

# First-Generation Women Students' Perceptions of Support While Enrolled in Higher Education Institutions: A Phenomenological Study

**Erin Messmer**

East Tennessee State University

**Jill Channing**

East Tennessee State University

*This phenomenological study explored the perceptions of support first-generation women students enrolled in college have. Eleven first-generation women students who were enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs across the United States completed one-on-one interviews. The participants explained the support they felt from family, friends, and members of their institutions, as well as areas where further support could be given. Key themes emerged, such as the role of mentorship, the need for financial assistance, the role of family, the roles of intersectional factors such as race and motherhood, and the offering of support during a crisis, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*Keywords:* first-generation women students, mentorship, COVID-19

Among the large number of students attending college in the United States of America is a unique group known as first-generation students. These students have been described as students whose parents had no more than a high-school education (Ward et al., 2012). They have also been defined as students whose parents may have begun college but never completed their baccalaureate degree (Ward et al., 2012). Whether their parents have limited or no higher education experience, first-generation students are generally viewed as a group in need of support (Ward et al., 2012).

First-generation students are more likely than their peers to have poor academic preparation for college, limited knowledge about college curriculum, and fewer available finances (Ward et al., 2012). Chatelain (2018) argued that first-generation students are guided on how to achieve good grades and to be admitted to a university, but they are not given guidance on how to navigate the world of higher education once they get there. First-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage upon their college admittance.

First-generation students face a unique set of challenges and, as such, need multiple types of support. The intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic class play a role in the development of students' identities. It also creates opportunities and challenges for them. For example, first-generation students struggle to become active members of campus life due to work and life obligations (Pascarella et al., 2004). Higher education institutions can play a critical role in offering support to this student population.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study was that first-generation women students may experience critical differences in the amount of support they receive while enrolled in college in comparison to their non-first-generation peers. These problems can be exacerbated by the multiple intersections of their identities and may not be fully known by higher education administrators. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand these challenges further through the lived experiences of first-generation college women, as well as to understand what support they perceived receiving and not receiving. In this study, support was generally defined as any form of guidance, assistance, or mentorship offered by family, friends, or branches of/people working at higher education institutions the student was attending. First-generation college students were defined as students whose parents or single parent did not have a four-year college degree at the time of the interview. Women were defined as anyone who identified as such, either cisgender or transgender.

### **Literature Review**

The differences between first-generation students and their peers are apparent upon their college enrollment. Phillips et al. (2020) state that higher education is seen as “the great equalizer” (p.1113). This perspective asserts that first-generation students can gain access to and persist through college, eventually graduating and adjusting to the upper- and middle-class rewards of a college education (Phillips et al., 2020). However, only a small amount of first-generation students smoothly transition from high school to college and continue onwards to graduation (Ricks & Warrne, 2021).

## **Differences Between First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Students**

During college, first-generation students are more likely to live off-campus, work full-time, and take classes part-time (Tinto & Engle, 2008). First-generation students are less likely to graduate in their fourth or fifth year of college attendance than their peers (Ishitani, 2006). They are also less likely to complete their degree than their peers (Whitley et al., 2018). Among first-generation students, women are more likely to graduate within a four-year period than their male counterparts (Ishitani, 2006). The rate of graduating Hispanic and Black first-generation students is significantly lower than the rate of White first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006).

The differences between first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers extend beyond academics. First-generation students are not as engaged with their institution as their peers are (Pike & Kuh, 2005). They are less likely to try a variety of experiences while enrolled (Pike & Kuh, 2005). These characteristics are particularly true of first-generation students with limited educational goals and those who live off-campus (Pike & Kuh, 2005). The authors of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2019) found that first-generation students who identified as seniors were less likely to participate in high-impact practices, such as study abroad, internships, or conducting research with faculty members (p. 15). First-generation students may not understand how important it is to be engaged with their college because their parents do not have the background experience to share with them (Pike & Kuh, 2005). They express feeling isolated during their freshman year, retreating to their dormitories often and being afraid of building relationships with others (Ricks & Warren, 2021).

