed.

Roger further emphasizes the enduring influence of parental guidance, noting:

> The idea of career stability, instilled by my parents, significantly influenced my
>
> decision to pursue a doctoral degree. I saw how hard they worked because they didn't
>
> have the opportunity to get a college degree and how much they struggled to be taken
>
> seriously when it came to other opportunities. They always told me that they wanted
>
> better for me and I knew getting my doctoral degree would signify to them that I was
>
> going to be ok professionally. (Roger)

The incorporation of these quotes deepens the understanding of the role of family values in shaping the educational aspirations of FGCS, linking the pursuit of a doctoral degree to broader familial ideals of stability and security. This finding expands upon Jairam and Kahi's (2012) study that families have a big impact on FGCS's decision to pursue higher education as a way to ensure career success and sustainability, especially when compared to the experience of their parents.

Sphere of Influence

Influence in Decision-Making. The second finding explored FGCS's aspiration to wield influence in their respective fields, recognizing that a doctoral degree is a key that unlocks doors to leadership opportunities. Through interviews with seven participants, a prevailing theme emerged, highlighting the perception that a doctoral degree is essential for preparing oneself for future leadership roles, ensuring that no obstacles impede professional advancement. Laura articulates this viewpoint, stating,

> To be ready for future leadership opportunities, I must pursue a doctoral degree to
>
> ensure nothing stands in the way of these opportunities. I knew that if I wanted to be

influential in my field I needed to be heard and in education that meant having a

doctoral degree. There weren't many that looked like me representing the many

students who do, so I had a sense of responsibility to be in those spaces and be a

voice for those who were not. (Laura)

Here, the participant articulates the strategic perspective of FGCS, viewing the doctoral

journey as a means to proactively remove barriers to leadership roles. Sarah further supports

this notion, expressing,

I understand that a doctoral degree opens doors for leadership opportunities. That has

been a driving force in my educational journey. I wanted to enter into spaces that

before were not available to me before. I wanted to challenge others in leadership and

push the boundaries so that change could be made. I knew that I could be that change

but in order to do that I needed to be welcomed into certain spaces and that meant I

needed to get my doctoral degree. (Sarah)

This quote encapsulates the participant's deliberate pursuit of a doctoral degree as a strategic

pathway toward achieving positions of influence and leadership. Zambo, Buss, and Zambo

(2015) addressed this in their student that pursuing a doctoral degree for FGCS means being

seen as a leader and having the opportunity to influence spaces where they can make a

difference for others. The participants understood that a degree would open the doors and

that finally, they could speak to those who could make a difference because now they would

be seen as equals.

A Voice to Make Decisions. The second piece of evidence under this finding focuses

on FGCS's desire to have a voice in decision-making rooms where discussions directly

impact populations they understand intimately. Insights from nine participants shed light on a

collective understanding that the leadership at their current institutions did not adequately reflect the diversity and unique needs of the students they were supporting. Samantha reflects on this awareness, stating, "I knew that the leadership at our institution did not reflect the students we were supporting. Having a voice around those tables is crucial to representing the true needs of the students." This quote underscores the participant's recognition of a disparity between institutional leadership and the student body, emphasizing the importance of diverse perspectives in decision-making. Samantha also shared that it was a conversation she had that made her realize the importance of a doctoral degree in order to be heard among others. She stated:

> I knew I had ideas to share but no one took me seriously. I got the usual 'yeah that
> sounds great let's talk about it more later' and there was no later. I was dismissed
> even though I was a FGCS of color that experienced many of the challenges our
> students were facing. I was no one in those rooms until I presented myself as a doctor
> and then they heard me. (Samantha)

It was feeling like an outsider that pushed some of the participants to pursue a doctoral degree because they knew they had the answer to some of the problems being discussed by leadership, but it was tough being heard. Joseph further reinforces this perspective, noting,

> Seeking a voice and place in decision-making rooms has been a motivating factor in
> my pursuit of a doctoral degree. No one really listens to me unless I am able to flaunt
> my doctor title and then share my thoughts. It is when I introduce myself as a doctor
> that eyes turn toward me and that I can sense a level of respect in the room. Before I
> was dismissed many times and now I am seen as the expert with the answer. (Joseph)

This statement articulates the participant's proactive approach in seeking academic credentials as a means to effect positive change within institutional structures. Zambo, Zambo, Buss, Perry, & Williams (2014) also found FGCS wanted to contribute to their fields in meaningful ways and it was via applying the knowledge from their doctoral studies and their lived experiences that they were able to impact their profession. Participants shared that it was important to have a voice, but it was also important to be able to make a positive impact for the students they represent, which was important for them when deciding to obtain a doctoral degree.

Nurturing First-Generation Doctoral Students through Supportive Networks

The pursuit of a doctoral degree is often a challenging and solitary journey, especially for first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) in education. Research Question 2 (RQ2) focused on understanding and exploring the support systems that contributed to the success of FGDS in obtaining their doctoral degrees. This section delves deeper into the findings, specifically examining the integral role of familial and community support, as well as the formation of supportive networks within cohorts and mentorship from alumni.

Familial Support

Unconditional Support Despite Lack of Understanding. One significant finding from the study is the pivotal role played by family and friends in the success of FGDS. The testimonies of participants reveal a common thread among 10 of them – the unconditional support of partners and family members, even when they did not fully comprehend the complexities of the doctoral journey. Six of the 10 participants further shared that they were parents with young children and that having their partner and children support them through

this experience provided them with even more motivation to move forward and complete their doctoral program. Hillary expressed,

My family didn't quite understand why, but they supported me unconditionally, allowing me to focus on my doctoral journey. They may not have understood why I was putting myself through 3 more years of education but they knew that I had my reasons and so they became my biggest cheerleaders especially during the tough times like late nights studying for exams and the weekends I had to be away to write. (Hillary)

It is the families of the FGDS that helped participants through the process, not because the family understood the process, but because they offered their unconditional love and support through the journey. Similarly, Ben emphasized,

Even though they didn't get it, my partner supported me wholeheartedly, making it possible for me to complete my degree. She would stay up late with me while I did work and would be by my side at the coffee shops when I needed extra time to study. She didn't have to go the extra steps but she knew at the moment I had to shift my attention to my doctoral program so she stepped up and did what she could so that I was able to focus on what I needed to do even if it meant less date nights and more late nights at my desk. (Ben)

This unconditional support provided a stable foundation for the participants, enabling them to navigate the complexities of their doctoral studies without added stress. This supports Tate et al.'s (2015) findings that the support families give to FGDS is important in their success, and although families may not understand the journey, they are willing to walk alongside them.

