

ASSETS FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS
BRING TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION SETTING

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Abstract

This qualitative research explored first generation college students (FGCS) from a holistic perspective. The study investigated students' personal assets and provided the field of higher education an alternative to the pervasive deficit-orientation of this undersourced population. Psychological capital (Luthans, et al., 2006), framed within positive psychology theory was the conceptual framework; and suggests psychological well-being can be enhanced through the identification and use of personal strengths. Other research has linked well-being to enhanced performance. Grounded theory methodology and appreciative inquiry were used to conduct three qualitative interviews of female, first generation college students. The data revealed that the first generation college students in this study have the following personal assets: proactivity, goal direction, optimism and reflexivity. There were 13 contributing strengths that supported the asset development: resourcefulness, strategic thinking, self-reliance, practical realism, flexibility, persistence, positivity, hopefulness, self-confidence, insightfulness, compassion, gratitude and balance. The development of the students' assets was influenced by their lived experience and occurred in response to their marginalized soci-cultural positioning. The participants described long and varied use of their assets, through flexible curricula and reflexive assignments. Implications based on the study's findings suggest higher education institutions could provide faculty development and augment student services to recognize first generation college students' assets. Instructors could likewise help students identify and use their assets in order to promote well-being and enhanced performance. Finally, students could become attuned to their unique assets and strive to increase mindful use of their strengths.

Introduction

Statement of Topic and Limitations

First-generation college students are trailblazers by simply taking the steps necessary to enroll in college without a family role model. They have differentiated themselves from their parents, sometimes causing alienation, and face a myriad of challenges. In spite of the often-explored obstacles (Bui, 2002; Hand & Payne, 2008; Orbe, 2004), FGCSs *do* enroll in college and many persist. So, what might these students bring to their higher education settings in the way of personal assets that would explain their enrollment and intent to persist? My interest in looking at this population from a holistic perspective, rather than the more commonly used deficit orientation (Bui, 2002; Hand & Payne, 2008; Orbe, 2004) fills a gap in how the field most often views FGCSs.

There are many forms of capital (assets) that each of us are influenced by and come to possess through life experiences and backgrounds. For example cultural and social capital have been identified as important resources for effective societies, communities and individuals (Bourdieu 1973, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Emery, Fey & Flora, 2006). In addition, educators have acknowledged the cultural and family funds of knowledge their students bring into the classroom provide an opportunity to more fully understand students and the assets they have (Moll, 2001; Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). Further, Martin Seligman (2008) has shifted the field of psychology towards recognizing that individuals possess positive psychological attributes which, when focused upon and practiced can improve psychological health (Seligman, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivicha, & Linkins, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Seligman has offered this positive psychology on a limited basis to the

field of education as well. However, there has been limited research of the application of positive psychology in higher education settings. Thus, positive psychology and funds of knowledge were the frameworks through which this research was conducted.

The purpose of this research was to investigate first-generation college students (FGCS) in a holistic manner. Further, we are interested in how FGCS's navigate their college experience and work to persist to degree completion. Accordingly, the primary research questions are:

1. What are the assets first generation college students possess?
2. How do they utilize these assets towards achieving their higher education aspirations?

We recognized certain limitations that define the research. First, this work in no way disputes the challenged status of first-generation college students, which will be detailed later in this paper. Instead it acknowledges the multi-layered disadvantage FGCS come with to the higher education setting and seeks to know whether these conditions are generative in terms of asset development and use. Second, this work is not an intervention process for the participants, but rather an exploration of their lived experience and how they achieve their higher education goals. Finally, we realize there is no one-size-fits-all understanding of an entire population through the voices of three individuals. However, the insights from this research may suggest further work in the field.

Potential Significance & Application in the Field

One of the most promising aspects of positive psychology and psychological capital is the notion that strengths can be developed to yield greater levels of well-being (Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008). Rigorous scientific research has linked well-being to positive outcomes such as psychological health improvements, enhanced employee performance, expansion of critical

thinking and broadening of student attention (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Luthans, Norman, Avolio, & Avey, 2008; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). The proponents of the field suggest that these benefits can best be reaped when we create a foundation of practice that starts in the field of education (Seligman, 2008). Over the last decade practitioners in the field of higher education have developed curricula in hundreds of primary and secondary education settings in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom (Quinlan, 2010). They recommend youth learning around psychological capital development and encourage students to “burnish their own natural strengths” (Seligman, 2008) in order to create individuals with the ability for generative well-being. Thus, the potential for the next generation to develop positive psychological assets is advanced.

In addition, higher education must also take the lead in training its students to recognize and develop their unique assets. It can further be argued that offering the asset identification and use as tools to under-served student populations may provide FGCS students with additional aides for personal and academic success. Therefore, higher education institutions, educators and student support professionals should be interested in these findings. Ultimately, the goal of this study was to add to the body of work regarding positive psychology theory by looking at a specific (FGCS) higher education student population. The implications of illustrating a relationship between personal well-being and performance would be far-reaching. The correlation could empower FGCS to recognize their inner strengths and in so doing yield higher academic and personal performance. If this phenomenon could be replicated in large numbers of thriving students, then institutional interest will be certain to follow.

Theoretical Framework and Statement of Researcher

The conceptual framework with which I most closely align is that of critical humanism (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). I have a profound belief in individual potential and one's ability to alter personal, community and societal outcomes. Yet after many years in community service I am keenly aware of the many systems of power and oppression that reinforce the status quo. I am comfortable positioned as a change agent; yet have a realistic understanding of cultural and corporate constraints that must be navigated. With regard to my educational philosophy I am constructivist with a facilitator instructional approach. The latter recognizes the value of students as co-creators of knowledge within the learning community. I whole-heartedly subscribe to Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner's (2007) recognition that humanist oriented learning "is a function of motivation and involves choice and responsibility" (p 294). Therefore, my research will explore the topic through these personal lenses and I quite naturally utilize an optimistic orientation.

This research was guided by the personal interest in the topic along with the imperative to offer the field of higher education a new way to view FGCS. Next, in chapter 2 a review of the literature on the population of interest, the specific setting and the theoretical construct of positive psychology shall be presented. Likewise it will point to a gap in the literature and highlight the need for this research to be conducted. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methodology used to craft the study in terms of data collection and analysis. A discussion of the data will be presented in Chapter 4. And finally, Chapter 5 will present implications and conclusions.

Literature Review

Exploring FGCSs through an holistic approach is in contrast to the majority of scholarly attention on this student population. The preponderance of research on FGCS maintains a myopic focus on low graduation rates, rather than a consideration of those FGCS who persist to graduation. Accordingly, this study addresses this void by employing asset-based, appreciative inquiry to deeply understand this underserved college student group (Emery, Fey, & Flora, 2006; Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000).

In order to set forth important background information for this study we created a detailed description of the first generation college student population is presented. Next a review of retention and persistence research describes the dominant theory around students' degree completion decisions and is one indicator of a thriving college experience. Then a review of how open-enrollment environments, which are defined as higher education settings that have non- or low- selective admissions requirements, are unique. Finally, a review of the positive psychology literature will be presented.

First Generation College Students

First generation college students have been a focus of higher education research for over twenty years (London, 1989; Willett, 1989). According to Choy (2001), they represent an increasing percentage of overall college enrollments; and present a challenge to higher education institutions in terms of their poor (36.5%) degree completion rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The research indicates this group has unique demographic and performance differences as compared to students whose parents have obtained a college degree.

Regarding FGCS demographics, they are typically burdened with multiple identities of layered disadvantage (Orbe, 2004). They tend to be minority, English language learners, and often have low-socioeconomic status (Bui, 2002; Orbe, 2004). The latter requires most of these students to work part- or full-time during their education. FGCS also include many refugee students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Further, the group arrives at their higher education settings with less academic preparation in terms of high school course selection, lower high school GPAs and lower scores on college admissions tests (Ishitani, 2003). Also, FGCS tend to more often be parents and/or spouses at higher rates than non-FGCS according to Zwerling & London, as referenced in Bui, (2002). Any one of these circumstances in isolation could predict poor post-secondary performance and retention, but together create a complex web of challenges.

When further layering the lack of family insight into the experience of completing college, these students have lower levels of college engagement and performance. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), FGCS tend to start their college careers later and most often at 2-year institutions. The lack of family understanding and support of the challenges FGCS are facing requires these students to “boundary cross” between their family life and their educational “world” (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). This is an isolating dynamic, which has the potential to be re-enacted in other settings. In fact, Orbe (2004) describes this as creating an “outsider” or marginalized self-concept, which likely contributes to the groups’ engagement issues. Ishitani (2003) describes this population as being less involved with college peers and faculty, which limits their integration and social acclimation. Social integration is a key area of focus within the retention research and will be further explored in the persistence literature presented later in this section.

