"I Want to Be a First": Student, Family, and School Factors Influencing First-Generation Student College Readiness

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Abstract

Understanding first-generation students' salient experiences in preparing for college is key for educators to engage in transformative college readiness efforts. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perspectives and experiences of a sample of first-generation college-bound high school students. Five themes and four subthemes describe their college preparation and college readiness. The themes were: (a) student agency fostering resilience; (b) cultural values; (c) family and friend involvement; (d) synergy in the school community; and (e) school community stakeholder perspectives on college readiness for first-generation students. Students shared how a collaborative partnership between themselves, their families, their school counselors, and their teachers contributed to their successful matriculation into college. School counselor and administrative perspectives are also offered. Practical implications for school community members' practice conclude the article.

Key Words: first-generation students, college readiness, high school student perspectives, family–school–community partnerships, school counseling

Introduction

The college preparation process is multifaceted, and school counselors must work together with administrators, teachers, staff, families, and communities to

prepare all students to be college and career ready (American School Counselor Association, 2019a). Enhancing the development of all students may require locating and mobilizing additional resources and support for students who are disenfranchised (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Leonard, 2013). One population with historically inequitable access and retention in postsecondary education are first-generation (to attend college) students (FGS; Castleman & Page, 2014; Whitley et al., 2018). Given the data on the benefits of a college education, the importance of college readiness for students who wish to pursue a post-secondary education cannot be overstated. Understanding the factors which contribute to FGS college readiness will further enable educators' ability to make a difference in their students' lives. While prior research has highlighted the importance of school counselors, teachers, and other school staff working with underrepresented populations, such as FGS, there is little research about the students' perspectives on how school counselors and others in the school community can understand and collaboratively support their successful college enrollment (Cholewa et al., 2015; Tieken, 2016). Research with a family–school–community lens is also needed to understand how school counselors work within the entire school community to assist these students. This study contributes to the literature by qualitatively investigating how a sample of FGS prepared for college, which may inform school counselors', teachers', and administrators' work with FGS regarding college readiness.

First-Generation Students (FGS)

For the purpose of this study, FGS are defined as those students without a parent or guardian who has a bachelor's degree (Garriott et al., 2015). There are alternate definitions, but this definition was chosen because it is often used by college admissions offices (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). As a group, FGS are less likely to enroll in college compared to their peers whose parent or guardian does hold a bachelor's degree (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Only 27% of FGS graduate with a bachelor's degree in four years, and they are less likely than their counterparts to complete their degree, even when controlling for family income, academic preparation, and ethnicity (Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Whitley et al., 2018). Ultimately, the college readiness of FGS is an equity issue. There are many proposed reasons for the unequal outcomes of FGS, some starting before college matriculation, which is why it is important for school counselors to understand the unique college readiness needs and experiences of FGS. An area of need is college information, since FGS often have limited access to college information from parents (Mitchall & Jaegar, 2018). It is worth noting that when the parents of FGS are involved in college planning, set academic standards early, and foster their child's sense of career volition, there are

positive effects on FGS' self-determination (Mitchall & Jaegar, 2018). Hence, parents and guardians should always be included in their students' college readiness (Leonard, 2013).

First-Generation Students and College Readiness

Examples of barriers in FGS college enrollment and persistence include lack of social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital; this includes limited parental knowledge about the college application process, confusion about which courses to take to prepare for postsecondary education, and financial strains regarding paying for higher education (Bernhardt, 2013; Mitchall & Jaegar, 2018; Pascarella, 2004). However, despite FGS' guardians' lack of knowledge regarding the college process, many FGS have indicated heightened emotional support from family members. Research conducted by Wang (2014) revealed that many parents of FGS motivate their children to reach their educational goals and serve as role models to younger family members by excelling in college. Furthermore, FGS have indicated that family members often provide significant support and motivation to pursue college. Vega (2016) found that many FGS' parents instilled a strong college-going expectation at an earlier age, despite parents not having attended college themselves. Barry et al. (2008) found FGS felt their support systems had the same capacities for championing them and helping as those of legacy college students (as cited in Unverferth et al., 2012).