First-generation students are comprised of many characteristics. A demographic sheet from the Center for First-Generation Student Success stated that 60% of first-generation students in 2015-2016 were women (RTI International, 2019). First-generation students are also likely to come from a minority background, be non-native English speakers, and be financially independent of their parents (Tinto & Engle, 2008). They are also at greater risk of dropping out of college than their peers (Ishitani, 2016).

## **Women in Higher Education**

As higher education progressed, the role of women in academia grew. However, the obstacles that women face have transformed over the years. Women are more likely than men to enroll part-time at an institution (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) reported that men first-generation students are 9.4% more likely to persist towards completing college than women first-generation students are (p. 415). Women face different expectations within their families and communities than men do (Laajala-Lozano & Jenkins, 2022). This may be a reason for the dip in first-generation women's persistence towards college completion.

Regardless of their enrollment status, women are often predominantly in charge of or responsible for childcare, domestic tasks at home, and are employed alongside being enrolled in college (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Persisting through college requires outstanding time management abilities (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Significant sources of stress for first-generation women students include the loss of connection to their home and distress within their families (Laajala-Lozano & Jenkins, 2022). Higher levels of stress in this population lead to lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms, indicative of the need for more institution-provided

counseling to support and retain first-generation women students (Laajala-Lozano & Jenkins, 2022).

## **Intersectionality**

As authors of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2020) stated, first-generation students face challenges that non-first-generation students do not. To better understand first-generation students and the differences they experience, it is critical to view their identities through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality provides a lens for viewing how the world is constructed through multiple intersections of identity (Crenshaw, 1991). The concept of intersectionality was first explored by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). Crenshaw (1991) used intersectionality to explain the overlapping identities of Black women to understand violence directed at them. Crenshaw (1991) argued that racism and sexism were both at hand in creating this violence, something that prior feminist and anti-racist discourse had not considered. Carastathis (2014) furthered this explanation, offering that intersectionality posits “that oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems...” (p. 304). Essentially, intersectional theorists argue that understanding the connection of multiple identities is essential to understanding how an individual is treated in society. Today, intersectionality is commonly used to refer to the many ways people identify, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality (Cooper et al., 2017).

In their 2019 study, Arch and Gilman wrote that first-generation students “... are not a homogenous group for whom a single set of services will address all needs at every institution” (p. 997). They explained that the struggles first-generation students experience are not only influenced by their first-generation status, but also by identifying factors such as race and gender (Arch & Gilman, 2019). Knowing that first-generation students are more likely to be women, minorities, and lower-class, intersectionality is a great way to explore the systems of oppression facing first-generation students in their attainment of higher education.

Intersectionality matters when assessing assistance offered to first-generation students. Assistance is often given by institutional agents. An institutional agent is “an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status and authority” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1067). The role of an institutional agent is assumed when a valuable resource, such as information about college, is transmitted from the agent to a receiver (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Essentially, institutional agents hold valuable information about college and are in a position to pass it along to students. Because of their intersectional identities, institutions may believe that first-generation students are being served through offices that meet the other facets of their identities, such as multicultural offices and diversity programs, when they are actually being overlooked (Whitley et al, 2018).

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was conducted using a phenomenological research design. Creswell (2014) identified phenomenological research as a design in which the researcher details the lived experiences of participants, pertaining to a phenomenon that they face. Phenomenology is a concept rooted in

the fields of philosophy and psychology (Creswell, 2014). Central to phenomenology is the concept of intentionality (Sokolowski, 2000). In the phenomenological tradition, intentionality refers to a persons' ability to be conscious of the things they do and the objects around them (Sokolowski, 2000). Phenomenological research aims to understand how participants view and make sense of a specific situation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). How participants understand their situations will be rooted in their intentionality, or awareness, of their lived experience. Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of lived experiences, making them available for analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

In this study, being a first-generation woman enrolled in college was considered a phenomenon, one that could only be learned about through the lived experiences of those women. Intersectionality theory was used to explore the intersections of gender, race, and socioeconomic status as they pertained to first-generation women students and their perceptions of forms of support.