The unwavering backing provided by family members allowed participants to navigate the challenges of their doctoral studies without the burden of justifying their pursuit.

Familial and Community Sacrifice. Beyond emotional support, the sacrifices made by families and communities were significant contributors to the successful completion of the doctoral degree. Seven participants expressed gratitude for the understanding and support of their loved ones. Julius acknowledged,

I felt bad for the sacrifices, but my family understood why they were necessary, making it bearable. At times it meant not being able to go out to dinner because I needed more time to do homework or not being able to do our traditional vacation because I had classes in the summer. My family knew that it was tough for me and I knew how tough it was for them too so I appreciated all the times they stood by my side and supported me. I knew it wasn't easy for any of us but having them by my side made it feel like a team effort versus me against the world. (Julius)

It was important to feel like they were not on their own through this educational journey. The participants shared that if their families did not support this process they may not have completed the program, especially with how much was required from both the person doing the doctoral program and their family. Erica further reiterated,

The sacrifices were tough, but the support from my loved ones made the journey more manageable. I never wanted to ask them to give up their world for me. I was the one who made the decision to return to school and do something that I knew would be tough but they were there to give me a helping hand when I needed it. Not only did my family understand that this would be tough but so did my closest friends, they all understood when I had to say no to things or when I had to step away from important

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events because for just a little bit I needed to focus on me and completing this

program. (Erica)

These sacrifices underscore the communal effort required for the successful completion of a

doctoral degree, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the doctoral journey with familial

and community support and reinforcing the idea that the doctoral journey is a collective

endeavor. The family and community support, as stated by Jairam and Kahl (2012), comes in

practical forms such time, space, and even the extra words of encouragement because as

FGDS are entering an experience that may not be known by others, their support system

understands what they can offer to help make the educational journey a success.

Community Support

Cohort Support Through Challenges. In addition to family support, the study

revealed the crucial role of building a community within cohorts and establishing mentorship

connections with alumni. The camaraderie within cohorts emerged as a pivotal factor among

eight participants when it came to overcoming academic and personal challenges. The cohort

model provided a built-in support system that became a lifeline for many participants. Julia's

testimony, "The cohort model was my lifeline at times. Having a built-in support system got

me through the toughest challenges," emphasized the instrumental role that peers play in the

doctoral journey. Having a cohort to turn to offered a group of individuals who understood

the journey and who walked alongside each other. Julia continued stating,

It was my cohort that knew what I was going through and understood when I needed

to celebrate and when I needed to step away to cry. They were the knows that

understood why I had to send a late-night text to vent about not being able to go to

bed even though I had an 8 am meeting the next day but when it came to hanging out

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after class I was the first one to say yes even though I had that same 8 am meeting

again. It was my cohort that became my family away from my family especially when

we needed to spend hours and hours on campus preparing for exams or writing paper

after paper. They saw me at my worst and at my best and supported me through each

step of the way. (Julia)

Participants shared that the cohort model allowed them to bond over the experience because

they started this journey together and moved along the process as a unit, supporting one

another through this experience. Ryan echoed this sentiment, stating, "Without my cohort,

the journey would have been much more difficult; they understood my unique struggles

because they were experiencing a lot of them with me." The community among the cohorts

proved to be a vital component of overcoming the isolating aspects of doctoral studies. Ryan

continued stating:

It was my cohort that welcomed me into this experience and who became the people I

turned to when I didn't understand what was going on. Our cohort was a mix of

FGCS and non-FGCS so we were able to share each other's stories and support one

another in areas that were new to us. I had cohort members that were able to explain

what was going on with the dissertation process while I was able to provide the

student perspective when it came to research we were reading in class via my lived

experience. We all struggled one way or another but we supported each other through

this experience. (Ryan)

The sense of shared struggle fostered within the cohort community became a source of

motivation and resilience for FGDS, demonstrating the power of collective support. This is

related to the social capital addressed in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model,

which focused on the fact that peers become an asset to students and help with navigating the educational system. The cohort became another support space for FGDS, and because there were none FGDS in the group it provided a form of insight to the process of obtaining a doctoral degree.

Mentorship from Alumni Eases the Unknown. Navigating the unknowns of the doctoral journey was made more manageable through mentorship from alumni. Connecting with alumni mentors offered valuable insights and guidance into the unknowns of the doctoral journey for six participants who further shared that they did not have anyone in their circle who had experienced a doctoral program and having access to alumni became their access to knowledge. Connecting with those who had successfully traversed similar paths provided valuable insights and guidance. Melissa's acknowledgment, "Alumni mentors filled in the unknowns and prepared me for the journey I had just started," underscores the importance of mentorship in demystifying the challenges associated with doctoral studies. She shared,

> Although we didn't have official mentorship programs, many alumni who came to talk to us were willing to continue to connect with us throughout our time in the program. It was through casual conversation that I was able to connect with the alumni and identify someone who became a mentor to me and who was honest about the process as I faced tougher times. They provided information that no one else would know that I needed because they also faced this unknown and they knew what I didn't. (Melissa)

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It was important to participants to have others who went through this journey to fill in the blank and to fill in even what they didn't know was a blank for them. Joshua further emphasized,

> Having alumni as mentors helped me navigate the unfamiliar terrain of a doctoral program. There was a lot I didn't know and there was a lot that I would have never known to ask about. I was told I didn't know what I didn't know and that comment was so true in this experience. (Joshua)

This experience with alumni mentors supports social capital for FGDS from Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model, it is the alumni's guidance through the program that allowed participants to move through the experience with new insight and a new layer of support. The mentorship relationships established with alumni created a bridge between past and present cohorts, fostering a sense of continuity and shared wisdom and offering FGDS a roadmap to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of doctoral programs.

Overcoming Barriers

Pursuing a doctoral degree in education is a transformative journey, marked by intellectual growth, personal development, and numerous challenges. Research Question 3 (RQ3) focuses on understanding and unraveling the barriers encountered by first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) in the field of education. This section delves into the nuanced findings, shedding light on the intricate processes of decision-making, the struggles with unknown aspects of the doctoral journey, and the external pressures imposed by scrutiny and guilt from supportive individuals.