In addition to the emotional and motivational support from family, FGS can overcome barriers to college access when equipped with the necessary information (Unverferth et al., 2012). Members of the school community have the potential to positively affect FGS college readiness development (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020). Research has shown FGS are almost two and a half times more likely than non-FGS to state that their school counselor was the most influential person in their thinking about postsecondary education (Cholewa et al., 2015). In a study of nearly 9,000 students, almost half (41.9%) of participants listed their school counselors as a resource for postgraduate planning, and approximately 30% of participants identified their school counselors as the most helpful resource (Griffin et al., 2011). Additionally, more than half of the students surveyed sought information from at least four sources, so students benefit when school counselors and school community members utilize a collaborative approach to college preparation (Griffin et al., 2011). When the participants were asked to identify sources they consulted, students were able to identify up to 13 sources of information, including peers, professionals (e.g., teachers, coaches, etc.), family members, community members (e.g., spiritual leaders, trusted adults), and colleges themselves (e.g., campus tours,

campus representatives; Griffin et al., 2011). Since improper preparation from academic programs may be a reason for fewer FGS attending college, college preparation programs may be especially beneficial for FGS (Griffin et al., 2011; Unverferth et al., 2012).

Those FGS who earn their bachelor's degree show resilience. While many definitions exist, "resilience" in this study is conceptualized as an individual's ability to successfully bounce back from unanticipated stressors (e.g., school, work, family; Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Researchers assert that resilience can be both cultivated and deteriorated by environmental factors such as school environment, peer support, and familial affluence (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Herrman et al., 2011). Furthermore, resilience is also closely correlated with student motivation (Brooks et al., 2012). With all of the unique strengths and needs of FGS, a theoretical perspective which considers both individual level factors and school/community level factors is an important aspect of ensuring postsecondary access and success for this population.

Conceptual Framework

The current study is conceptualized through the lenses of family–school–community partnerships and social cognitive theory. Family–school–community partnerships are collaborative initiatives and relationships among school counselors, other school personnel, community members (including families), and community-based organizations (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Such partnerships can provide beneficial college and career opportunities for students through building support, resources, and programs that provide responsive services to meet the complex and varying needs of students (ASCA, 2019a). Since FGS may have less access to college readiness resources in their homes, it is especially important for these students to have additional postsecondary access resources in the school setting and collaborative relationships in the community, in order to create asset-rich schools which increase students' college readiness (Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan & Henry, 2008). Social cognitive theory is a psychological theory of human agency developed by Albert Bandura (1989). Human agency refers to a human's unique ability to intentionally affect outcomes by his or her actions, and personal agency consists of the cognitive processes an individual uses to exert determinative influence (Bandura, 2001). For instance, intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness are all cognitive components of personal agency (Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and perceived barriers and supports are all components of social cognitive theory to utilize in work and research with FGS (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Olson, 2014; Garriott et al., 2015). A theoretical blend of family–school–community partnerships and social cognitive theory will provide a

comprehensive conceptual framework to guide the exploration of FGS college preparation and readiness through both internal and external factors.

Purpose of Study and Research Question

The research literature on FGS typically consists of quantitative studies using survey methods, and the students' voices are rarely highlighted (Castleman et al., 2014; Cholewa et al., 2015; Pham & Keenan, 2011). Through a better understanding of the college readiness and preparation journeys of FGS, the current study will provide practical information for school communities and school counselors to create more equitable access to postsecondary opportunities for FGS. Guided by the gaps in the literature and the conceptual framework, one research question guided the study: "What are individual, school, family, and community influences on college preparedness and readiness in a sample of FGS?" To engage in this line of inquiry, multiple members of the school community (i.e., school counselors, administrators, students) were asked to participate.

Method

The researchers sought to discover the lived experiences of recent high school graduates who are first-generation college students (FGS) using a social constructivist, phenomenological design. For added context to this experience, researchers also investigated the perspectives of others in the school community (i.e., school counselors and administrator) from the school in which the students graduated. Social constructivism emphasizes the individual creation of knowledge and experience through social interaction. In the current study, this creation of knowledge occurred within interviews, meaning that the participants constructed knowledge through sharing their perspectives (Costantino, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). The focus is not on "explaining" phenomena, but rather "understanding" what is happening within individuals (Costantino, 2012). This aligns well with a phenomenology methodology which is utilized "to describe the meaning or essence of participant experience of a phenomenon" (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 289).

Participants

Participants for the current study included eight members of the school community: students (*n* = 5), school counselors (*n* = 2), and an administrator (*n* = 1). The researchers used purposeful convenience sampling to recruit the participants from one high school in a mid-Eastern U.S. state.