## **Methods**

### **Research Questions**

This study's research questions were crafted with the study's purpose in mind, which is to understand how first-generation women students perceive support during their college experience. To fully understand support as it pertains to these women, the research questions center around the key concepts of academic and emotional needs, institutional support, and intersectionality.

1. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their academic and emotional needs?
2. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their perceptions of forms of support?
3. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the role that identity intersectionality plays in today's higher education environment?
4. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the ways crises are handled by higher education institutions?

### **Population**

tudents selected to participate in this study identified as female and first-generation. For the purposes of this study, first-generation was defined as students whose parents or single parent did not have a four-year college degree. All participants were 18 years of age or older and had completed at least one full year of college. Eleven women from across the United States participated in the study. Five were undergraduate students, and six were graduate students. Only three of the women identified as a race other than White. Each participant selected a pseudonym to be identified by in the final reporting of the study. The pseudonyms used are Anna, Kauni, Alexis, Christina, Michaela, Katie, Michelle, Carol, Georgia, Lucy, and Isabel.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study used what Patton (2015) called a standardized open-ended interview. An interview protocol was created, and follow-up questions were asked as needed. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and data was coded by-hand by identifying themes through key words and phrases used in the interviews.

Data were analyzed using an inductive reasoning process. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described this process as one "...of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories" (p. 367). The coding process started with a thorough reading of each interview, alongside highlighting of key phrases and quotations. Notes were made in the margins to indicate a theme that the key phrases identified. After this initial phase was completed for all 11 interviews, data was organized into themes to identify which ones were the most prominent. Research questions were written on a piece of paper and notes were taken under them regarding which themes emerged that best answered each question. Next, each quotation from the interviews that corresponded with the prominent themes was numbered. Notecards were created with the corresponding numbers and used to organize an outline of presentation of the data.

## **Reflexivity, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations**

My role in the study was that of a partial participant. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identify a partial participant as someone who participates to an extent in the setting they are conducting research in or population which the research is coming from. While I do not identify as a first-generation student, I do identify as a woman. Furthermore, as a college instructor, I have my own perceptions of what quality support for students looks like. These characteristics were potential barriers to my expectations or analysis of some participants' responses. By acknowledging my role as a partial participant, I made strategic choices in my sampling, question-asking, and data analysis that increased the reflexivity of my study. I used bracketing and kept a reflex journal to avoid letting bias slip into the final data analysis.

To establish the trustworthiness, or credibility, of the data, triangulation and member checking were used. Researchers use triangulation to justify discovered themes when examining multiple data sources (Creswell, 2014). In this study, I searched for common themes among multiple participant responses and used institutional resources, such as university websites, to compare to the responses. Creswell (2014) described member checking as allowing participants to review the final report, descriptions, or themes to determine if they find them to be accurate representations of their responses. In this study, each participant reviewed the transcript of their interview to approve its accuracy.

Ethical considerations were given throughout the data collection process. Permission to conduct the study was obtained through the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of East Tennessee State University. All participants signed an informed consent form. The informed consent form was read to them prior to the interview and all participants gave verbal consent before being interviewed. They also had the ability to ask me questions prior to the interview. Because all interviews were conducted online via Zoom, I was in an isolated space to maintain the privacy of interviewees. All interviews were recorded using audio and video technology. Participants were

assured that all efforts to maintain their privacy would be taken. Participant names were omitted from this research publication, as well as any identifiable information. Each participant was asked to create a pseudonym for themselves that is used in the final report. Risks were minimal for this study.

## **Limitations**

This study was limited by its participants. The perspectives gathered in this study might not be those of other first-generation women students across the country or the world. As such, the results of the study were another limitation. Data collected could not be generalized to the entire population of first-generation women students because of the qualitative lens used to conduct the study. Furthermore, the phenomenon explored in this study served as a limitation. It was assumed that definitions of women and first-generation students were clear and that consistent meaning was held in the research. It was further assumed that participants would understand what support meant as it pertained to them and their experiences.

## **Results**

The data collected for this phenomenological study was coded and grouped into prominent themes to address each of the four research questions. Direct quotations from the research participants are provided below as supporting evidence to each research questions' answers.