FGCS research indicates they have less clear education goals (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), enroll in more remedial courses, complete fewer credit hours, and have lower GPAs than their non-FGCS peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2003; Orbe, 2004). This likely contributes to the increased incidence of attrition for FGCS in both 2-year and 4-year degree programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) and explains the group's low self-efficacy beliefs as highlighted by Eaton and Bean's psychological model of college retention (as cited in Braxton, 2000).

Persistence

Academic retention is a critical benchmark for both institutional and student success. The higher education academic persistence research has been dominated by sociologists' explanation and theory. The dominant voices in this realm are Vincent Tinto and Alexander Astin whose research, dating back to the mid 1980's, suggests students who are academically and socially integrated into their college environment, are more likely to persist (Skipper, 2005). Many student support services have been developed as a response to this understanding. Examples of institutional aides related to sociological research include: first year programs, learning communities, mentoring programs and peer and/or faculty tutoring centers (Kane, Beals, Valeau, & Johnson, 2004).

Over the years many studies have verified the involvement approach to student retention illustrating that engagement strategies can improve student retention (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004; Hand & Payne, 2008; Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010; Ishitani, 2006). More recently Tinto has broadened his focus to include classroom dynamics and the opportunity to impact students on a one to one basis. In Tinto's (2003) presentation to European educators, he

describes that high faculty expectations for their students is one critical element in student persistence. Thus, suggesting that belief in students' abilities to meet rigorous academic demands is an integral aspect of student persistence. One can logically deduct that students would likewise be influenced by an expression of faculty faith and in turn develop a sense of self-confidence.

However, challenges have been set forth against the student engagement models of retention, claiming they tend to negate both cultural and psychological capital. Skipper (2005) observes, "isolated efforts to increase retention are unlikely to produce large scale improvements in student persistence rates" (p. 73). Accordingly, several scholars have suggested a need to integrate other approaches for a more holistic approach to student retention. The literature suggests cultural perspectives are critical lenses through which to view the attrition dilemma. Kuh and Love (as cited in Braxton, 2000) describe the importance of the culture-of-origin in determining the relative value of education; this will have influence on a myriad of student educational choices. Likewise, Rendon, Jalomo and Nora (as cited in Braxton, 2000) suggest that Tinto's model reinforces the power structures of the dominant culture and suggest a more integrated approach. They object to the notion that all students (especially those of color) must conform to the establishment's definition of engagement (Braxton, 2000). This becomes a highly salient observation with regard to FGCS, as they are often ethnically and racially diverse (Bui, 2002; Orbe, 2004).

Anthropological researchers have also contributed to the understanding of student success. One socio-cultural theory that seeks to improve educational outcomes is the construct of funds of knowledge (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002; McIntyre, Rosebery & Gonzalez, 2001; Moll, 2001). The concept suggests educators seek a deeper understanding of their students by way of engaging with

their family and cultural origins. Through this insight teachers can activate the familial resources to better support students' academic achievements (Kiyama, 2011).

In order to develop a holistic understanding of FGCS, we must also consider the influence of personal psychological attributes. Though there is little doubt that cultural and sociological factors are central to understanding the retention dilemma, the lack of attention on psychological dynamics is critical. Comprehensive psychology based retention models have had limited research. Eaton and Bean (1995) describe several single psychological attribute research studies that tested the influence of motivation, self-efficacy or life task constructs. This work has contributed to the understanding of the relevance of psychological factors concerning student behavior. Eaton and Bean state, "students are psychological beings and that collective issues of sociology play a secondary role" (as cited in Braxton, 2000, p. 58). Consequently they suggest that attitude-behavior theory, coping behavioral theory, self-efficacy theory and attribution theory contribute to students' choice to persist. They call for further investigation into the psychology-based explanations of student persistence, both in terms of a variety of higher education settings and in the testing of other influential factors.

Positive Psychology

Since the new Millennium, the field of psychology has embraced an alternative focus towards understanding how people thrive, known as positive psychology. Much of 20th Century research on human psychology focused on pathological understanding in response to the societal challenge of mental illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychologist proponents suggest:

Psychology should be able to help document what kinds of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement, and how people's lives can be most worth living. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5)

The challenge for the field has been to develop sound theory along with empirical evidence regarding this positive context in order to dispute claims that it is simply “feel good” frivolity.

Positive psychology is a balanced, prevention-oriented model (Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008). Scholars believe their research is “intended to supplement, not remotely to replace, what is known about human suffering, weakness, and disorder” (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, p. 405) in order to offer the other end of the spectrum in the understanding of human psychology. Further, this more complete picture suggests that if one can cultivate well-being (whether in terms of key traits or a generalized outlook), then one’s psyche is buffered against stress and other life challenges, thus creating a psychological wellness archetype (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This shift in psychological theory has profound implications when applied to other fields, and particularly education.

During the last decade a variety of positive psychology based models have been employed by professionals in community development, human resource management and in public and private education (Emery, Fey, & Flora, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008; Tough, 2011). Emery and her colleagues have created an effective approach to community development using asset mapping and through utilization of appreciative inquiry methods in gathering data about what is operating well within a community. Communities are able to expand (or invest) in these attributes; and in so doing create community capital (Emery, Fey, & Flora, 2006).

Positive psychology has made inroads in business and human resource management as well. Fred Luthans, a University of Nebraska management professor, has spent much of the last decade creating and testing a model for employee performance that tracks key psychological elements in order to predict employee success (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004; Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006; Luthans, Norman, Avolio, & Avey, 2008; Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008; Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008). They have identified four psychological components: self-efficacy, resilience, hope and optimism, which establish a psychological capital index (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006). Their model holds two critical assumptions. First, that these are “state-like (ie. open to development)” characteristic (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006, p. 388). Thus one can improve their PsyCap index. Secondly, that “PsyCap is a core construct that predicts performance and satisfaction better than any of the individual strengths that make it up” (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman & Combs, 2006, p.388). In other words, the composite review is more instructive than studying a single aspect or attribute.

Positive psychology has been embraced by dozens of elementary and secondary schools across the globe (Tough, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivicha, & Linkins, 2009). Seligman and his colleagues have introduced the concept in top tier private schools, alternative inner city schools and in private secondary and elementary settings throughout the United States and abroad. Seligman described an important goal in the education of children must include “identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these strengths” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). Their approach is to offer students and their school communities not only the cultivation of moral character attributes, but to attune students to their

core strengths and discover how these strengths play out in helping them thrive in today's complex world (Tough, 2011).

The development of positive psychology and its utilization in a variety of applications suggests there might be a worthwhile application for its use in understanding FGCSs. There is a preponderance of FGCS research describing the population's deficits and a corresponding lack of attention on the exploration of this group's unique assets. Finally, there is a gap in the literature in terms of applying positive psychology in open enrollment higher education settings.

Consequently, the following study will employ positive psychology theory to investigate assets FGCS possess and utilize. Of course, the setting in which the participants are persisting is also a relevant body of research.

Non-selective Higher Education Settings

In order to fully appreciate open enrollment higher education settings it is important to understand not only the demographic characteristics of these institutions, but the market and economic pressures they are facing. There have never been more students educated within the US higher education system; community colleges have experienced a disproportionate increase in those enrollments (Fry, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Along with the dramatic rise in enrollment, there has been a marked increase in the participation of underserved populations at all levels of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Fry, 2009), which includes first generation college students. Porchea, Allen, Robbins & Phelps (2010) further describe how community colleges' open enrollment policies result in a less academically prepared student body. Finally, first to second year attrition rates are higher (46%) at community colleges as compared to 4-year institutions (27%) (Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010).

An additional factor in the open enrollment college environment is the changed economic environment in which they must operate. First, the rapid development of private, for-profit technical and degree granting higher education institutions are creating a more competitive market. According to NCES (2003) from 2000-2009 this segment of the market has experienced a 411% increase in the number of for-profit higher education institutions. These enterprises offer admissions to underserved populations at similar rates as public (community college and non-selective university) institutions. Thus FGCS represent a significant portion of the student body in these non-selective higher education environments. Secondly, the great recession has created extraordinary challenging conditions causing increasing tuitions with decreasing institutional capacity in both student services and course offerings. This suggests looking to institutions as the sole source of support for student persistence is unrealistic given the financial pressures. This researcher believes an important aspect of FGCS success lies in the psychological assets they possess. These students are already trailblazers as illustrated by breaking from family history to enroll in higher education. The question is how does their pioneering spirit and personal assets relate to their persistence in higher education settings.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to consider the relationship between FGCS's assets and their intent to persist in open enrollment higher education settings. Accordingly the primary research questions shall be:

1. What are the assets that first-generation college students bring with them to the college experience?
2. How do they utilize these assets towards achieving their higher education aspirations?