Students

In terms of demographics, all student participants self-reported their ages as 18; three identified as women and two as men. The racial/ethnic make-up was diverse, with two participants identifying as White, one as American Indian, one as Hispanic, and one as Latino. Four of the participants are enrolled in four-year colleges and universities, and one is enrolled in a community college.

School Counselors and Administrator

The school counselors identified as White women; one was in her forties and one in her fifties; one had five years of school counseling experience and the other had over 10 years of experience at the time of the interview. The administrator was an assistant principal who identified as a White woman with 18 years of experience as an educator and who is a first-generation college student. See Table 1 for pseudonyms and demographics.

Table 1. Participants

Student Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Age	College
Danielle	Hispanic	Woman	18	4 year
Chris	White	Man	18	4 year
Lynn	White	Woman	18	4 year
Mirabelle	American Indian	Woman	18	2 year
Taylor	Latino	Man	18	4 year
Stakeholder Name	Position			
Susan	School Counselor			
Francine	School Counselor			
Debbie	Assistant Principal			

School Context

The student participants and the school community interviews were all with participants affiliated with the same high school. In terms of the high school's demographics, approximately 20% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged; approximately 75% of the student body identifies as White, followed by 12% as Black or African American, 5% who are multiracial, 4% who are Hispanic, and 1% each of both Asian and American Indian identifying students. There are three school counselors employed for approximately 1,000 students; this means each counselor has a caseload of approximately 330 students, which while higher than the ASCA recommended caseload ratio of

250, is smaller than the national average of 430 students per school counselor (ASCA, 2019b). The researchers selected this particular high school as the source for participants because the researchers consider it an exemplary school in terms of serving their FGS population. They offer individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom instruction on college readiness; a financial aid representative from a nonprofit organization is in the school weekly; and they organize college visits, host a yearly college fair, and meet with families to plan for students' future goals. The school counseling department coordinates these opportunities for all students in the public high school with the support of the school community, teachers, and administrators. While exact information on the college enrollment and attainment rate of FGS is not available, the school has a large FGS population, and 55% of the student body enrolls in an institute of higher education within 16 months of earning their high school diploma. Additionally, the higher education enrollment rate of economically disenfranchised students is 13% higher than the state average. The first author also had an established research relationship with the school district and had obtained district approval to speak with students and employed members of the school community (i.e., school counselors, administrators).

Procedure

The researchers obtained institutional review board approval prior to beginning the research study. Semi-structured interviews served as the data source, and the first two authors completed the interviews. The interviews occurred either in-person or via video conferencing software. All interviews were audio-recorded for transcription purposes. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. The interview protocol was collaboratively developed and was reviewed by a qualitative researcher with a background in school counseling. Open-ended questions were the main source of information, with some relevant closed-ended and demographic questions (see the Appendix for student interview protocol). The researchers asked student participants how they perceived the process of college preparation and what factors played a role in their college readiness. The school community stakeholders, defined as the assistant principal and two school counselors at the school of the student participants, were also interviewed by the first author. This provided additional information from the school community in order to better inform the understanding of potential factors influencing FGS college readiness. The interview protocol for the school community members consisted of three open-ended questions. The administrator and school counselors were asked:

- "How do you define a first-generation student?"

- "What support do you and your school offer specifically FGS for college readiness?"
- "What challenges or barriers do you face in college readiness counseling and efforts?"

In order to build rapport, researchers conducted in-person recruitment at the school, met with students prior to the interview, and explained the study and our commitment to protecting confidentiality. The interviews then began with the researchers explaining there are no right or wrong answers to any interview questions and that they were excited to hear the participants' unique perspectives.

Research Team

The research team consisted of one counselor educator and three (i.e., at the time of the study) counselor education doctoral students. The first author was, at the time of the study, a counselor education and supervision doctoral student with four years of high school counseling experience, including individual and group counseling work with FGS. She is a White woman and an FGS herself whose research focus is career and college readiness. The second author was also a counselor education doctoral student with a background in high school counseling, who identifies as a Black woman. The third author, a Black man, was a doctoral candidate at the time as well as a practicing school counselor. The fourth author is a Black woman counselor educator with an extensive research background in school counseling. All four authors were members of the coding team. The outside auditor had been a school counselor for a decade prior to becoming a counselor educator and is a White woman.