### **Mentorship Matters**

Mentorship plays a significant role in the lives of first-generation college students. Whether good, bad, or nonexistent, these mentorships, or lack thereof, had an impact on participants. Mentors can improve the academic goals and retention numbers of first-generation students, making them comparable to their peers (Fruht & Chan, 2018).

Faculty members play a particularly important role in student mentorship. Certainly, this was the case for Kauni. When speaking about her decision to come back to college as a non-traditional student, Kauni mentioned a professor who serves as her mentor. She said, "My professor, who is my mentor ... Her view of me is way better than what I see." Throughout the interview, Kauni praised her mentor for her levels of assistance. Kauni's motivation to perform well and earn her degree was connected to the strong mentorship she received.

This level of support from faculty was also expressed by Isabel. As an undergraduate student, Isabel had an advisor who supported her. She indicated that his support made a significant impact on her ability to earn her degree.

I think the transition to undergrad, where I had this really supportive advisor ... he was amazing. He ... helped me during my second year and then continued throughout the rest of my bachelor's ... He even said to ... me and my friend ... he was like, 'I see you guys as my daughters. I just want you to succeed.' So ... having that support system made me finish.

Some women noted that bad interactions with professors and guidance counselors have been impactful as well. Kauni dropped out of college because of a bad interaction with a

professor. She continues to feel the impacts of the interaction today.

I loved writing when I was younger. I wrote poems and stories ... I loved English and I loved writing, and I wrote my very first paper for my English class and I got an F and she told me my writing was absolutely atrocious and that I needed to reconsider being in school. I dropped out. I got an email from her after she found out I dropped out and she apologized, but damage was done ... I didn't actually write after that ... It took me probably a good, 5, 6, 7 years maybe before I even started writing again and even to this day I struggle ... I'll send my papers to different people and have them proofread them now because ... I don't have the confidence that ... I mean, you would think that was back when I was 19 years old ... that would go away, but it hasn't. My confidence, it's really shattered ... That one paper.

When first-generation students encounter negative professors, they may lose interest in the class or respect for the professor's teaching skills (Wang, 2014). In Kauni's case, she lost interest and self-confidence, and dropped out of college as a result. Now enrolled as an undergraduate student at a different institution, Kauni continues to notice the way professors treat her. She said, "I'm kind of animated a little bit and I had a professor who told me my personality absolutely blew. [laughter] Yeah. I almost dropped out ..." This professor teaches in the department Kauni studies in. She was considering attending graduate school at the institution but has changed her mind, partly due to her interaction with the professor, saying, "...I can't go to grad school here, because she ... would be the professor I would need to mentor me, so I can't stay here." Again, a negative interaction has impacted Kauni's decision-making. By negatively speaking to Kauni, her professor led Kauni to lose respect for her, and lost a potential graduate student (Wang, 2014).

Some participants expressed a desire for faculty to fulfill the role of mentor in their educational journeys. Christina noted that she needed support from people who understood what the college experience was like.

I think maybe professors and people who work at the university could give more support because they have the background. My immediate family had no idea what it was like to go to college, so they couldn't really help me in that way.

This sentiment was further shared by Georgia. Now in her doctoral program, Georgia longs for a mentor to help guide her.

I feel ... that some of the people in my cohort ... knew the ropes much better than me because either they'd had family members who had done ... doctoral studies, or they were married to someone who had a doctoral degree. And so, I often felt like I was trying to play catch up ... So, I think ... to had [sic] a mentor would have been helpful...

### **Financial Support is Needed**

A large theme that developed over the course of the study was financial support. As Roksa & Kinsley (2019) noted, first-generation students do not benefit financially from their families in the same way that their non-first-generation peers do. All eleven participants mentioned finances during their interviews. For most participants, the conversation centered around needing help financially to attend or complete college. Several women identified needing



assistance navigating the financial aid process. For example, Michaela described the difficulty she has encountered completing FAFSA.

I feel like first-generation students are definitely students that need help with financial aid stuff, because their parents don't know how to do it, and they don't know how to do it ... I didn't have anyone that knew how to do the FAFSA. So, we [my family] just had to figure it out. And I feel like that's something that there can definitely be more support in, is the financial aid from, like, the federal standpoint.