Methods

Credibility & Overall Approach

The goal of this research was to explore the assets first generation college students' possessed and utilized as they began their higher education experience. Data collection and analysis were designed to give primary consideration to the tenants of privacy, informed consent and an atmosphere of trust in order to create an overt "ethic of care" and to develop compelling findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This qualitative project utilized a variety of tactics to accomplish these aims.

The study employed several methods to ensure research trustworthiness. The over arching consideration for validity was that the study be rigorous and credible. I triangulated the data by gathering it from several different sources (archival institutional data, qualitative interviews, institutional survey results and the researcher's reflective journal entries). Pulling together a variety of sources allowed for a rich mix of data and developed reliability.

The overall approach of this qualitative study was informed by grounded theory methodological mechanisms developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which looks to examine a concept or situation through the eyes of the subjects. The process allows the investigator to produce understanding that is grounded (revealed) in the data (Scott, 2009). Though this may seem obvious there is a subtle nuance that differentiates the method. I practiced constant comparison during data collection that suggested modification in the direction of data collection based on feedback from the subjects. Participants are integral in the emergence of important themes as they co-created the findings with me.

This framework was chosen for both the personal (researcher's) theoretical fit and the relevance to the topic. First, grounded theory approach so thoroughly engaged the subjects in the

process, that it was a natural selection for an educator influenced by constructivist learning theory. Second, this approach recognized the inherent wisdom of the participant. It reinforced individual efficacy and empowered the participants. The latter closely aligns with my beliefs regarding human potential and the imperative of action as a critical humanist.

Finally, grounded theory is an exacting methodological choice given the construct of positive psychology and funds of knowledge. These well-researched constructs have been applied in the fields of psychology, business and human resource management and K-12 education. Recognizing we are applying these effective concepts into the higher education arena, there must be constant member checking with participants to verify its appropriateness. Thus grounded theory was the method of choice for this research.

Setting

This research was conducted on the campus of Utah State College (USC, a pseudonym). Since it's mid 20th Century founding the institution has evolved to meet the changing needs of the communities in which it serves. Initially the school was strictly a vocational training school. Later it became a Technical College and by 1980's, as degree offerings expanded, it became a community college (2010-2011 Fact Book, 2011). In the first decade of the 21st Century, the school was also offering bachelor and master level programs. USC continues to evolve in meeting community needs.

Utah State College is a unique higher education setting providing a full compliment of post-secondary programs and maintains a non-selective admissions policy. According to the 2010-2011 Fact Book (2011), FGCS make up nearly 40% of the USC student population. The College's enrollment is expanding, even while other Utah higher education institutions are

experiencing contraction (Braithwaite, 2011). In 2011 USC's 33,395 students represent nearly 20 percent of all Utah System of Higher Education headcount and now has the largest higher education enrollment in Utah (Braithwaite, 2011). As a result of USC's continual growth and open enrollment philosophy, the College struggles to graduate its students. Maffly (2010) noted the college "is dead last among NCAA's 335 Division 1 schools" (p. 1) in terms of its 31% overall graduation rate. These poor retention rates have flagged the school on a national watch list as a "drop-out factory" (Maffly, 2010, p. 1).

The College has been taking action on multiple fronts to address their retention challenge. First, USC took a dramatic step when recently announcing new admissions benchmarks, which are designed to help the College meet its conflicting objectives of open access and baccalaureate rigor (Maffly, 2011). In effect the new standards will identify students who are not yet ready for baccalaureate coursework; thereby creating a stepped enrollment program. Students below certain academic standards will be required to complete 24 credit hours of introductory level courses and maintain a 2.0 GPA in order to advance to upper-division standing (Maffly, 2011). Secondly, the faculty and staff in the department of Student Success Studies provide student support by "meeting students where they are and help them move to higher levels of academic confidence" (USC department of college success studies, 2011). They accomplish this through course offerings, faculty and peer mentoring, academic and career counseling, First Year Experience program and other remedial assistance. The structured enrollment measures are likely to increase the demand on these services by indentifying more students in need and requiring participation in certain course offerings provided by this department.

Participants

The participants in this study were USC students that are first-generation, first-time college enrollees. These terms are defined as follows:

- First-generation: neither parent has completed college, though parent(s) may have some college course work, may have obtained a high school degree and/or may not have completed high school
- First-time enrollees: have never attended college previously, and are currently enrolled at USC

The three student participants were all traditional aged (enrolled into college the fall following their high school graduation), female, and Caucasian. They each graduated from public high schools in the communities in which they lived. Based on the pre-interview survey they all met the definition of first-generation, first-time college students according to their family backgrounds and identified themselves as having had low socio-economic status. The following descriptions shall provide individual background on each participant.

Liz. Liz is the eldest of several siblings and grew up in an intact (married) family. Neither of her parents attended college; and her father did not complete high school. Liz was home schooled until the 4th grade. She described her transition to public school as socially awkward. However, she viewed that adjustment experience as good preparation for her family's relocation out of state. While in southern California she participated in an International Baccalaureate program, which she described as challenging. When she returned to Utah in high school she was frustrated with the lack of creative thinking. In order to stay engaged she enrolled in high school honors and AP coursework. She had the highest high school GPA (3.85) and composite ACT score (28) within the participant group. She attends her college with an

academic scholarship and was admitted to the honors program. Liz lives with several other honors students in campus housing. She expressed disappointment with her first semester performance (GPA 2.97), but indicated she had learned how to prioritize her schoolwork as a result.

Lilly. Lilly is the youngest of two daughters and lived with both parents and several pets growing up. She described herself as an introvert. She is emotionally closest to her mother; and views she and her sister as very dissimilar based on her sister's extrovert status. Her mother is currently enrolled in a community college; while her father never had any higher education experience. Their family had a series of moves in her elementary and middle school years. As will be discussed in the data analysis section, these moves proved to be socially and emotionally challenging for her. Although she remained in a single high school, her social life was limited. In high school she did not have a job and remained focused on academics which yielded a 3.58 GPA with many concurrently enrolled and AP classes. Her ACT entrance composite test score was 25. At the time of the interview, Lilly had a part time job, was a commuter college student and had the highest first semester college GPA (3.29) within the participant group.

Gillian. Gillian has one younger brother and grew up in northern Arizona living with her father. Her mother did not live locally. She mentioned several extended family members and friends (grandmother, uncle, father's girlfriend) having been involved in her life. She was in the gifted and talented program through her elementary and middle school years. In high school she did not qualify for the gifted program due to the larger pool of high school students. However, she participated in concurrent enrollment classes in high school. She had the lowest high school GPA (3.15) and composite ACT score (18) within in the participant group. During her senior year she moved out of her family home and into the home of family friends. Her

college plans changed several times for a variety of reasons, but she ultimately chose to move to Utah to attend USC. Gillian is a commuter student, living with an uncle. She had her first part-time job during her first semester of college while she was enrolled in six credit hours. Her first semester college GPA was 3.2.

I recognized that these students did not resemble the normal profile of FGCS as detailed earlier in this paper. All participants were strong secondary school performers, indicated by their average high school GPA of 3.53. They each responded quickly to the invitation to be involved in the qualitative interviews; thus showing a level of engagement that is not typical for FGCS (Kane, Beals, Valeau, & Johnson, 2004; Skipper, 2005). Their high school academic performance, non-minority status, English as primary language, traditionally timed college admissions and non-married/parent demographics differ from the observations several researchers have made about this population (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Kane, Beals, Valeau, & Johnson, 2004; Orbe, 2004; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004;). This may, in fact, be a bias in the sample.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

This study collected relevant data through a variety of approaches in order to deeply understand the relationship between first-generation college students' personal assets and their intent to persist in their college aspirations. Following IRB approval at both Westminster College (this researcher's institution) and an additional approval as researcher on a USC IRB, I collaborated with an Associate Professor at USC's department of Student Success Studies to create the qualitative portion of the research.