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized the methodological approach of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is an approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data, which allows for rich description of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of data analysis guided the thematic analysis process. Phase 1 is to become familiar with the data; the research team read the transcripts and noted initial ideas. The team examined the entire dataset prior to developing the coding frame (Joffe, 2012). The researchers all met to discuss initial ideas and bracket biases and assumptions. Phase 2 is generating initial codes through systematically coding interesting features of the transcript data and collating the data relevant to each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ascertain reliability in a rigorous manner, two researchers separately coded the first two participant interview transcripts (Joffe, 2012). The research team then met as a whole, and the codes were further

refined. Following this meeting, all four researchers coded the remaining participant transcripts and held another meeting to finalize the coding frame.

In Phase 3, the research team began to make meaning out of the codes and collapsing the codes into themes. Researchers independently collated codes into potential themes and collecting the relevant data for each potential theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, the researchers met for a fifth time for Phase 4: reviewing themes. The team checked that the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. During this meeting, Phase 5 was also accomplished, which is to refine the specifics of each theme, decide on the overall story the data is illustrating, and generate clear definitions and names for each theme. Finally, Phase 6 was the production of the "report," which is when the research team worked together to select compelling example quotes that were related to the research question and then connect them to the literature and theory in the discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness

The researchers consistently bracketed personal experiences and potential biases, which they shared during research team meetings. They reflected through written memos as well as oral memos by audio recording their experiences directly after interviews. The coding team with the remaining two authors served to help control for any biases or misunderstandings the interviewers may have held (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An outside auditor also served as a source of assumption checking. The first author interviewed two school counselors and an assistant principal from the high school that the participants attended for data triangulation purposes. Student participants received their transcripts and results as forms of member checking (Tracy, 2010). Throughout there was a focus on a rich description of the data set in order to maintain a sense of the social constructivist nature of inquiry and promote transferability of the data for future studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The researchers identified five themes and four subthemes within the interview data to seek information on the research question: "What are individual, school, family, and community influences on college preparedness and readiness in a sample of FGS?" Theme 1, *student agency fostering resilience*, has two subthemes: (a) *intrinsic motivation*, and (b) *extrinsic motivation*. Theme 2 is *cultural values*. Theme 3 is *family and friend involvement*. Theme 4 is *synergy in the school community*, which has two subthemes: (a) *school counselor involvement*, and (b) *teacher and community member involvement*. Theme 5 is *school community stakeholder perspectives on college readiness for FGS*.

Student Agency Fostering Resilience

This theme highlights how participants successfully "bounced back" from stressors in the college preparation process, in part due to their self-direction and motivation. The participants felt ownership in the process of applying and being ready for college. Self-determination echoed in their statements, and while a bit of uncertainty was there, the students all persevered in applying for college and attending. Chris said, "Well, my parents encouraged it, of course, and the rest of my family, but it was kind of me seeing that, making the decision on my own." Whether it was in reference to their college applications, financial aspects of planning, or searching for scholarships, the participants knew they would have to stay determined, organized, and self-motivated to make their postsecondary dreams a reality. Danielle shared:

> In my process to find the colleges, I do everything by myself. I did all of it by myself. I didn't ask my brother 'cause he doesn't know. My mom, she wouldn't know either. She is from a different country.

Taylor shared he is a student under DACA and often knew his counselors and teachers weren't always sure how to help him prepare for college. He said:

> So, it was more difficult for me to figure out my options, and they did a good job helping me, but for a lot of them, it landed more on me to figure it out, because I was an exception to the rule. So, they did a good job. They led me into where I should go to look for things, but a lot of work landed on me trying to figure out what I should do, what worked best for me.

Overcoming challenges because of motivation became two unique subthemes: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation includes the students' innate and personal reasons for pursuing college which are not dependent on outside rewards. Extrinsic motivation was evidenced by the students' reasons for pursuing college and sticking to their goals based on external factors and benefits, such as employment and financial security.

Intrinsic Motivation

Mirabelle was motivated to be the first in her family to get a college degree, saying, "My parents and grandparents, nobody's completed college. I want to be a first." Lynn expressed that her love of learning was a reason for enrolling in college, "Pursuing my learning at this level has been something that I've always saw [sic] as a really cool idea." Taylor shared similar thoughts with Lynn, saying, "As a kid I've always found myself to be curious, and I've always liked learning. I enjoyed learning; I enjoy learning now, so that's why I'm here."

Extrinsic Motivation

Lynn said, "The real answer is obviously I need college for the career I want." Several others shared that sentiment. Another source of extrinsic motivation was money. Mirabelle shared in her interview the struggles her family faced when they lost their jobs. She saw a college education as a way to secure financial stability for herself, sharing, "My family influenced it, because my grandfather's construction business recently failed, and I want to make sure that I don't have something like that happen to me in my future."