The Unknown Process

Navigating the Decision-Making Process. One prominent challenge identified in the study is the difficulty faced by participants in navigating unknown processes throughout their doctoral journey. The decision to pursue a doctoral degree is a complex one, and for many FGDS, this process was marked by ambiguity and a lack of information. Twelve participants expressed challenges in determining the best pathway and making informed financial decisions, especially since all twelve did not receive financial support from their current institutions to continue their education whether it was within their current college or not. Jennifer encapsulated this sentiment by stating, "Navigating the doctoral degree process was confusing; I felt I didn't have enough information to make the best decisions." When searching for the program that was right for them, participants emphasized that they did not feel they had all the information, but they also did not know what they should ask to get that information. Jennifer further shared these thoughts by saying,

> I knew I wanted to start a doctoral program but I wasn't sure where to start. I wasn't sure what the difference between a PhD and an EDD was and which would make more sense for me. I wasn't sure how I would pay for these programs or what a good price for a doctoral program would be. I didn't know how to answer questions about what faculty I wanted to work with or what research I wanted to do because I didn't even know that I needed to know this information already. I was facing a very confusing decision and I didn't even know if I could ask anyone in the program or if they would be honest with me about it because at the end of the day they also wanted me to pick their program. I didn't know where to start or end my search. (Jennifer)

Even starting a program was a challenge because with so many programs available, how is a FGCS supposed to narrow their options and truly understand what they are looking for when this is an experience they are having on their own. Similarly, Laura shared:

> Starting the program, I often felt I lacked the information needed to make optimal decisions for myself. I knew certain schools were known for being top schools but I didn't know what they meant for doctoral programs. It took me back to choosing my undergrad, picking whatever school someone else told me was good but not truly understanding how it was a good program for me. (Laura)

Participants shared that they knew the decision would be tough but they didn't realize how tough it would be when missing imperative information such as cost and funding. This supports findings by Hoffer et al. (2003) that state approximately a third of FGCS pay for their own education and are less likely to seek financial assistance from their institution. Laura emphasized this sentiment in her interview when she shared,

> I knew about financial aid and I knew that I would most likely have to pay for my program but I wasn't told that there were programs that would pay for me to attend their program. I wasn't told there was an opportunity to find funding for my education and I came in thinking that it was all on me and that I needed to prepare to add more loans to my debt. As a FGCS, having to get another loan became the norm for me and I just assumed it was something I needed to do again but no one told me that this wasn't necessarily true because I had options. (Laura)

The uncertainties surrounding financial considerations and the optimal academic pathway posed significant hurdles at the onset of their doctoral journeys. The start of the journey can

be tough for FGCS because it is the start of so many unknowns, but it is also step one to begin their path toward a doctoral degree.

Difficulty in Understanding Unknown Processes. As participants progressed through their doctoral programs, encountering unfamiliar processes such as preliminary orals and the defense added another layer of complexity. Thirteen participants struggled to seek support for these unknown aspects. Ben shared:

> Preliminary orals and defense were mentioned, but I never truly understood until I faced them. I turned to my cohort to help me understand what I was walking into and it was almost like walking down the yellow brick road, we didn't know what was at the end when we got to Emerald City. (Ben)

There were milestones that they knew they needed to meet in order to progress through the program but they faced them one at a time because that was what became manageable. Ben further shared,

> Half of the time it almost felt like we were walking into a mystery. We looked at each other and were hoping one of us knew what was going on. We had papers, tests and discussions and those we were prepared for but the moment we started preparing for our end of the year exams and our dissertation it was almost like someone started speaking to us in a different language. It was scary at times because we didn't know who to ask and we were scared to ask our faculty because we didn't want them to think we didn't belong or that we weren't ready for this. (Ben)

The difficulty of understanding the process intertwined with imposter syndrome for many FGDS because they did not feel comfortable asking for help due to the risk of seeming like a fraud. This supports the findings from Gardner and Holley (2011) that found many FGCS

navigated their educational journey carefully because they did not want to be discovered as imposters in education. Julius echoed this sentiment, saying, "So much was new to me; understanding processes like preliminary orals and defense was hard but I wasn't willing to ask for help because I was going to figure this out on my own." For some participants it was easier to go through the program using trial and error than to reach out to faculty in the program to ask for help because they felt that it was expected that as doctoral students they needed to know everything. Julius further shared,

> At times I felt like a fraud when I would see others in my cohort moving along the process with such ease. I was ok asking my cohort questions and getting their opinion on what to do next when it came to my own progress but I was not willing to reach out to our faculty because it almost felt like those were not things you should ask them. I almost felt like I was expected to know everything and that I was expected to know what I was getting myself into but that wasn't the case and I didn't know who to turn to for help. (Julius)

This lack of clarity and support in understanding critical milestones in the doctoral journey posed a significant barrier for FGDS. This finding emphasized the need for enhanced support structures to guide FGDS through the intricate and often opaque processes embedded in doctoral education or even incorporating the opportunity to seek the support of faculty in a safe space where students are able to be vulnerable and are able to ask all the questions they have.

Familial and Community Guilt

Scrutiny from the Community. Another notable barrier identified in the study is the scrutiny and guilt experienced by FGDS from individuals who, despite offering support,

questioned the significance of pursuing another degree. Despite receiving support, eight participants faced questions and skepticism from individuals in their communities who questioned the necessity of obtaining a doctoral degree. Tanya expressed the need to justify the decision, stating:

> I had to justify my decision to go back; many questioned if this degree was truly essential. Many times, I was asked why I put myself through this but also why would I put my family through this because this was affecting them too. (Tanya)

Although participants received a lot of support from their community, the times when their decision was questioned really caused them to take a pause and consider whether it was worth it. Tanya felt the pressure of justifying her decision and she further shared:

> The more I got questioned by my support system the more I questioned myself. I knew they supported me when I started the program but as things got tougher it almost felt like they were regretting supporting me. At times it felt like they would rather I stop this and get back to my life pre-doctoral program. I felt guilty that I was putting my family through this because I made the decision to do this. I made the decision to put myself through a doctoral program but they were the ones that were also suffering and that wasn't fair to them. (Tanya)

Having their community question, them caused participants to have a sense of guilt and question their decision to become students again. The literature addressed this sense of invalidation and the impact that students faced when they are not receiving support that allows them to be personally and academically successful (Rendon, 1994). FGCS looked for familial and community support and it was tough to navigate their journey when they were questioned by them. Samantha added,

Facing scrutiny for putting my need for education over family and work needs was

challenging. It shifted from having unconditional support to being questioned at all

times. It almost felt that I was having to defend myself more and more as I made

progress towards my doctoral program. I thought I had made the right decision going

back to school but at times it felt like I had messed up and that now my family was

regretting ever supporting me with this journey. (Samantha)

Having to justify this decision with strangers is one thing, but having to justify this decision

with people who are your support system is a challenge that FGDS may have not expected to

face especially when the support was there at the beginning. The external scrutiny from the

community added an emotional burden to an already challenging journey and added an

additional layer of stress and justification for FGDS.