The primary instrument for the qualitative data collection was one-on-one interviews with student participants in which the following protocols were executed. During my first contact with the research participants I described the informed consent philosophy, the purpose of the study, what the student could expect in terms of the process and reconfirmed their willingness to participate as well as explain that they may withdraw from the project at anytime. I also explained how the information would be coded with numeric identification, and without any reference to their name or other identifiable characteristics. I further assured each student that when the report is written pseudonyms will be used. Finally, I identified myself as an instrument of the research and provided enough of a personal introduction to create a sense of mutual vulnerability and trust.

Three qualitative interviews were conducted in a safe, private, on-campus conference room. This location insured privacy and convenience for the participants. The sessions were audio recorded (following the subject's approval to do so) on two devices to minimize technical difficulties and allow for interactive, intense listening and observation on my part as researcher. Prior to the scheduled appointment participants were sent a brief survey to confirm their FGCS status and to introduce the grand-tour question in order for them to have an opportunity to thoughtfully prepare.

The interviews were begun with the following grand-tour inquiry: Please describe the experiences that have brought you to USC as a student; and what you hope to get out of your time here. This query was designed to be open ended in order to provide freedom to the interviewees to discuss issues meaningful to them. Likewise terminology relating to assets or college retention was limited in order to reduce risks of influencing the subject. The analysis began immediately (during data collection) using inductive logic to guide the direction of the interviews (Rossman &

Rallis, 2003). The goal was to glean descriptive, episodic information regarding their lived experience as it relates to the identification and use of their personal assets.

During the sessions I noted observations about body language and other non-verbal and environmental details. I paid special attention to ideas, words or issues that the participants reiterated during the interview and probed as necessary to verify my understanding of their intended meaning. This constant, real-time comparison is at the heart of the grounded theory approach and required my attuned sensitivity in order to capture possible themes (coding). At the conclusion of the interview participants were asked what the interview process was like for them. Finally, I summarized our conversation and inquired with the participant whether I got it right. This member-checking suggested possible categories that had emerged for me during the interview and allowed me to verify whether my initial conclusions were valid.

Data analysis and protocol revisions began almost immediately. Following the interview I spent reflective time to memo thoughts and impressions of the session in my research journal. This helped reveal the messages that were “concealed” within the data (Dick, 2005). The assumption was that I was an instrument of the research and am charged with uncovering the hidden jewel that is the conceptual understanding of the participant’s lived experience. In order to accomplish this, reflective thinking and writing were key elements of the data collection process. Later I transcribed each interview from the audio recordings. I endeavored to capture the spoken word exactly as expressed, because I realized that language can also be a pure source of the data. Once the transcripts were created I read them several times and began the coding process through note making. An important aspect of grounded theory is to work with one set of data until you believe it has been exhausted.

Individual student profiles were developed using a recursive method. A working casebook for each student was created which included archival institutional data on high school grade point average (GPA), admissions test scores, and fall 2011 semester GPAs. Later the interview transcripts, the researcher's field notes and journal entries regarding the participant were added to complete each student profile in order to create an in-depth, individual casebook.

In accordance with grounded theory principals, per individual analysis was thoroughly conducted prior to the cross-case review. The individual cases were read and re-read a myriad of times while noting the participant's strengths and creating memos for follow-up during the cross-case examination. "This process undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, continuously feeding back into the process of category coding" (Dye, 2000, para. 2) and resulted in a rich understanding of each participant. Through reflective analysis and repeatedly reviewing the data, core themes emerged.

A cross-case analysis of the three interviews was completed in order to consider the relationship of individual assets between participants. I developed a spreadsheet tracking the frequency of over forty assets (codes) observed in the individuals' profiles. Next I returned to the individual profiles to assess whether there were certain codes that had more emphasis or importance to a particular participant, which may not have been reflected by frequency alone. I also created a moveable mind-map using note cards to experiment with different groupings of the data. Certain codes began to look redundant and suggested they could be combined into categories. I again returned to the profiles to see if individual voices would verify or negate some of the initial categories; and categories were adjusted accordingly. Once feasible categories were identified the data was discussed over several hours of structured conversation with a critical colleague with whom also has a research interest in this population. Additionally I benefited

from my adult education cohort and tapped their pooled knowledge during the data analysis. This process, along with the preponderance of data, revealed the following findings.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was guided by an overarching interest in what assets these first generation college students brought with them to the higher education setting; as well as how they utilized these capabilities towards their intention to persist. These students possessed a variety of assets, some of which could be described as innate, but many of which evolved over time in response to their lived experiences. Participants often reflected on stories that illustrated their assets had been utilized long before their college enrollment and in a variety of settings. Their unique backgrounds and environmental influences contributed to the students' asset development and use.

The participants' lived experience was pivotal in the development and use of their assets. They described assets that they regularly tapped into in order to find personal and academic success. This practice is similar to the theory that education thought leaders describe as funds of knowledge (González & Moll, 2002). This premise recommends educators excavate the social, cultural and psychological capital that their students bring into the classroom in order to highlight the unique gifts students in marginalized positions bring to the educational setting. The teacher validation in turn becomes an additional asset for the student. This research illustrated the participants relied on their assets and utilized them to their benefit.

As I analyzed the interview data, four assets were prevalent with all participants. They included: Proactivity, Goal-directed, Optimism and Reflexivity. As the participants told their stories it became evident that their strengths were integral in their path toward higher education,

as well as their intention to persist. The themes each have several related sub-themes that indicate both depth and breadth of the attribute. The identification of these patterns was noted both in terms of the frequency of expression as well as in the intensity of articulation. A presentation of each asset theme, along with related sub-themes, shall be presented in the following section.

Findings

Proactivity. Participants indicated a variety of ways in which they initiated action in order to make their college experience, as well as other aspects of their life, viable. Perhaps this strength may appear an obvious requirement, as they are first in their family to pursue a college education. However, Tinto's (2003) work explicitly connects student effort, which he terms time-on-task, as being predictive of learning and student persistence. Angela Duckworth (as cited in Tough, 2011) described the development of her "Grit Scale" to measure the all-important degree to which students exhibit action and persistence. These participants were experienced in taking necessary first steps. They did so in a variety of settings and have indicated a long-term tendency of taking action. The following assets were linked to participants' action orientation: resourcefulness, strategic thinking and self-reliance.

Resourcefulness. Students frequently described scenarios that indicated a strong proclivity towards resourceful action in meeting life's challenges, as well as their educational aspirations. As an example, Liz had a history of seeking resources when presented with educational uncertainty and unfamiliar challenges. Following a home-school elementary education, she went to a public middle school. She was socially awkward, due to her rather isolating home-school experience, and very confused by the block schedule system used at the new school. Although her parents were unable to provide guidance (because they had not

attended middle school), she found the answers she needed from an uncle who was willing to help her navigate the unfamiliar experience. More recently Liz described how ill at ease she was with the college application process; and how she creatively sought the help necessary to successfully apply to the colleges of her choice:

I had no idea what I was getting into or how to go about it. But I had some friends help me out. So I had two really good friends, one goes to Westminster and one goes to USU in Logan. They helped me out with the process. I talked to their parents because they went to college; I figured out what it was like for them.

(Interview, February 9, 2012)

Participants repeatedly accessed expertise from critical adults to help them navigate their personal and academic dilemmas. Because her parents were not familiar with the process, she knew she had to reach out strategically to another family member or friends' parents. Students whose parents attended college might assume they have the resources they need. Because of her position, Liz reached out for specific help strengthening skills of resourcefulness. Thus, this FGCS engaged the necessary resources that enabled her to take the required steps to pursue her higher education aspirations.

Strategic thinking. Another element of the participants' action-orientation was their ability to strategically research and evaluate information. The students detailed several examples of thoughtful strategizing relating to the management of their college experience towards their higher education goals. Participants revealed that they not only obtained information or help from others when necessary, but they thought carefully about the facts in order to make effective decisions.

Lilly's calculated thinking was displayed a number of times during our conversation. She strategically evaluated which college to select among those that had accepted her. In the end Lilly concluded that "USC just had more options and I could go farther here than at SLCC and have to transfer a bunch" (Interview, February 9, 2012). Lilly determined she needed a stable college setting with a variety of degree and major options. Thus she thoughtfully considered her needs, the facts about the different institutions and made an optimal choice for herself.

Liz detailed her strategy for summer school, "I'm planning on taking one summer class that's calculus, so I can focus on it. And even if it's not a good grade I'll have two semesters of grades to hold up my GPA" (Interview, February 9, 2012). Her strategy was designed to improve, or at least maintain, her GPA and achieve a balanced semester workload. Liz also replied to an inquiry about what she had learned in her first semester and noted, "Probably do less than you think you can handle. Because it's better to get the A's and take longer to finish" (Interview, February 9, 2012).