The first theme of student agency fostering resilience is succinctly summed up by Danielle's statement:

> Another reason why I want to go to college is that I just want to prove something. I can definitely become something. I know right now I'm paying for my own education. I know even though it's stressful, I'm going to have to actually find a job and do all of this. I know I'm going to be able to do it. I know I'm going to be successful.

Cultural Values

All but one of the participants shared that cultural values were a meaningful part of their experience in preparing for college. This is exemplified by the following quote from Danielle:

> Our culture, we always work hard. We always try to reach for what we can. Because they [Danielle's parents] were first generation immigrants, they always emphasize the fact that they worked hard to give me opportunities, and that's why I'm here [in college].

Some participants named "culture" specifically as an important factor in their journey to college, but others indirectly noted factors such as values inherited by their families. Another cultural component shared by participants was their experience of being raised in a small community. Multiple participants only wanted to attend a school where they knew several other graduates from their high school were also attending. Chris said his choice in where to go to college (i.e., a private college in a rural area) was strongly influenced by his love of his hometown and the university's location.

> I've always grown up in a small community, and I've enjoyed that, how small it is, and I have seen it be nice at college. Like I said before, you see the same people every day, your friends, and being close by, it's just nice to still be close to home.

Another interesting finding was wanting to "give back" to others in their ethnic group by pursuing higher education. Danielle shared how she wanted to

help Spanish-speaking people have access to mental health care, and that was why she was pursuing a major in psychology.

Family and Friend Involvement

This theme focused on the positive impact both family and friends had on the college readiness and preparation of the participants. The participants readily gave examples of how their families and friends were involved in their preparation for college. Mirabelle said, "I received strong support at home. Everyone thought that my choice was a very good one because it's something that they hadn't done, and if it made me happy then it was worth it." Lynn shared similar sentiments about her parents encouraging higher education despite not graduating with a college degree themselves. She said:

> I don't have parents who were like, "You're getting kicked out of the house if you don't go to college." It was never that, but it was always kind of, we have good expectations for you, or it was more so, just people in my family saying, "You're really bright, so make sure you do something with it."

Despite expressed limitations of their parents' knowledge surrounding college, some participants were able to identify sources of information within the family network. Lynn shared:

> I have another big role model. I have a cousin who went here as well, and he's my buddy. He's been a mentor to me. Not a lot of people in our family have gone to college at all, like cousins, aunts, uncles, very few. He's one of the only ones.

It was not just family who encouraged the FGS participants to apply for college. When the participants had friends in high school who were planning to attend college, this made a large impact on their experience with preparing for college. Chris shared about his friends' role:

> They encouraged me to go to a four-year university. All of them are like, "you can do it, why don't you try it? You can afford it…" So, I don't think I would've looked into it as much as I did unless they did that.

Synergy in the School Community

This theme illustrates how there are multiple parts and people in schools involved in the college readiness of FGS, and they need to work in a cohesive manner in order for students to gain the most benefits. This synergy between the different stakeholders in the school community is what initiated the college preparation journey for some, as when Chris shared the influence of multiple school employees on his decision to go to college, saying, "I was told by multiple teachers and counselors that I could go to a four-year college."

Several participants noted how there was a feeling of total support in their school in regards to the students' postsecondary plans. Lynn shared:

I never got any kind of sense from any of the teachers or counselors that their door wasn't always open. From my psychology teacher to my English teacher to the assistant principal to my guidance counselor to the other guidance counselor, who wasn't even mine, but basically got adopted as my guidance counselor, they all just gave off this vibe that I could constantly go there if I needed anything….Maybe it's because [school name] is fairly small as far as high school goes, but they were really cool about that.

School Counselor Involvement

Their school counselors were a large part of the synergistic school system participants discussed. As Lynn said about the school counselors, "preparing for college, I'll give lots of credit to them." The FGS reflected on how their counselors helped them develop career goals; for instance, Lynn did not know what speech pathology, her current major, was before her school counselor told her. The school counselors also were valuable sources of information on scholarships. Additionally, the emotional support the school counselors offered made an impact on the students. Four of the five participants visited their school counselor when they were overwhelmed by the college process. The participants, especially their senior year, were "frequent fliers" in the school counseling office, often visiting two or three times a week to talk about college preparation. It was even shared that for several participants, their school counselor was the first person to tell them how to go about applying to college and then walk them through it step by step. When Mirabelle was asked how she knew what to do to apply to college, she said, "I didn't. I asked my counselor."