Criticism from Past Doctoral Students. Seven participants encountered doubt and

criticism from friends who had completed their doctoral degrees, creating an additional layer

of challenges and questioning their struggles. Joseph articulated the impact of this criticism,

saying:

Friends with doctorates questioned why I was struggling so much, making me doubt

my journey. I would share with them everything I was experiencing hoping that they

would understand my struggle but instead they made me feel like I was struggling

over nothing. They would tell me that their experience was so smooth and that they

finished so quickly when everyone would tell them it would take 5 plus years so that

they didn't know how I was struggling with a 3-year program. (Joseph)

Comparing their experience to others added a sense of frustration, but what was harder for some participants was not being able to share their experience with individuals they thought would understand them the best. Julia expressed:

> Their experiences made me feel guilty for my struggles and sacrifices. Their stories made me question at times if I was doing something wrong but then I would remember that my story was not the same. I had to remind myself that I was not just a student, I was a full-time mom, a full-time wife, a full-time staff member and a full-time student all at once and they didn't have all of that when they were students. When most of my friends who have their doctorate started school they were single and were able to be full time students and nothing else because their families were able to financially support them through their journey. They had a different life then what I had when I started my program and it was ok that I struggled but that didn't diminish the sense of failure and the frustration I was feeling for struggling as a student and now struggling with every other aspect of my life because I had to sacrifice it all. (Julia)

This scrutiny and criticism added layers of complexity to the emotional and psychological challenges faced by FGDS. This sense of frustration they felt was coming from those who would compose their social capital and having lost that support impacted them both emotionally and professionally as students (Yosso, 2005). The comparison with seemingly smoother experiences of alumni friends intensified feelings of guilt and self-doubt among FGDS and caused another layer of barrier for them with their educational experience.

Impactful Resources for Success

Embarking on a doctoral program in education is a transformative experience, laden with challenges and opportunities for growth. Research Question 4 (RQ4) delved into identifying and understanding impactful resources that contributed to the success of first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) in education. This section expands on the findings, exploring the role of affinity groups for mutual support and the significance of faculty mentorship in shaping the academic journey of FGDS.

Affinity Groups

Connecting First-Generation Doctoral Students. Twelve participants highlighted the importance of unofficial support groups, forming an affinity group that proved instrumental in helping them navigate the toughest points of their doctoral programs. This camaraderie played a pivotal role in helping participants navigate the toughest points of their programs. Melissa's acknowledgment, "Having the support from other first-generation doctoral students truly helped me get through the toughest points of the program," reflected the transformative impact of shared experiences and mutual support within these informal networks. Melissa continued by stating,

> At times it was just nice to talk to others who went through the same experiences I had. It was nice to have a coffee before class or grab some dinner and just vent about the struggles at work that came with balancing work and school because we needed to work in order to afford school. We didn't have a club or a set meeting time to get together but slowly we learned who was a FGCS based on the conversations we had and the experiences we shared and that was how we created our unofficial support group. These were the people that were up at night with me and cried with me when I

was having a really bad day and I knew that at some level they understood what I was feeling and that helped me come to class on the days I felt like I just didn't have the energy to do so. (Melissa)

Joshua echoed this sentiment, emphasizing, "The camaraderie among first-generation students provided motivation and support during the program." It was the sense of community that opened up conversation among the cohort to address concerns and fears that they had and provided the support that they may not have found somewhere else. Joshua continued by sharing:

It was other FGCS that helped me navigate the program and even though most of us had no idea what we were doing or what we were getting ourselves into we still made it all the way through together. We put the pieces together and we figured out the way out as a team and it was not easy at all but it was possible. We didn't have others to turn to, we didn't have our family to ask questions so we turned to each other and we made it through. (Joshua).

It was this sense of community that helped FGCS build social capital among each other to help one another navigate through the doctoral program and understand this new process (Yosso, 2005). Finding other FGDS helped strengthen their decision to pursue a doctoral degree because they knew they weren't alone and that they had their community moving forward towards their degree completion.

Affinity Groups for Current and Future Students. Ten participants recognized the potential of establishing an official affinity group, not only for current students but also as a mentorship opportunity for future students interested in pursuing a doctoral journey. Roger's insight, "An affinity group would benefit not only current students but could become an

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opportunity to mentor and guide future students who are entering this journey just as we did," highlighted the dual role such groups can play in providing support to current FGDS and paving the way for the success of future generations. Roger continued by stating:

> We had to create our own group and had to navigate this process on our own. Any support we found was unofficial or by sheer coincidence but I don't think that is the best way. I want there to be established support for FGCS entering a doctoral program. I felt alone and lost and thankfully I found my people to help me navigate this journey but we can't say that for everyone. We saw people leave the program in our cohort and in cohorts after us and that is rough to watch and I can only imagine the impact an affinity group would have in being able to provide the support that so many of us were missing. (Roger)

Knowing that they were missing something in their experience then translated as passion for helping others. Participants were eager to share that they wanted to see a change and that they were willing to come back to help establish this for future students so they can have what many were missing. Erica further emphasized,

> Having an established community would serve as a valuable resource for so many. So many of us started this program still feeling confused about our decision and how we could be successful but if we had a group that understood our struggles but also provided the support we needed would have elevated this experience so much. So many of us remember how we felt going through the program and if we could we would go back and provide the support we may not have received ourselves. (Erica)

An affinity group would provide FGDS with the opportunity to build both social capital and navigational capital via their experience with others and through their sense of community

with other FGDS (Yosso, 2005). Establishing a formalized community aligned with the broader goal of creating a supportive ecosystem for FGDS throughout their academic endeavors.

Faculty Mentorship

Connecting Beyond Classroom Time. Along with support from their fellow FGDS, seven participants expressed a desire to connect with faculty beyond the traditional classroom setting, recognizing the potential for faculty mentorship to provide unique opportunities in their doctoral programs. Jennifer emphasized, "Connecting with faculty as mentors could provide opportunities I wasn't aware of," showcasing the need for mentorship that extends beyond academic guidance to include professional development and networking opportunities. Jennifer shared:

> I was able to find a mentor among the faculty but it almost felt too late for me. I was in my third year and I reflect back on what it would have been like to have this mentorship relationship since year one of the program. To have someone to speak to on a professional level and to learn from their experiences and even their research would have impacted my experience so much more. I struggled with navigating the world of research and it was my mentor who provided the clarity I needed to be confident in my decision for my search topic. (Jennifer)

Participants understood that their experience as Ed.D. students was different from PhD students from conversations with other students, and they felt that the faculty interaction was so limited to the classroom and they wished it was more. Ryan added:

> Mentorship from faculty could offer new perspectives and experiences for first-generation doctoral students. My interactions were based on who was my professor

that quarter and that was it but I wish there was more because I see the benefit in building those relationships with faculty beyond my program. It was tough to find those opportunities and we felt limited even though we were a part of a top research institution with some amazing names on the staff but yet I never felt comfortable enough to connect with these experts in the field. (Ryan)

Building relationships with faculty via mentorship opportunities also helped FGCS build social capital, which supported the research by Gardner and Holley (2011) that shared FGCS thrive with mentors whether they were first-generation or not because they provided a new level of guidance and support through their doctoral journey.