Lilly also mentioned the importance of assessing and managing workloads. She noted in high school that her only non-concurrent or non-AP class appropriately received less of her attention because of its less rigorous requirements. Now in college she is making similar prioritizing choices as indicated when she stated:

Like some classes you have to put more time in and some you can slack off because you need to put more time into a certain one. That's important to know which homework you need to get done first, because there's other homework you might be able to miss and not be disadvantaged. (Interview, February 9, 2012)

She is astute in evaluating how to spend her time and balance course assignments, along with a part-time job. Gillian also exhibited strategic approaches related to her coursework management.

She described how she utilized the on-line math lab and adapted the technology to her advantage. In this way she was able to understand the content even if her instructor was not available for help; and ensure she was making necessary progress. Being able to assess the myriad of demands on one's time is an important life skill and will position these students for personal and academic success.

These students must be more strategic than their non-first generation counter parts because they do not have family background to guide them as college students. Each subject referenced using on-line sources, such as *ratemyprofessor.com*, input from counselors or peers as a means to make wise college course selections. Each student applied the information they obtained differently based on their values and needs. The participants had a track record of doing so that extended back to high school and middle school. Thus strategic data gathering and thinking is a well-entrenched asset that continued to benefit them as they transitioned into higher education.

Self-reliance. The individual initiative inherent in taking action is synonymous with self-reliance and independence. Each participant exhibited self-reliance as an element of her personal capital. Liz spoke of her independence from peers when reflecting on being the only one of her high school friends that maintained an interest in the college she is now attending: "I'm kinda like, OK you can do what you want but thank you for helping me discover this university that was here. I'm in love with it, so I'm going to do it" (Interview, February 9, 2012). She was able to self differentiate from her peers and create her own path. Independence is an important life and academic strength. A significant objective of one's college experience is to learn how to make personal choices that allow you to meet academic requirements. Often peers can detract students from taking optimal scholastic action; however, having a sense of personal independence

empowers students to deflect disadvantageous peer pressure and take action that will serve them well.

Gillian repeatedly expressed the personal importance of self-reliance. She noticed that her ability to act independently had flourished since leaving home. Gillian recognized this when she described, “So when I applied for school I did it on my own and it was something I could take credit for” (Interview, February 17, 2012). Her ability to appreciate her self-reliance may be responsible for her repeated use of this strength. Likewise she foresees relying on her independent action to achieve some of her long-term goals. Gillian detailed her thinking about this when she stated, “I don’t want to like live off the state and depend on someone else. I want to be able to depend on myself” (Interview, February 17, 2012). This comment illustrates her sense of self-reliance and how she envisions utilizing this strength in the future. The students’ independent action and ability to rely on one’s self is a critical element in their action orientation.

These FGCS have taken a myriad of necessary steps that explain the anomaly of being first-in-family to attend college. They have exhibited “boundary spanning behaviors” that require them to move between different groups that don’t usually mix (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). However, these participants repeatedly figure out what needs to occur for them to prevail in their academic settings. In fact these three students would seem to contradict Collier and Morgan’s (2008) findings that suggest FGCS are often unable to even determine what is required due to their lack in family cultural capital. These participants possess a high internal locus of control, according to Bean and Eaton’s model of student retention (as cited in Skipper, 2005), as indicated by their proclivity to take action. Their pro-active orientation explains how they got to this higher education setting as well as the steps they are taking to persist.

Goal-directed. The participants were all what I term a mission-driven group, based on the details they revealed in the qualitative Interviews. These students developed both short term and long-range goals for themselves. They had ambitions that ranged from academic intentions to purpose filled lives. For example Gillian boldly stated, “I’ve always been confident that I’d always go to college. Ya, I knew in middle school I wanted to go to college” (Interview, February 17, 2012). While Lilly proclaimed her life ambition in a more general way, “I want to make a decent living but I want a job that I enjoy doing. So that when I’m not working I can have those good people in my life and have strong relationships” (Interview, February 9, 2012). This focus on the future coupled with their proactivity helped explain how they have become first generation college students. These participants set goals for themselves in order to achieve their personal and higher education aspirations. Their goal direction was consistent with Orbe’s (2004) FGCS subjects who referenced that their first generation status served as a motivator towards success and persistence to degree completion. He indicated that the FGCS have certain challenges that require them to do more, such as setting personal goals, than their non-FGCS counterparts. The participants utilize the following strengths in pursuit of their goal orientation: practical realism, flexibility and persistence.

Practical realism. In order to achieve a benchmark one must have a practical understanding of the challenge. These students can identify a variety of challenges both in terms of life aims and those related to their higher education objectives. All students in the study mentioned the link between the need for higher education and better job opportunities. As an example, Gillian specifically commented, “You have to have a lot of schooling to get a decent job” (Interview, February 17, 2012). These students indicate they have a realistic understanding

of the 21st century job market. They have assessed the need for higher education and are now pursuing that goal to better position themselves in the post global economic crisis era.

After deciding to pursue higher education, Lilly was sensitive to the financial burden her education placed upon her family. Because of this, she pragmatically selected a school within driving distance in order to save housing and living expenses. Likewise she made a sensible selection of her major when acknowledging her interest in psychology, but recognizing her inability to manage the burnout associated with clinical work. Thus she is pursuing a career in organizational psychology. Lilly regularly referenced her personal challenges and her realistic attunement will be pivotal in achieving her goals around health, finances and career selection. She displayed a well-developed sense of practical realism, which non-FGCS and students from higher socio-economic backgrounds may not even consider in their decision making. Practical realism has served these students well in academic, social and career goal setting and is an asset they utilize with regularity in their higher education pursuits.

Flexibility. Another critical attribute in goal achievement is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Adjusting to transitions is something each participant has had as part of their history following family relocations, among other events. This asset was the most consistently referenced strength the group had in common.

Liz endured frequent elementary, middle and high school changes both in and out of state. She described feeling out of sorts when arriving to public school, “so I cried on the first day of middle school” (Liz, Interview, February 9, 2012). But after getting help from a relative Liz resolved that tearful day noting, “but then I started to love it (middle school)” (Interview, February 9, 2012). Later when changing high schools she reworked the situation to her benefit recalling, “The school back here was really strict and I wanted to be creative, but there were no

outlets to be creative. So I got in the honors classes because that was better” (Liz, February 9, 2012). In this way Liz modified her environment and made choices that allowed her to successfully and more happily complete high school. Her adaptability is a certain asset that allows her to achieve her academic goals.

Likewise Lilly described how she became accustomed to responding to unexpected social disappointments. She changed schools frequently during her primary years, which required the shy natured child to make new friends. Later, though she remained in the same school system, she repeatedly experienced friends moving away. This required her to change her outlook and so she became satisfied with keeping her own company and having a less active social life. Lilly currently describes herself as “I’m kind of a hermit and don’t get out very much” (Interview, February 9, 2012). She was forced to become accustomed to more solitude than she might have hoped, but rationalized that she could make the best of it by recognizing how it fits with her introverted temperament. Thus her flexible perspective defines her resilience in this interpersonal challenge.

Gillian brings the notion of flexibility back to her higher education goals. She noted her adaptability in terms of being open to several different paths in going to college. Originally she anticipated living with a brother and attending a large state university in Tucson. However, when that did not work out she was prepared to live with family friends and attend an Arizona community college. But finally when the option of moving to live with her uncle and attend USC was presented, she did what was necessary to capitalize on this opportunity. Being flexible allowed her to live her long held dream of attending college. Nimble adapting to change is an important asset employed by each of these goal oriented first generation college students.

Persistence. Another essential strength for goal accomplishment is persistence. Each member of the sample group related stories that implied, if not overtly stated, their unrelenting efforts in both personal and academic stories. Gillian was especially articulate on this topic when she described a frustrating experience regarding obtaining an official identification (ID) card. This was necessary because she did not have a driver's license and it is required for both school and employment documentation. She had to overcome a myriad of obstacles such as cross state bureaucracy, engaging several family members to search for birth certificate copies, resistance from her father and the difficulty of repeated visits to the department of motor vehicles (issuing agency). Ultimately her efforts were successful and not only did she obtain the ID card, but with it she appealed to her university in order to be granted residency. This status significantly reduced her tuition costs and increased her ability to persist towards her degree objectives. This sort of relentless action makes Gillian bound for success.