Teacher and Community Member Involvement

When teachers were involved in the college readiness of their students, the students benefited. Lynn remembered how her senior year English teacher made the curriculum relevant to her and her classmates because it was tailored to the college preparation process, saying, "The first six weeks of 12th grade English is writing a college essay, writing a resume, writing a cover letter. It was super nice." Teachers served as mentors and role models. Lynn described her French teacher as "a big person who helped me get to this point." The students looked up to their teachers as people who encouraged them and challenged them. Students were particularly influenced by teachers of subjects that were related to their future careers, such as one participant's psychology teacher. Additionally, community members were vital in college readiness. A representative from a nonprofit organization would come to their high school weekly

to sit with students and families, complete college applications, and apply for the FAFSA and scholarships. This extra support beyond the school counselors was helpful for the students. Another way the community was involved was through raising funds for their college tuition. Mirabelle shared, "My church actually raised $4,000 for me in scholarships." Lynn was appreciative of her community's support in general: "I got the overall impression that the community is really supportive of anything that the seniors wanted to do.…Whatever we were doing, everyone felt like there was someone supporting them."

School Community Stakeholder Perspectives on College Readiness for FGS

This theme reflects the viewpoints of the school community stakeholders (i.e., two school counselors and one assistant principal) on the college readiness preparation of FGS. The stakeholders shared the challenges of working on college readiness with FGS, what their roles entailed in the college preparation process for this population, and their enjoyment in working with FGS on college readiness.

Francine, a school counselor, shared a challenge in working with FGS on preparing for college:

> And we talk about going and touring [college campuses]….I've always said, like, "When you go on your campus, you're going to know if you're meant to be there." You're going to be like, "Ooh, this is where I want to be." And then also I just feel like resources around here, we just don't have a lot of resources, and maybe even sometimes the parents are working, and they can't take them. All these things that are super important, I think, maybe not all of the parents do those things.

The assistant principal, Debbie, shared how she can relate to FGS due to her own experience. She said, "So on both sides of my family I was the first kid to ever go to college. I know the struggles firsthand, 'cause it was difficult." She shared her role as an administrator in preparing FGS for college includes having conversations with students about their career goals and how college aligns with that, and "then I just try to facilitate and work with our counselors as far as the things that they do." The assistant principal mentioned how school counselors come into the classroom themselves, but also provide curriculum for teachers to integrate college readiness lessons.

The school counselors also shared the targeted interventions and programming they provide for FGS. This included individual meetings and classroom lessons. Another example, aligned with the students' perspectives, was small group counseling experiences; Susan, the second school counselor said, "And we've also started to build in first-gen groups for those students who are college

bound. We've done first-gen groups the last few years now because we've seen there's a need and value in that." Susan shared she intentionally assesses who is a FGS to invite those students to the group:

> And we also ask about first generation, and we define that for juniors, and we ask them to let us know if they are a first-generation student. So that's the way we figure out who those students are, and we pull from that pool.

Finally, the school counselors and assistant principal shared their love of working with students on college readiness and helping them prepare for college. Francine said,

> Yeah, I love it [college counseling]. Yeah, I sometimes feel like I'd rather do that than the mental health portion. I don't know, because I just see, I'm a results-driven person, and I like immediate gratification. So when you're working with a student with mental health issues, you don't often see that, but when you're working with students on scholarships and colleges, and they get in, and they get money, and they're going, like, it's amazing.

Discussion

The transition to college for those who are FGS can often involve multiple barriers to success. FGS may possess less information about attending college due to not having a parent or guardian who attended and had the experience of preparing, applying, and matriculating into college (Unverferth et al., 2012). Through the conceptual framework, a blend of family–school–community partnerships tenets (Bryan et al., 2018) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), the current study seeks to help school community members understand the lived experiences of FGS who successfully matriculated into college. Specifically, the researchers were interested in the individual, school, family, and community influences on college preparedness and readiness within one school community. The current study also includes other school community member's perspectives to provide an additional layer to the results (i.e., school counselors, administrator). The results provided a strengths-based approach to understanding FGS college-bound students which is often missing in the research literature.