Informed Decision-Making in Selecting a Dissertation Chair. Having faculty mentors not only offers support through the program but can also provide insight when it comes to certain processes associated with the doctoral program. Twelve participants felt unprepared when selecting their dissertation chair, underscoring the need for guidance from faculty to make informed decisions aligning with their research interests. Julia's reflection, "Connecting with faculty before selecting a dissertation chair would have helped me make a more informed decision," highlighted the critical role faculty play in demystifying the dissertation process and ensuring FGDS make well-informed choices in selecting their chairs. Julia shared:

I knew there were so many experts on campus but I had no idea how to connect with them or how to approach them when it was time to select my dissertation chair. I saw that more of my cohort leaned into the faculty that taught our classes but I knew that I needed someone different with a different set of expertise but I had no idea where to start and I didn't know who would help me figure that out. (Julia)

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Hillary further emphasized, "Understanding the role of the chair and how they align with my research was challenging without faculty guidance." When the experience with faculty is limited to those within their courses, FGDS can find it difficult to seek faculty to serve as their chair when they cannot find anyone that can support them in their research topic. Hillary continued sharing:

> It almost felt like I needed to settle for who I knew because I didn't know who else I could approach. I was scared to go to someone outside of our program because I didn't even know how to explain what I needed because I didn't know what that was. It felt safer to ask someone who taught in our program because I assumed they knew what I had to do and that they would be able to guide me but at the same time I knew I needed something else that was not available among our faculty. It was a coin toss or almost a choosing of the lesser of two evils for me and that isn't how it should be selecting your chair. (Hillary)

Having faculty as a resource is important for FGDS navigating a doctoral program; they can serve as advisors and mentors to students who need the support and reassurance that they made the right decision (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). A faculty member can be a source of knowledge for FGDS when it comes to selecting a committee chair because having access to faculty beyond their classroom opens a new range of research possibilities and opportunities.

Conclusion

The exploration into the motivations, challenges, and resources shaping the journey of first-generation college students (FGCS) pursuing doctoral degrees in education has unraveled a rich tapestry of experiences. Research Question 1 highlighted the dual impetus driving FGCS: the pursuit of sustainable decision-making for future aspirations and the

aspiration to wield influence in their fields. Parental influence, coupled with the recognition that a doctoral degree opens doors for leadership opportunities, emerged as foundational factors shaping their educational trajectories.

Building on these motivations, Research Question 2 delved into the support systems vital for the success of first-generation doctoral students (FGDS). The familial and community support, exemplified by unconditional backing and sacrifices, laid the groundwork for their educational journeys. Equally crucial was the formation of supportive communities within cohorts and mentorship from alumni, demonstrating the transformative power of shared experiences and guidance.

However, the journey of FGDS is not devoid of hurdles, as uncovered by Research Question 3. The struggles in decision-making processes, difficulties in navigating unknown aspects of the doctoral journey, and external pressures like scrutiny and guilt from supportive individuals added layers of complexity. Understanding these barriers is vital for creating targeted support mechanisms to ensure the holistic success of FGDS.

Research Question 4 explored impactful resources that contribute to the success of FGDS. Affinity groups, both unofficial and formalized, emerged as powerful networks providing mutual support and mentorship opportunities. Faculty mentorship, extending beyond traditional academic guidance, played a pivotal role in navigating the challenges of doctoral education.

In essence, the journey of FGDS in obtaining a doctoral degree is a multifaceted one, shaped by motivations, supported by networks, and challenged by barriers. Educational institutions and support systems must recognize and respond to these intricate dynamics to create an inclusive and supportive environment.

As I reflect on these findings, it becomes evident that nurturing first-generation doctoral students requires a comprehensive and tailored approach. Recognizing their motivations, fortifying their support systems, addressing barriers, and leveraging impactful resources are key components in fostering their success. The richness of their experiences calls for continued dialogue, research, and action to ensure that the academic landscape becomes more inclusive, supportive, and responsive to the unique needs of first-generation doctoral students in education. Through these efforts, we can truly pave the way for a more diverse, resilient, and thriving academic community.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of first-generation doctoral students in pursuing and obtaining a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership are both inspirational and eye-opening for future students and institutions of higher education. The pursuit of a doctoral degree is a significant academic and personal achievement, particularly for individuals who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. This study focused specifically on the experiences of first-generation doctoral students in the field of education, aiming to understand the factors that led them to pursue a doctoral degree, the support networks that were impactful for them, the barriers they encountered and overcame, and the resources they found helpful during their doctoral programs.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

RQ1: What factors led first-generation college students to pursue a doctoral degree in education?

RQ2: What are the support networks that were impactful for first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) in (pursuing and) obtaining their doctoral degree in education?

RQ3: What barriers, if any, did first-generation doctoral students identify and overcome while pursuing and obtaining a doctoral degree in education? How did first-generation doctoral students manage any experiences of invalidation/not belonging?

RQ4: According to first-generation doctoral students, what resources would have been helpful while completing their doctoral programs?

The study highlighted the experiences of 15 doctoral students who, although they attended the same R1 research institution and had many similar experiences, still walked a

very unique path toward their doctoral degree pursuit and completion. Their stories strengthen the importance of understanding the journeys of first-generation doctoral students from undergraduate to doctoral programs. The barriers they faced and the support they received all impacted their experience and helped propel them toward successfully completing their doctoral degree.

Significance of Findings

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on first-generation college students and doctoral education. By exploring the experiences of first-generation doctoral students, this study adds nuance and depth when it comes to understanding the challenges and successes encountered by this population. The themes identified in this study resonate with broader discussions on social support, mentorship, academic skills development, and perseverance in doctoral education.

The study underscores the resilience and determination of first-generation doctoral students. Despite facing various challenges, including financial constraints, imposter syndrome, and a lack of familial or cultural understanding of the doctoral journey, participants in this study demonstrated remarkable persistence and resourcefulness in pursuing their academic and professional goals. The identification of impactful support networks, such as mentors, peers, and institutional resources, highlights the importance of building robust support systems for first-generation doctoral students.