Lilly described a long and dedicated attempt to manage issues of depression when she shared, "I think I spent a lot of my time in high school trying to change my point of view to enjoy what I'm doing" (Interview, February 9, 2012). She continues to take action towards the maintenance of her psychological health while at college. Lilly described a sociology class discussion in which she proclaimed her personal determination in this regard:

We were talking about negative people are not the best to have around you; and I said I don't really have people like that in my life because I try not to have people that are draining around me. Because I do work pretty hard to stay happy sometimes. So I try to have positive people around me and not have negative ones. (Interview, February 9, 2012)

This student has displayed remarkable grit and taken the required steps to insure she is healthy. Her resolute action on managing depression can likewise be seen in her academic resolve. She described that academics have been her primary focus both during high school and now in college. Her honor roll high school status and excellent first semester college performance of a 3.29 GPA (institutional archival records) indicate her efforts are meeting with success.

Finally, Liz related a “slip up” in her first semester of college where she assumed her success in high school math had prepared her well for the college trigonometry class in which she was enrolled. By mid semester Liz realized she was failing the course. She recognized she needed to make a variety of changes in her study methods such as paying better attention in class, taking more careful notes and not going out the night before tests. She barely passed the course, but she has appealed the grade and is retaking the class with much better success. She was proud of her 90% average and expected she would pass the course with improved results. Liz intends to “frame” the passing grade and notes that it was “a learning experience. I’m putting homework as a priority. It was like a learning experience that I had to go through” (Interview, February 9, 2012). She was able to appreciate the experience, though painful, and predicted this would benefit her in the long run by having to develop college level study habits and learning how to prioritize her academics. Each student demonstrated a strong penchant to persist until they accomplish whatever their targeted outcome might be. Their goal achievements are a testimony to their persistence and determination.

Gillian, Lilly and Liz have a focus on their future that is augmented with clearly articulated objectives. Somers et al. (2004) looked at an enormous data set to reveal that FGCS that articulate bachelor or advanced degree aspirations were more likely than their non-FGCS counterparts to accomplish that aim. This suggests FGC students who are encouraged to discuss

their goal direction are more likely to achieve them. Each participant in this study has linked her education with her desire to have a better job. Several have specifically stated they intend to obtain a 4-year degree; while one is hopeful to receive her associate degree. Therefore, the prospects for these participants to persist and acquire their degree of choice are positively impacted by their goal-directed nature.

Optimism. The participants displayed a variety of optimistic perspectives. Experts in the field of positive psychology describe have distilled how optimism as beneficial for well being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and can advantageously impact academic achievement (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivicha, & Linkins, 2009) as well as employee performance (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004; Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008). Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) indicated positive emotion broadens the scope of college student attention and their thought-action repertoires. Thus optimism is an important psychological attribute to possess and utilize for first generation college students as they persist in their higher education aspirations. The students in this study exhibited the following optimistic strengths: positivity, hopefulness and self-confidence.

Positivity. The participants demonstrated their enthusiasm through body language, facial expression and in terms of word selection. Both Liz and Gillian were eager to participate in the study and arrived at the interview early and with all the materials (pre-survey) in hand. Liz referred to her “love” for almost every aspect of her college experience – the architecture of the campus, the honors program, her room mates, her housing and even the opportunity to take part in a research project. Lilly, on the other hand, was more reserved in terms of expression, but related enthusiasm in her own tempered form. She articulated passion for her pets and the affinity towards her extended and immediate family. Additionally, Gillian described her enthusiasm

when she deciphered math homework, “so now if I’m doing a hard problem and I get it, I’m like ‘yes!’ and do a dorky little gesture even if I’m in the middle of people because I’m so excited” (Interview, February 17, 2012). So she has the ability to display enthusiasm even when social norms suggest a more reserved response might be called for.

As the students relayed their stories a variety of positive descriptions were noted. Although Lilly was the least overtly positive within the group, she too offered affirmative descriptions of her USC classmates and teachers. The others were more expressive on this measure. Liz too was able to infuse a “silver lining” perspective into her description of an academic disappointment when she stated, “I had to go through it. That helped me grow up a lot” (Interview, February 9, 2012).

Gillian shared many instances of her positive outlook. She described her optimism with regard to facing problems, “If it’s likely, I thought positively about it, if it’s a slim chance, (laugh) I still thought positively about it” (Interview, February 17, 2012). Thus she maintained her positive perspective even when it was unlikely to result in the outcome she wanted. Gillian also detailed how she encourages others towards a constructive point of view when saying “Just like if someone comes to me with a problem I’m always like, just think positive it will help” (Interview, February 17, 2012). At the conclusion of our interview she made the connection that “I think people who achieve a lot in life are often positive thinkers” (Gillian, February 17, 2012). Clearly this participant is an avid optimist and utilizes her strength of positivity with great regularity. The participants had varying levels of expressed positivity, yet each employed this strength to their benefit in personal and academic settings.

Hopefulness. Hope is a psychological asset that is part of the PsyCap index that predicts employee well-being and efficacy according to Luthans et al. (2004). Accordingly, it is an asset

worthy of consideration for college success. The degree to which the participants discussed their sense of hope often implied how they would utilize their particular strengths and knowledge in order to create a desired future outcome. As mentioned earlier this group of students had each experienced several moves in their childhood. These experiences helped them identify aspects about place that they valued. During the course of the interviews each student related a place they hoped to live in the future and listed attributes such as weather, size of the community, proximity to family that would be appreciated in the location of their choice. Most important was returning to a setting in which they could recreate the features of their happiest home.

Another consistent subject that these FGCSs were hopeful about was to have a quality career or job. The definition of quality often included being happy in one's work (Gillian, February 17, 2012; Lilly, February 9, 2012). Further they hoped to:

- be self sufficient (Gillian, February 17, 2012),
- make (earn) a good wage (Lilly, February 9, 2012), and
- have an interesting job (Liz, February 9, 2012).

Their vocational desires were very much influenced by family members who were unhappy in their work. Thus these FGCSs were uniformly hopeful that their education would provide them with better job opportunities based in large part due to the influence of family and peers that did not obtain a higher education.

Liz had an epiphany while making a connection that her mother tended to challenge her and other family members as a form of motivation. As this awareness became apparent Liz stated "So now I feel like I'm going to do everything she's ever hoped for me; so I can fill that up" (Interview, February 9, 2012). The identification of her mother as a motivator inspired a personal expectation that, though unclear, is a desired outcome for Liz to deliver to her mother. This is a

hopeful group of students, particularly relating to where they desire to live, their future job prospects and one's emotional desire to be a source of fulfillment to a loved one.

Self-confidence. Having pride in self is an important feature in optimism. One is unlikely to maintain a positive outlook without a sense of personal pride. These FGCSs are indeed self-confident, and yet it is steeped in realism and humbleness.

Liz seemed to become more self-confident as our conversation progressed. Initially she was tentative in her declarations such as “I think I can handle it” and “maybe I’m an example for them (her siblings)” (Liz, February 9, 2012). But, when member checking with her at the end of the interview Liz stated, “another thing is I hadn’t realized how far I have come. Another thing I realized is I’ve done a good job and I do deserve some kudos” (Liz, February 9, 2012). Liz was able to increasingly recognize her accomplishments during the course of our interview.

According to Wood (2011), her ability to identify a particular strength suggests an increased likelihood of her accessing and utilizing the strength in a variety of backdrops.

Lilly was confident of her academic abilities. She noticed that her strong school performance gave her certain privileges in high school that other students did not enjoy. She was able to acknowledge her scholarly strengths, even while contrasted with a weakness. For example, when she described how she did not like to participate in class discussions due to her shyness, she noted, “I think I stress more about what I was saying than learning. If I had to say something I would know it” (Liz, February 9, 2012). Her academic prowess is a counterbalancing force she can tap into when necessary. This is a strength she has relied upon and likely will continue to do so as she pursues her higher education.

Gillian demonstrated self-confidence on many fronts. She described herself as an “excellent problem solver, very friendly and helpful.” Gillian also described a sense of personal

satisfaction regarding her concurrent enrollment high school classes in which she performed well. Likewise she was proud of her performance in her college generals where she was able to recall the concurrent course material and replicate her prior academic success.

Optimism is prevalent among these FGCS. Their ability to recognize and utilize this asset is noted by education, psychology and organizational behavior experts as being a critical personal strength for academic, personal and work success (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008; Emery, Fey, & Flora, 2006; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivicha, & Linkins, 2009). Luthans et al. (2008) shed light on how individuals with optimistic orientations have enhanced abilities of realistically assessing their situation and setting appropriate goals. Optimism has also been discussed by experts in the field as offering a buffering aspect against the widespread incidents of teen depression (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivicha, & Linkins, 2009). This is of particular interest given one of three participants had a depressive history and indicated the least frequency with regard to optimism. The potential for developing this strength as a shield to augment the many other steps this student has taken towards maintaining positive mental health is an interesting prospect.