Despite the challenges inherent in preparing for college, students from the current study were able to remain motivated towards their academic pursuits, illustrated by the first theme of *student agency fostering resilience*. In fact, having fewer resources than their peers may spur student initiative in pursuing

college. Related to social cognitive theory concepts, the students' agency allowed goals to be both set and met, with future academic plans serving as a driving force (Bandura, 2001). Students noted their interests, navigated what they could on their own, and sought out help and resources when applicable. *Intrinsic motivation* for the students interviewed seems to consider their personal interests, such as a love for learning. *Extrinsic motivation* considers their professional pursuits, whether founded in financial stability, career success, or personal philosophies. Motivation closely correlates with resilience, and these findings support that in the current sample (Brooks et al., 2012).

The second theme, *cultural values,* is another individual level factor on FGS college readiness. The influence of cultural values contributed greatly to the career aspirations of the participants, including a work ethic stemming from familial beliefs and what a college degree could mean for respective communities. Additionally, a sense of community felt when considering past, present, and potential classmates seemed to influence which college a student chose to attend. While literature most often highlights the academic preparedness of FGS, this finding supports research which does emphasize cultural, and, as in the next theme, family and friend influences (Bernhardt, 2013; Mitchall & Jaegar, 2018). The third theme, *family and friend involvement*, emphasizes how important the family and community components of the family–school–community partnership framework were to the current sample. Positive peer influence and supportive families were the catalyst for the participants in this study to pursue a college degree. This supports prior findings that parents and families are often the first resource students consult when thinking about pursuing college (Griffin et al., 2006; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Additionally, participants emphasized the role and impact other family members, such as siblings and cousins, played in the FGS' college planning experience. This is not typically highlighted in the family–school–community research literature, rather it is solely the influence of parents that is most often discussed when it comes to supporting secondary students (Jensen & Minke, 2017).

The fourth theme, *synergy in the school community*, refers to a collaborative effort to provide the best resources possible. This theme is an illustration of how a true collaborative approach, aligned with the tenets of family–school–community partnerships, leads to positive outcomes for students (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020; Johnson & Hannon, 2014). Both *school counselor involvement* and *teacher and community member involvement* resonated with the participants in the study. The participants noted how influential their school counselor and teachers were in preparing them for college, paralleling previous research (Griffin et al, 2011). This included the curriculum they offered highlighting college preparation tasks such as application essays, which has shown to be beneficial

for FGS and was echoed in the current study (Griffin et al., 2011). Genuine encouragement from teachers and school counselors was also invaluable to the students in their belief that they could attend college. Influential parties often extend beyond the school building, with community members impacting postsecondary decisions (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2011), and this was the case for the current study, especially when community members financially supported them in their college pursuits. The financial aid expert affiliated with the nonprofit organization was invaluable for many students to access the financial aid needed. Despite the time commitment involved in partnerships between schools and the community (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020; Casto, 2016), the payoff is made clear through these students' stories.

The fifth and final theme, *school community stakeholder perspectives on college readiness for FGS*, provides additional perspectives from the school community on FGS' college readiness in high school. The school counselors and administrator noted the challenges FGS often face in preparing for college (Bernhardt, 2013; Mitchall & Jaegar, 2018; Pascarella, 2004), but also reported their joy in working with students who are the first in their family to attend college. The school counselors and administrator also verified the resources the FGS reported receiving and utilizing to prepare for college, including: individual counseling, small group counseling, and collaborations with teachers to promote college readiness in curriculum (i.e., synergy in the school system). Again, this illustrates the potential benefits for students when school community members collaborate (Griffin et al., 2011).

Implications for School Communities

Despite the focus on one school community, the current study offers several practical implications for both school counselors and other educators in the school community based on this particular sample's experiences. First, school counselors are in a unique position to provide integral support to foster FGS' resilience and provide a strengths-based approach to working with FGS. School counselors often focus on the tasks surrounding college readiness, such as the application process itself, but the participant's agency and resilience were of utmost importance to their successful matriculation into college. School counselors and teachers can collaborate to provide classroom lessons and schoolwide assemblies that develop students' growth mindset, which encourages overcoming barriers to success through persistence and effort, fostering resilience (Plirstok, 2017). Several organizations, such as Overcoming Obstacles and College Board, have premade lessons school counselors and teachers can use that foster students' resilience (e.g., College Board, 2019; Overcoming

Obstacles, 2019). The participants also noted the importance of their school counselor's and teachers' emotional support; hence, when providing college planning resources, wellness check-ins are necessary as well.