Research Question 1 unveils a nuanced exploration of the motivations that drive first-generation college students to pursue doctoral degrees in education. The findings revealed a dual impetus among FGCS: a quest for sustainable decision-making for future aspirations and an aspiration to have a sphere of influence in their respective fields. Parental influence

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and the strategic understanding that a doctoral degree opens doors for leadership

opportunities emerged as significant factors shaping the educational trajectories of these

students. Furthermore, the desire for a voice in decision-making rooms, especially where

decisions impact populations they understand well, underscore the broader goal of affecting

positive change in their respective fields.

These findings offer valuable insights into the complex interplay of personal

aspirations, familial influence, and professional strategic thinking that propel FGCS on their

academic journeys toward doctoral degrees in education. As higher education institutions aim

to foster inclusive and diverse academic environments, understanding the motivations of

FGCS becomes imperative in developing targeted support systems and initiatives that

address their unique needs and aspirations. This research provides a foundation for further

exploration and informs educational policy and practice, contributing to the ongoing

discourse on diversity and equity within academia.

The findings from RQ2 highlight the multifaceted nature of support systems that

contribute to the success of FGDS in their doctoral journey. The unconditional support from

family and friends, coupled with sacrifices made on a familial and community level, created

a foundation upon which FGDS built their academic pursuits. Additionally, the formation of

supportive communities within cohorts and mentorship from alumni exemplify the

collaborative nature of doctoral education. These support systems not only alleviated the

inherent challenges of the doctoral journey but also contributed significantly to the overall

success and well-being of FGDS.

These results emphasize the significance of a robust support system in ensuring the

successful completion of a doctoral degree. The unwavering support from family and friends,

coupled with the formation of supportive communities within cohorts and mentorship from alumni, created a comprehensive network that assisted FGDS in overcoming the challenges associated with doctoral studies. As institutions and programs continue to strive for inclusivity and diversity, understanding and fostering these support systems will be pivotal in nurturing the success of first-generation doctoral students in education. Recognizing and fostering these support structures is imperative for educational institutions and policymakers seeking to enhance the inclusivity and success of first-generation doctoral students.

The findings from RQ3 underscore the multifaceted barriers faced by first-generation doctoral students in education. The challenges in decision-making processes, coupled with struggles in understanding unknown aspects of the doctoral journey, illuminate the need for tailored support mechanisms. Moreover, the scrutiny and guilt imposed by supportive individuals within their communities and among alumni contribute to the complex emotional landscape that FGDS navigates.

These external and internal challenges paint a comprehensive picture of the hurdles faced by first-generation doctoral students, urging educational institutions and support systems to address these issues in a more nuanced and targeted manner. Understanding and addressing the challenges faced by first-generation doctoral students are crucial steps in fostering inclusivity and success in doctoral programs. The findings from Research Question 3 underscore the need for enhanced support systems, clear communication of processes, and sensitivity to the unique challenges faced by FGDS. As institutions strive for diversity and inclusivity, it is imperative to recognize and address these barriers, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, can successfully navigate the doctoral journey in education.

Finally, the findings from RQ4 highlight the pivotal role of impactful resources for first-generation doctoral students in education. Affinity groups, whether unofficial or formalized, emerged as vital support systems, providing mutual support and mentorship opportunities. Finding a group of peers who understand their educational journey at a personal level provides a safe space for addressing concerns and sharing experiences. Providing a space for current and former first-generation doctoral students to come together is an opportunity to learn from each other and be able to expand their support system more organically among others who may have experienced similar hurdles and achievements through their doctoral degrees.

The significance of faculty mentorship goes beyond traditional academic guidance, offering unique opportunities for professional development and aiding in crucial decision-making processes such as selecting a dissertation chair. Recognizing and fostering these impactful resources is essential for educational institutions and support systems aiming to create an environment conducive to the success of first-generation doctoral students. It is through these avenues of support that the unique challenges faced by FGDS can be addressed, contributing to their overall success and well-being in the doctoral journey.

This study revealed the significance of various forms of capital within first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree. Assets such as familial, social and navigational capital are pivotal resources that contribute to the resilience and success of first-generation college students and it is important to recognize and value these forms of capital within educational settings and beyond. Reflecting on Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth, the forms of capital continue to be relevant for first-generation college students pursuing

doctoral degrees as the experiences of entering a new educational journey lead to new learning experiences and areas of growth through the support of others.

Similarly, this study provided insight into the importance of validation and affirmation in educational environments, including for first-generation college students in doctoral programs. The findings of this study underscore the role of validations in fostering a sense of belonging, confidence, and academic success among first-generation college students in doctoral programs facing various forms of adversity. Reflecting on this study's findings utilizing Rendon's (1994) Validation Theory, it helps strengthen the understanding of how validation and invalidation can continue to impact first-generation college students pursuing a doctoral degree and how institutions can better support students through affirming their identities and experiences.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The sample size of interviews and the focus on a single institution may limit the generalizability of the findings. For the purpose of this study, I interviewed 15 first-generation doctoral students who completed their Doctored of Education in Educational Leadership at the University of California, Los Angeles. The number of interviews did pose a limitation for my study as it limited the results and perspectives shared among the group, but based on the findings there were several recurring themes even among such a small percentage of the population. The recurrence of themes among participants suggests the relevance of these findings for other first-generation doctoral students.

As for focusing this study at one institution, while that poses a limitation in the study, it also allows for this study to be replicated by other institutions that would like to learn more

about their first-generation doctoral student population and identify areas of support that are

needed for student success not only at the doctoral level, but from the undergraduate level as

well, to help first-generation students continue their educational journey beyond a bachelor's

degree. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to capture a

broader range of experiences and perspectives.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

The findings of this study have several implications for research, policy, and practice.

From the interviews with 15 first-generation doctoral students, I have learned that there is

still much that needs to be done to support students through the educational pipeline. There

are services available for first-generation college students starting their college education, but

the support becomes limited and, in some instances, non-existent at the doctoral level. The

pathway must be open to a growing population in higher education at all levels of education.

Policy

Policymakers and higher education administrators should advocate for policies that

promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in doctoral programs. This includes increasing

funding opportunities for underrepresented students, implementing culturally responsive

pedagogies, and fostering a supportive and inclusive campus climate. The participants in the

study highlighted that little was known about funding a doctoral program and that most of the

information found was for Ph.D. programs and not Ed.D programs. When the funding

available for students continuing their education is limited to loans, then the policy has

created new barriers for completion and impacted a population that may already be entering a

doctoral program with limited resources. The resources available must be distributed among

both Ph.D. candidates and Ed.D. candidates as both pathways are important for future members of leadership.