Reflexivity. These first generation college students displayed an ability to “know thyself” in a variety of ways. They are a self-aware group of young women and whether it be through their participation in this research or previous life and academic experiences, I noted their personal insights through out the qualitative interviews. Seligman (2008) explains that developing a familiarity with one’s strengths is the foundational first step in developing and utilizing them for increased well-being. His position as the “father of positive psychology” and his belief in human potential is closely aligned to my own humanist perspective. Thus, it became important to not only note the strengths I observed, but also to consider what the participants

appreciated about themselves in order to assess how they were utilizing their strengths. Avey et al., (2008) reference insightfulness as a distinct advantage for employees coping with organizational change. They noted, “awareness of thoughts and feelings, namely mindfulness, was found to interact with PsyCap to predict positive emotions” (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008, p. 65). Their research points to the importance of reflexivity and how it works in tandem with other attributes in ways that allow individuals to access and utilize their strengths more readily. FGCS’s socio-historical experiences play a large part in the development of their assets. Their lived experience has required these students to develop certain assets that have allowed them to break with family tradition and go to college. The following qualities were noted by the participants’ in terms of their mindfulness: insightfulness, compassion, gratitude and balance.

Insightfulness. Throughout my field notes and again while coding I made frequent notes of the remarkable self-awareness the participants exhibited. The variety of topics and manner in which the students displayed their personal attunement is a testimony to this strength. Gillian described her personal assets clearly in part because our conversation preceded a job interview for which she was prepared to discuss her strengths. However, it was her self-confidence and positive thinking that I noted most often and which she listed as her best character traits. She had a sense that her powerful positive thinking was a force not only to be used for her own benefit, but also to be shared with others by way of encouraging its use. She repeatedly used her upbeat perspective when confronted with disappointments and recommended, “maybe you can change your outlook” as a realistic solution (Gillian, Interview, February 17, 2012). Gillian was forced to develop new, typically positive, perspectives as a tool for coping with her unpredictable experiences.

Lilly exhibited knowing herself with a depth that is unusual for a young woman of her age. She was astutely aware of her shy nature and the challenge of working on her positive mental health. Her efforts in dealing with depression resulted in her sentience regarding the need to surround herself with positive people. She was mindful of her shy nature as well and spoke of it in terms of her preference for small circles of friends, not liking to speak up in class and liking to be an observer learner (Lilly, Interview, February 9, 2012).

Liz regularly practiced self-reflexivity during our interview. She noted her determination was likely due to the competitive, teasing atmosphere created by her mother. Liz recalled making the connection that “mom made my dad go to CA. I feel like she was sticking it to him to make him go and achieve. And now I realize that’s what she’s doing for me” (Liz, Interview, February 9, 2012). In addition, Liz detailed her preference for active learning and especially assignments that are reflexive and require her to synthesize information. Although enthusiasm and determination were dominant strengths for Liz, her appreciation of insights gleaned from the dialogue process was pronounced.

Compassion. The participants detailed several compassionate characteristics in stories about their personal lives and their scholastic careers. They were accepting, empathic and tolerant women. These attributes are critical in higher education settings where collaborative projects and diverse student communities are an integral part of the college experience. Thus the participants were fortunate to have cultivated and exercised these strengths.

Liz mentioned her thoughts on the professor whose class she did not perform well in during her first semester. She recalled “Not that he’s bad, but he wasn’t right for me” (Liz, Interview, February 9, 2012). Her lenient assessment is an illustration of her empathy and multi-dimensional understanding of the situation. Likewise, Liz showed special consideration towards

her parents who have a history of encouraging her by way of expressing skepticism. As an example, after she decided she was going to go to college she recalled her parents joking, “oh ya, like you’re going to go to college!” (Liz, Interview, February 9, 2012). The fact that she perceived this as humor illustrated a benevolent appreciation towards them. Liz specifically noted that they are different and perhaps make choices unlike her own goal driven temperament when she recalled, “They’re focused on the present, but that’s kinda the way they are” (Liz, Interview, February 9, 2012). Though she is able to self-differentiate herself from her parents, she did so with empathy and tolerance.

Gillian’s strengths also included empathy and a strong conscience. She recognized that she was a “people person” and possessed strong social skills when remarking “I like the fact I’m not shy ... like here I don’t know anybody so I like really have to stretch out and say I need to know this” (Gillian, Interview, February 17, 2012). However, she was quick to follow these comments with an empathic observation of others who do not have this strength, “I feel sorry for people who are (shy) because they have a hard time talking to people they don’t know” (Gillian, February 17, 2012).

Finally, Lilly exhibited an abundance of compassion, most notably towards herself but also with family and classmates. Her kindness towards herself seemed to connect with acknowledging and responding to her needs regarding her depressive condition. Lilly also noted, “I like to observe. I think that’s why I like to watch class discussions to see what different people think about ideas” (Lilly, February 9, 2012). She has a genuine interest in hearing and considering the points of view of others, which is a strong indicator of her accepting, tolerant outlook.

Gratitude. The participants displayed subtle but notable levels of gratitude towards both their current circumstances and for particular instances in their past. FGCS seem to appreciate being in college and do not take the experience for granted because they have not been socialized to believe it is a right or an expected outcome. The importance of gratitude for college students was examined by Miley and Spinella (2006). They linked self-reported high levels of gratitude with increased motivational drive, strategic planning and empathy, which together were defined as high executive function. Thus, gratitude is a relevant asset for college students.

Liz was most specific in her repeated articulation of how grateful she feels to be at USC. In the first few minutes of the interview she stated several times that she is lucky to have found this university, to have been admitted, then accepted into the honors program with a significant scholarship and also into honors housing. She acknowledged that her academic “slip up” was not only appreciated but necessary because it “helped me develop my priorities” (Liz, Interview, February 9, 2012). She was able to appreciate being in college in ways that non-FGCS might take for granted. Liz displayed an abundance of gratitude.

Lilly also alluded to her sense of appreciation, most often by expressing an affinity towards her past. She sentimentally recalled living in other places where she was rich in quality friendships that she could “lean on”. She valued this attribute in her relationship with her mother. But she frequently returned to stories detailing the resolve her cadre of elementary school friends had when they protected children who were bullied. She was grateful she still was able to keep up with two of these old friends and has been able to visit with them when she returned to visit family several times over the years. Another manner in which Lilly expressed gratitude was in terms of relief. She is relieved to be done with high school, which she vividly associated with a personal low point in terms of loneliness and her struggle with depression. She was able to

acknowledge that her USC experience was an improvement over her high school years saying, “I like the people in class and stuff and all my teachers are really good and really helpful” (Lilly, Interview, February 9, 2012). Though reserved in her expression, Lilly is thankful for aspects of her past as well as the present.

Gillian, like Lilly, was less obvious in terms of verbalizing her gratitude with appreciative language. However, she specifically conveys her appreciation for unanticipated lessons. Her resilience and willingness to be flexible allows her to see the silver lining in almost any experience. For example she recalled:

It took two days on two trains and a bus (to arrive in Utah). I was nervous and scared, but I was excited too. I was going to meet new people and see things.

When my path went out in a different direction I thought of it as a way to see different things and experience different things that I might not have learned if I went on the set path. (Gillian, February 17, 2012)

Gillian’s reflexive abilities are demonstrated when she was able to turn her fear into positive expectation by considering the change in course as an opportunity. In fact, she is not alone in this group with regards to being able to hold two seemingly conflicted perspectives simultaneously.

Balance. Dialectic thinking is an important strength for adult learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) and one that our participant data revealed with frequency. Whether in regards to needs, likes or thinking, these young women were able to balance divergent viewpoints in authentic ways. Liz showed comfort with the recognition that she was directionless when stating she had no idea what she was going to do or how to go about finding her way after high school. But in contrast she described a litany of goal-oriented steps she took that have

positioned her in the honors program at the university of her choice. Somehow her awareness of being aimless was able to exist concurrently with her focused action. Another dichotomy was the messages of doubt she regularly received from her parents, while at the same time she displayed a robust sense of personal expectation and self-confidence. These are remarkably divergent orientations, but Liz is able to maintain her sense of self-efficacy and appreciate her parents' unique form of support. Liz was able to hold and act on divergent notions while being true to her personal beliefs.