Money was a source of stress for several participants. Carol and Lucy addressed the difficulty of having out-of-pocket expenses to complete class assignments. Carol described having to make a difficult decision about her education due to financial circumstances.

Some people, from the art school perspective, many first-gens left because we couldn't afford the supplies, 'cause they're very expensive. Um, things like that which other, I'm sure, first-gen students who come from wealthy backgrounds didn't have to go through ... Like, oil paints are, like, \$20-30, like, a tube. So, if you need, like, ten colors, that's \$200 out of pocket ... Um, and that could go to rent and food ... That's part of the reason why I, I dropped out of art school. Like, another friend dropped out too, who was also a first-gen.

Isabel's financial experience was different from the other participants. A child of a low-income family, she stated, "I send money home." She described having to work outside of her graduate fellowship, despite school regulations.

The job thing? I'm not even supposed to work. Like, I was working ... I think 25-hour shifts on top of grad school and you're only supposed to work a maximum of ten hours if you're on fellowship. If you GSI, which is graduate, like, a TA, graduate student instructor, you're supposed to work twenty hours max and even beyond that you can't work more than ten hours. So, I was already violating that ... Because then the problem is, like, they'll ask you ... 'Oh, well, why are you working?' 'Cause I need money.' 'Okay, well, we'll give you, like, this little bit of \$300 and that's going to suffice for the rest ...' It's not gonna suffice. I need money ... It's not a problem that just goes away.

In several instances, money served as a motivator. Katie was also motivated by financial incentives. When asked why she went back to college after earning her bachelor's degree, she responded, "This may sound shallow, but one thing is because I worked at [place of employment], you know, they would reimburse the degrees and ... I felt I needed to take advantage of that." Carol described financial assistance being a motivating factor for her as well. "The only way I was able to afford it was I got a huge hefty financial aid scholarship, which ... I don't have any student loans, which I'm grateful for ... Yeah, so ... that's the only reason why I went ... It was free ... It was a free education."

## **Institutional Support**

Several participants described feeling like they had to seek out support from their institution when they needed help. This contrasts with the institution directly offering support. For example, Alexis said, "I don't know if they [my institution] know I'm first-generation, and I think when it comes to that, usually you have to communicate with them that you're in need as a first-generation....," indicating that first-generation women students need to express their first-

generation status if they need help.

Support for first-generation students may exist on a campus, but first-generation students may have difficulty finding it. Isabel explained that she had to look for the support she needed. She said, "... I didn't get career support until I was in my later years. Like, I'm just getting support now ... and that's because I had to go look for it. If I didn't look for it, I would still not have it." Carol described students receiving financial assistance from her institution needing to find a work study job. She said, "... Like, that's out there for you, but being able to find the job that you need to use that work study fund was all on your own."

Isabel and Christina spoke about their need for help in understanding the unwritten rules of college. Because they are unaware of basic college expectations, first-generation students may encounter negative experiences with institutional members. For example, Isabel emphasized that faculty should "... [sigh] Realize that there are ways that they can support us by, like ... Like, simple things, like not making us feel dumb for asking questions ...," an experience that non-first-generation students may have. Christina further addressed the unwritten rules of being a college student that she thinks first-generation students would benefit from knowing.

... I think it would be awesome if a university published, like, first-generation college FAQs [frequently asked questions]. Like, "Should I meet with friends? Yes, you should do this often. Should I go to office hours? Yes, your professors are there to talk to you and they want to talk to you about it. This does not mean you're stupid. This does not mean you did not do your homework. This does not mean any of those negative things that you might have in your brain."

## **Family Support**

Overwhelmingly, participants indicated that they wanted and valued support from their families. For some participants, support from their family was limited or nonexistent. This was the case for Kauni. She explained:

Oh, my dad is upset with me for being in college. My dad thinks it's a waste of time and he does not understand why, after I get my four-year degree, why I will not go and start making money. He thinks that with your four-year degree, you should be able to make a crap ton of money. And I've tried to explain to him ... as a four-year degree psychology student, I'm not a psychologist yet, I will not make any more money than I was making before. I have to explain that to him and he doesn't understand that. Again, when you talk to somebody who's not educated much past high school, it's very difficult ...