Another area that can help support first-generation college students interested in pursuing doctoral programs would be by providing more funding for McNair Scholars programs so that more schools can apply for funding and grants can support a larger number of students. According to the Department of Education (2022), 187 McNair grants were dispersed throughout most states with each program supporting an average of 28 participants. There are 2,828 four-year degree-granting colleges in the United States which means only 6.6% of institutions currently have a McNair Scholars Program with a very limited number of students that the grants can support. If the Department of Education could provide additional funding to provide more grants to more institutions that would mean more first-generation college students can be provided with a resource that can impact their experience with applying and completing a doctoral program, especially with over one-third of current college students identifying as first-generation college students.

Practice

Universities and academic institutions should prioritize the development of support programs tailored to the needs of first-generation doctoral students. These programs should focus on mentorship, academic skills development, financial assistance, and psychological support to help students navigate the challenges of doctoral education successfully. Currently, the McNair Scholars Program, a federally funded program, offers the opportunity to a limited number of first-generation college students to experience the rigor of a doctoral program through exposure to research and the requirements for doctoral programs during students' undergraduate years. A program like this becoming available to more students

would provide greater insight to understand what it means to enter a doctoral program and how to seek resources available for students. If a program like the McNair Scholars Program was available to the vast majority of first-generation college students, more clarity would be available about the pathway to doctoral programs and that would impact the level of understanding when selecting their future program.

Lastly, faculty members and academic advisors play a crucial role in supporting first-generation doctoral students. Training programs should be implemented to equip faculty and staff with the knowledge and skills necessary to mentor and support first-generation students effectively at the doctoral level. Support is given many times at the undergraduate level, but little is offered at the doctoral level when it comes to advising through the programs. Lunceford (2011) addressed that advisors can only support students through their educational pathway if they truly know them, but how is an advisor supposed to support a student through the doctoral program when relationships are limited to the undergraduate experience. It is almost expected that students understand what they need to do to be successful and navigate the academic rigor that is a doctoral program if they choose to continue their education.

Future Research

Future research in this area should explore the experiences of first-generation doctoral students across different disciplines and institutional contexts. This study focused on students in the field of education but exploring the experiences of first-generation college students in rigorous fields like science, math, law, and medicine can provide a different perspective on the educational experience that students face. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term outcomes and career trajectories of first-generation

doctoral students. Exploring not only the experience during doctoral programs, but also career outcomes post completion of doctoral programs, can expand on the research by Blackwell and Pinder (2014) that explored the value of doctoral programs for first-generation college students and found that increasing their career opportunities was a driving force.

Another recommendation for future research is focusing on first-generation college students who defy the traditional mold of the population. A study on first-generation college students who identified as white and come from rural communities would provide a new perspective to the first-generation college student experience that is not yet addressed in a lot of research. Two participants in this study shared that as first-generation college students who identified as white, they felt that at times they were not able to share about their own experiences because they did not match that of the current literature read in class. They felt that their white privilege diluted their first-generation college student experience and that they could not add their own experience to the discussion. Hillary shared during her interview that she almost did not participate in this study because she was not sure what she could add to the story. She shared:

> The hardest thing for me was opening up to share my story. I also felt like I could not share my struggles with others even though I have had a number of struggles economically and being a first-generation college student who came from a place with fewer opportunities. I knew that I have white privilege and felt that I couldn't be the one to open up about being first-gen. I shared my story only with those who knew me well but I never felt I could speak for the population even though my experience was similar because I felt since I didn't look like most first-gen students then my story didn't matter. (Hillary)

Her story highlighted that there are pockets of the population that have not been explored or that have not had the opportunity to express their story because they do not match what many think is the first-generation college student population. It is exploring new pockets within this population that will provide new insight into supporting first generation doctoral students through their educational journey.

Conclusion

The experiences of first-generation doctoral students at UCLA demonstrate that success in doctoral programs is achievable, even for individuals who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. By leveraging social support networks, mentorship, academic skills, and perseverance, first-generation doctoral students can overcome the challenges they face and achieve their academic and professional goals. This study underscores the importance of supporting first-generation doctoral students and providing them with the resources and opportunities they need to succeed. By sharing the experiences of successful first-generation doctoral students, I hope to inspire others to pursue their academic and professional goals and to encourage universities to support the success of first-generation students. First-generation college students work tirelessly to persevere through the educational pipeline, especially when it comes to starting and successfully completing a doctoral program. Although they enter with experiences from their past educational journey, a doctoral program comes with its own set of challenges. Institutionally or within their personal networks, first-generation students must face new barriers and overcome new challenges in their journey of becoming a doctoral graduate. Despite the obstacles they may encounter, first-generation students have the potential to thrive in doctoral education and make meaningful contributions to their fields and communities.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

(Date)

Subject: Research Participation Invitation - Trials and Triumphs of First-Generation Doctoral Students

Dear: (Name)

My name is Cassandra Gonzalez and I am an Ed.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

I am writing to invite you to participate in my dissertation study, Dr. Who: Trials and Triumphs of First-Generation Doctoral Students. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of first-generation college students who obtained their Doctor of Education at a Tier 1 research institution and identify areas of support that would help support future students with similar backgrounds.

For the purpose of this study, I am looking for alumni from the University of California, Los Angeles Educational Leadership Program who are first-generation to college students and graduated from their doctoral program within the last 5 years.

Participation includes submitting a brief 5-minute questionnaire located in this email. A select number of respondents will be asked to participate in an interview that will take approximately an hour and a half and will be contacted to schedule a one-on-one meeting via zoom.

(Embedded google form, responses sent to primary investigator)

If you are interested in participating please answer the following questions:
- Are you a first-generation college student?
- What year did you complete your doctoral degree?
- What institution did you attend for your bachelor's degree?
- What year did you complete your bachelor's degree?
- Were you a TRiO participant? If yes, what program did you participate in?
- Are you interested in participating in the interview process?
- If selected for the interview, what would be the best day and time to connect?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts from your involvement in the study. You will not directly benefit from your participation in the research. Most importantly, the results of the research may assist other institutions who wish to build additional resources for supporting first-generation college students interested in pursuing doctoral degrees and in assisting them in completing programs.

Those selected for the interview will also receive a Starbucks gift card as a thank you for your participation and will be emailed to you following your completed interview.

If you would like additional information about the study, the Study Information Sheet is available here: (Link)

Please submit the questionnaire above to inform me that you wish to participate in the study and I will follow up with you with a Calendly link to schedule your interview at a time that works best for you.

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact: Cassandra Gonzalez at 909-973-4500, cagonzalez@g.ucla.edu or Dr. Robert Teranishi, Faculty Sponsor at robert.teranishi@ucla.edu

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Cassandra Gonzalez
Principal Investigator
University of California, Los Angeles

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT SCREENING QUESTIONS

(Embedded google form, responses sent to primary investigator)

If you are interested in participating please answer the following questions:

- Are you a first-generation college student?