Lilly likewise displayed contrasting standpoints. She regularly commented on her reliance on her family support. She spoke of their financial backing and also of the centrality of their emotional scaffolding. On the other hand she is an example of tenacious personal discipline in the management of her depression. Her efforts in self-care are admirable and are balanced with steadfast assistance provided by her family. Another contradictory aspect of Lilly's story has to do with her negative experiences related to moving in childhood. Nevertheless, she explained she intends to select a major that will require her to transfer to a college outside of Utah. Further she spoke of an interest in moving to somewhere with warmer weather. These are seemingly conflicting sentiments, yet both are valid in her eyes. Finally, Lilly noted she is decisive "I just sort of decide. (laugh) I kinda go with my first thought and I'm just like that" (Lilly, February 9, 2012). This was inconsistent when considering her timid, careful nature. It is also in contrast with instances she described of changing her mind, such as with her selection of major and where she would like to live after college. Thus, Lilly indicated an ability to be at ease with dissimilarity and maintaining the tension in conflicted viewpoints.

Gillian's dialectic thinking was most apparent in her two most dominant strengths: independence and flexibility. Our interview was peppered with statements of personal pride and

repeated descriptions of her self-reliance. Conversely, she described a number of examples of working with others in an interdependent way in accomplishing an objective. She activated family members' help to collect required documentation for her ID and residency status, she utilized her uncle's help for living arrangements, transportation and test preparation. Similarly Gillian's intense orientation toward being adaptable stands out against her articulated determination and persistence. She demonstrated time again that she was accepting of the curve balls thrown her way in regards to the several iterations of college attendance. She noted that being open to different paths is critical for her. However, she likewise articulated her determination "I'm dead set on doing that" (Gillian, February 17, 2012) and relentless persistence. Gillian displayed both independent and interdependent tendencies as required by the circumstance. Similarly she can be both flexible and tenacious, but is able to maintain these seemingly opposite strengths in a legitimate amalgamation.

Self-awareness and the prevalence of certain internal virtues such as mindfulness, compassion, gratitude and dialectic thinking have served these FGCS well. Researchers have indicated that even if a subject has relatively low levels of psychological capital, they can compensate by activating their mindfulness (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008, Miley & Spinella, 2006, Seligman, 2008). Thus, the reflexivity of our participants is indeed a valuable asset the participants capitalize upon.

Implications and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The first-generation college students examined in this study brought a variety of personal assets with them as they embarked on their higher education journey. They revealed assets that could be grouped into four themes. These students were proactive, goal-directed, optimistic and reflexive. Each theme had a full compliment of associated assets as follows:

- Proactive – resourcefulness, self-reliance, strategic thinking
- Goal-directed – practical realism, persistence, flexibility
- Optimistic – positivity, hopefulness, self-confidence
- Reflexive – insightfulness, compassion, gratitude, balance

Participants' stories described using their assets in a variety of settings (personal, academic, relational and employment) and over a long period of time. They continue to use them in their higher education aspirations. Thus, they revealed both depth and breadth of their asset development and use.

Participants' lived experiences help explain how and why they developed these assets. Based on the ample detail of their lives, I concluded that these students' unique backgrounds and their socio-cultural positioning was central to their asset development and use. Because of their marginalized position (as first-generation college students and lower socio-economic status) they were required to cultivate assets in order to meet personal challenges and achieve goals. In contrast, members of the dominant culture may not recognize certain assets because they cannot relate to the experiential knowledge and may not be attuned to a different socio-economic perspective. The participants were able to redeploy their assets derived out of necessity towards their higher education objectives. Therefore, the marginalized positioning of these students may

in fact be a benefit to the extent that the assets developed and used were in response to their environment.

Recommendations for Higher Education

This research challenges the pervasive deficit orientation towards first-generation college students. It does not deny that they are a disadvantaged population, but rather seeks to understand how educators can better “see” these students in their fullness. It is important to bring to light “the multiple dimensions of students’ lived experience” in order to better serve their needs (González, 2002). Thus, the field of higher education should not overlook the assets of FGCS. In response to the findings several recommendations are offered to higher education institutions, instructors and students.

Institutions could support FGCS by providing faculty training and augmenting student support services. For example, faculty development and departmental dialogue that exposes instructors to this alternative asset oriented view of FGCS might be offered. This would be accomplished by providing scholarly literature about positive psychology and funds of knowledge; and pointing to the potential that increased well-being and application of personal experience holds for improved student success and retention. In addition student support services, counseling staff or first year programs could alert students to their personal assets through the use of several inventory assessments as described by Wood et al (2001).

As part of shifting faculty’s perspective about FGCS the institution might offer the following analogy. Since educators must “see” FGCS students in new ways, then they resemble gem cutters. In essence the gem cutter is charged with maximizing the value of a stone by shaping and polishing the raw material into a more appreciated asset (Nate Morgan, personal

communications, March 4, 2012). Gem cutters, like educators, help reveal the inherent value of their product. They are not the only factor in the process, but to the extent educators participate in the intricate work of mining the value of each student to expose their brilliance; then students may be appreciated in new ways.

Instructors have the most contact with students and, as Tinto (2003) described, hold the greatest potential for impact. Once faculty has been trained with an eye toward appreciating student assets, course assignments and class processes could be adapted to encourage students' identification and use of their assets. Curriculum must be flexible to allow students with a variety of assets to access their own strength in response to the course content. It stands to reason that encouraging this work in the classroom would benefit not only the marginalized group members, but all students who are enrolled with faculty dedicated to cultivating student assets through identification and use. Faculty could include self-reflexive assignments that pay attention to the funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom. Vygotsky (1978) offered educators the notion that children learn best when they can tap into knowledge they already have as part of the instructional experience. Similarly, if we encourage higher education students to use the assets they have experienced success in utilizing, then we might expect break-through learning and accomplishment in their higher education goals.

Students would be well advised to identify and use their personal assets as tools for achieving their educational and personal goals. They should engage in self-exploration of their strengths through whatever means they have access to or are offered. Hopefully, the process will include recognition that their strengths are, at least in part, a product of their lived experience. In understanding this premise students should develop an appreciation for their family of origin and their socio-cultural background that allowed them to develop their assets. One way in which

students can practice their strengths is by modeling for siblings or other community members who could benefit from their example. No matter the setting, it is critical for students to continue the use of their assets, once identified, in order for them to benefit from them. Only then will their personal potential be maximized and ultimately the community and society at large enhanced.

Implications for future research.

While there has been significant educational research on positive psychology and funds of knowledge, there continues to be an imperative for future study relating these constructs to higher education student persistence. There is a need for further investigation of the participants in this project, as well as a more generalized necessity to expand the sample size and population, examine other higher education settings and more specifically define persistence and student success.

Though this study was able to identify assets and self-reported incidents of their use, there would be greater understanding if able to follow these participants over several years. First, we would be able to track whether students continue to use their assets. We could also attempt to assess whether their assets are in fact becoming more robust due to awareness and use by employing one of the strengths use assessments that Wood et al described (2011). A multiple year project would also provide additional credibility (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) as well as the ability to more thoroughly examine the assets' relationship with persistence to degree completion. Then a review of their academic success could more conclusively relate assets to student outcomes. Further, we might have the opportunity to explore the contra-hypothesis. For example, if one of the participants elected to leave school, the long-term relationship developed

through the course of the study might find the student willing to continue the conversation; and allow us to review whether their asset use declined and to learn more about their attrition decision.

Additional studies that increase the sample size would provide more credible conclusions. With more participants we could examine whether the assets identified in this research are broadly accessed by other FGCS. As noted earlier in this paper the participants' were in many ways unusual FGCS; in that they were not minority, English language learners, poor academic performers, married or parents nor non-traditional in the timing of their college enrollment. In addition, if both FGCS and non-FGCS were included in future studies, then comparisons between these two populations could be made. Of special interest would be whether the two groups varied in terms of the assets they possessed and whether they were used differently (ie. long-term use in terms of depth and breadth). Also, a larger study could provide opportunities for more quantitative methods to be implemented, which would be critical to confidently analyze differences between populations. Future studies should also be conducted at a variety of higher education settings. Looking at FGCS in private, public and for-profit institutions may reveal variations in the findings based on the differences between admissions selectivity and other institutional policies. Finally proposed research might also look to add greater clarity about the definition of persistence. Perhaps there are other characteristics in addition to degree completion that could mark higher education academic success and provide a pre-graduation link between assets and student accomplishment.

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