Students benefit when they have positive reflections of their identities represented in society, often increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy, as seen in the results (American Psychological Association, 2017; Gershenson et al., 2018). School counselors can support representation of various identities through specialized college trips. School counselors should consider contacting multicultural student organizations and requesting their support in the college tour experience. Organization members can deliver a specialized presentation to students and field students' questions related to barriers to college, how they overcame them, and the overall collegiate experience. Through this experience, students can truly *see* part(s) of their identity reflected within the college setting and possibly see themselves attending college one day, too. Similarly, school counselors can collaborate with school administration to have an "alumni day" when graduates return to their alma mater and speak to current high school students about their postsecondary experiences. School counselors should devise a diverse panel, attempting to appeal to a wide range of student identities (e.g., FGS, race/ethnicity, gender) and schools (e.g., historically black colleges and universities, two-year, four-year, vocational trade).

Research has long shown family as an important element of the college transition process (Miller, 2007). Given the noted salience of family and friend involvement, the school community should create experiences that allow these individuals to both directly and indirectly support students' postsecondary goals (e.g., see Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020, for an example of such programming, called Pathways to College and Career Readiness Program). Further, the current study suggests that the inclusion of family members in college planning events should extend beyond parents and guardians; for interviewed FGS, cousins and siblings were sources they relied on frequently. For example, if there are future planning meetings with seniors to which parents/guardians are invited, the event organizers can also extend the invitation to any family member the FGS believes should attend the meeting.

Students benefit when schools harmoniously work to promote students' postsecondary success. Thus, college and career readiness should be infused into core subjects, across all levels. For example, the school counselor can collaborate with the English department to incorporate resume-building into the curriculum. In civics, students can learn about fiscal responsibility and financial readiness. Alternatively, schools could support FGS college-going ambitions through creating a formal, school-based college readiness elective. Herein, students would receive smaller-scale instruction, mentorship, guidance, and

support that ultimately aims to prepare students for college. Research contends that school-based college readiness electives (e.g., Advancement Via Individual Determination) are efficacious in (1) improving student resiliency predictors (e.g., self-esteem, confidence, critical thinking skills), (2) promoting a heightened sense of support and school engagement (i.e., a "family-like" culture), and (3) providing integral support for FGS, such as financial aid resources and individualized college preparatory assistance (Huerta et al., 2013; Llamas et al., 2014; Watt et al., 2011). Additionally, students often cite teachers as "pseudo-counselors." That is, they develop meaningful relationships with their teachers, many of whom have supported them in navigating life's challenges. Given this reality, school counselors should share postsecondary information with teachers (e.g., regarding scholarships, SAT/ACT testing dates and deadlines, college visits) through professional development and other communication opportunities.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with any research study, there are limitations to the utilized methodology. There were only five student participants, limiting the amount of data provided and its transferability; however, this is the suggested minimum number for phenomenological studies (Polkinghorne, 1989). We suggest that future studies involve more participants. The small sample size and school context of the current study should be considered when considering implementing recommendations. Only some of the interviews occurred in-person, and the others had to occur via an internet conference platform, making the interview method somewhat inconsistent. However, a semi-structured interview protocol enhanced consistency. Finally, as with any qualitative study, the researchers bring their own beliefs, assumptions, and biases to the process (Creswell, 2013); in light of this, appropriate trustworthiness measures were taken in the data analysis process. Future research could focus on the experience of FGS from different settings (e.g., urban, suburban) and see if and how these students' perspectives differ. More research on how family members other than parents and legal guardians (e.g., siblings, cousins) can influence FGS will be beneficial. Additionally, it is important to know how school counselors, teachers, and administrators are prepared to work with FGS on their college readiness, such as their graduate school training and professional development opportunities. Finally, college readiness efforts should begin well before high school, and educators should help students and families to consider the possibilities of higher education beginning in elementary school (Pulliam & Bartek, 2018). Hence, future research can focus on FGS as early as elementary school and their school community members' efforts to support their college readiness and career development.

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Appendix. Student Interview Questions

- Are you a first-generation college student?

- What made you want to attend college? Did anyone influence that decision?

- Once you made the decision, how did you know what to do, in terms of preparing for college?

- What support did you receive at school? At home? In the community?

- What was your school counselor's role in your college preparation?

- Were there other things you wish she would have helped you with?

- Were there things you asked for help with that your school counselor couldn't help you with, and what were they?

- Are there resources or support available for students who are the first to attend college in their family at [insert school name]?

- Tell me about your experiences in the summer before college, in terms of enrolling in and preparing for college.