- What year did you complete your doctoral degree?

- What institution did you attend for your bachelor's degree?

- What year did you complete your bachelor's degree?

- Were you a TRiO participant? If yes, what program did you participate in?

- Are you interested in participating in the interview process?

- If selected for the interview, what would be the best day and time to connect?

Interview Protocol

Topic

The experience of First-Generation college students from deciding to attend to graduating from a Tier 1 research institution in California.

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. You have been invited to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your experience in the educational system as a graduate of a doctoral program in a tier 1 research institution who was also a First-Generation college student. My research project as a whole focuses on the triumph and tribulations First-Generation college students faced when they pursued and received their doctor of education degree.

To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to audiotape our conversation today. For your information, I am the only person who will have access to the recordings which will be eventually deleted after they are transcribed. Thank you for agreeing to participate.

I have planned this interview to last no longer than 90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover, you may request to skip a question or stop the interview at any time. Everything discussed in this interview is confidential so feel free to speak openly about your experience.

Interviewee Background

1. In what discipline did you get your undergraduate degree? From what institution?

2. How did you decide to attend _____ for your undergrad degree?

3. Tell me about your family's history with education.

    a. Did anyone else in your family attend college?

    b. How did your family feel about college and continuing education?

4. Undergraduate Experience: When did you know you were going to college? Was there someone or something that was influential in that decision-making process?

5. How conscious are you about being the first in your family to attend college? What does it mean to you?

6. Can you describe if and how being the first in your family to go to college has changed your relationship with your parents or siblings?

7. From where or from whom did you receive the most support?

    a. Family, friends, staff/faculty?

Interview Questions

Warm-Up Questions

1. Tell me about your decision to go to pursue a Doctor of Education degree.

    (Clarifying: Describe your educational journey/background that led you to your doctoral program? What experiences impacted your educational experience?)

    a. What factors contributed to your decision to attend a doctoral program?

    (Clarifying: Are there specific personal and/or professional reasons?)

    b. How did you feel about your decision to apply to a doctoral program?

        i. How did you feel about applying for a doctoral program?

        ii.   How did you feel about getting accepted into the program?

2. When you told your family and friends about your decision, what did they say to you? (Follow-up: What were the reactions from family and friends regarding your decision to attend graduate school?)

3. How did family/friends support your decision?

    a. Tell me about any family/friends who were not supportive—why do you think that might be?

    b. Did you experience any disconnect with your family as you further your education?

    c. What challenges did you face in finding support from people who may not understand how graduate school is a different type of demand?

    d. What kinds of pushback did you receive from family or friends who didn't understand the value of graduate school as compared with full-time work?

Key Questions (Educational Journey)

4. What was communicated to you about the graduate school process and financing during the Admissions process?

    a. Financial Aid

    b. Application Process

    c. Enrollment Process

    d. Dissertation Process/Program Completion

5. Describe what the first few days of grad school were like for you.

    a. At the beginning, who or what were some of the significant people or events?

    b. Did you feel you fit in?

c. How did your feelings about fitting in change over time, if at all?

d. Tell me about some of the important relationships you developed in grad school with faculty or staff?

Key Questions (Support Systems)

6. Did you feel welcomed or a sense of belonging at your institution?

a. What made (or did not make) you feel this way?

7. Some first-generation graduate students describe academia as an ''alien culture.''

a. Is there anything that felt unfamiliar or alien to you as a graduate student?

8. How, if at all, did your graduate program use First-Gen stories and examples to support First-Gen students?

a. How did these stories and examples (or their absence) affect your identity as a First-Gen college and graduate student?

b. Did you have faculty members who identified as a First-Generation student?

c. Were First-Generation stories/experiences represented in the curriculum?

9. How has your experience as a First-Generation graduate student compared to your experience as a First-Generation undergraduate student?

a. Is there any difference between being a First-Generation undergrad and a First-Generation graduate, in terms of support and challenges?

10. If you had to come up with a title or phrase that describes your experience in graduate school, what would it be?

11. How do you think your first-generation perspective added to your classroom conversation or academic work? Where did it trip you up?

12. In your opinion, how could your program have created more space for First-Generation graduate students to have conversations about the First-Generation college experience without the shame or stigma attached to this identity?

    a. What would you add to your program to support First-Generation graduate students?

13. How would you prepare incoming First-Generation graduate students for their experience at your institution?

    a. Ask for specific details or examples. What words would you tell yourself?

Wrap-Up Questions

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your journey through graduate school?

15. Is there anything important you left out?

Probing Questions:

1. Can you give me an example of that?

2. Can you tell me more?

University of California, Los Angeles

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Dr. Who: Trials and Triumphs of First-Generation Doctoral Students

INTRODUCTION

Cassandra Gonzalez, Ed.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is conducting a research study for her dissertation. Dr. Robert Teranishi from the Education Department at UCLA are her faculty sponsors.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you identified as a first-generation college student who attended UCLA and obtained your Doctor of Education within the last five years. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?
This study aims to explore the lived experiences of first-generation college students who obtained their Doctor of Education at a Tier 1 research institution and identify areas of support that would help support future students with similar backgrounds.

HOW LONG WILL THE RESEARCH LAST AND WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?
Participation will take a total of about 90 minutes at a time that is convenient for your schedule.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Engage in a 90-minute recorded Zoom interview with questions pertaining to your educational journey including your undergraduate years. Questions will focus on your experience as a first-generation college student, areas of support, and areas to further explore for institutional support.
- Engage in a follow up recorded Zoom interview of no more than 20 additional minutes only if all appropriate data cannot be captured in the initial interview.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IF I PARTICIPATE?

Some participants may feel uncomfortable if they do not wish to discuss personal information about their experience. Interviewees will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?

- You will not directly benefit from your participation in the research.
- The results of the research may assist other institutions who wish to build additional resources for supporting first-generation college students interested in pursuing doctoral degrees and in assisting them in completing programs.

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

Use of personal information that can identify you:
Information that is obtained in connection with this study that can identify participants will remain confidential. To ensure confidentiality of the participants, a pseudonym will be used.

How information about you will be stored:
All research data and records will be stored electronically on a secure network with password protection.

- You have the right to review the audio recordings made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Your data, including de-identified data may be kept for use in future research.

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?

You will receive a Starbucks gift card for your participation in this research which will be emailed to you following your completed interview. If you start but do not complete the interview, you will not receive full payment for participation.

WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

The research team:
If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact: Cassandra Gonzalez at 909-973-4500, cagonzalez@g.ucla.edu or Dr. Robert Teranishi, Faculty Sponsor at robert.teranishi@ucla.edu

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

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