Katie expressed that her family seemed indifferent to her educational aspirations. When asked if she perceived that her family and friends support her, she said:

To be honest, I don't know. It's like, with the more degrees I get, the less support I seem to get. [laughter] And I don't ... I may sound strange, but it's just like, 'Really? Another degree?' is kind of the attitude I get ... from some people ... This is sounding terrible, but when I went to get my master's, my sister was like, 'Why are you getting a master's?' you know, and so it's just been kind of spotty, I guess, the support.

In some cases, families were uncertain how to support the participants. Michaela explained:

I feel like, for me, like, my parents don't understand necessarily what college courses and

things are like, so they just kind of, you know, listen to my experience and they don't really have experience to add to it, so they don't have that input, you know, maybe my friends do have that ... But, I think that, you know, friends with a similar family structure to mine, they still receive the same level of support, it's just a little bit different. They've actually, you know, taken the college coursework and stuff, so they're like, "Oh, this class was hard. You're going to need to take a lot of notes in this course," or something like that, but I think the same general level of support's been pretty similar.

Despite support being limited, participants acknowledged the ways their families helped them, particularly in reaching college. Several participants in this study stated that they did not feel pressure to attend college. Rather, their parents assisted them in whatever ways they could. Lucy provided a clear example of this. She elaborated on her experience talking to her mother about college. When asked if they had conversations about Lucy attending college, she said:

Not really. It was more, just sort of like, it's been mentioned in passing ... Well, I guess when I was looking at colleges, then we started having conversations about it ... but it was more just, like, her asking questions about it and, like, money was a really big concern, so of course she was asking a lot about that. Um, she did take me on college visits, which was a big surprise. I didn't think I'd get to do any of those ... Looking back, I think that she definitely, like, wanted to be more involved with it, but didn't really know how to engage with it, if that makes sense.

It is clear that parental assistance and support is valued by first-generation women students. They believe the support from those closest to them, especially their parents, is critical to their accomplishments in college (McCulloh, 2022).

## **Motherhood**

Of the eleven participants, four identified as being mothers. They spoke about the challenges they encountered balancing both roles. Georgia and Christina addressed the need for childcare. Georgia's family supports her by providing her with this assistance. Christina spoke about the disservice institutions do to students who are mothers by enacting policies that ban children from the classroom. As a former teacher, she experienced students emailing her to let her know they couldn't make it to class because they did not have childcare. She said, "...that's something I'm really passionate about that I wish universities and employers would do a better job of supporting women with."

Feelings of guilt are part of the role conflict that mothers face when deciding between their education and their children (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Balancing the two can cause tremendous stress. Georgia explained the physical and mental toll that balancing college and motherhood had on her.

Um, it's been tough. Like, there's been a lot of time I've looked back from a mother's standpoint and felt really guilty because I took time away from my kids. And it made it more challenging. I mean, I think ... it was physically harder on me because I probably went a lot more without sleep and things like that to be able to complete assignments and stuff, because I would try to wait until I got my kids in bed ... and then I would be up ... sometimes all night long. I mean, I remember as a bachelor's student, I was up sometimes two or three days at a time, and I don't even know how I did that now, 'cause

I can't go one day without sleep. But, I think physically, it probably took a toll on me ... And still, you know, I still look back and wonder if it was worth it all sometimes ... I guess I feel like I missed some of my kids' childhood.

## **Race**

The women who identified as White did not feel that their race or ethnicity influenced the support they receive from their institutions, or they did not acknowledge them as influential factors. Christina acknowledged the privilege that her race provides her:

No, I mean, I've never felt that my race mattered. I'm lucky because I'm White. So, I've never had any ... You know, I know people say white is the default, so you don't think about races often, which I think is true. I never thought about it. It's probably more difficult if you're a person of color, but I haven't had that experience.

For the three women of color who participated in this study, their race has contributed to their college experience. As expressed earlier, first-generation women students are perceptive to how they are treated by professors and other institutional members. Carol took notice of how professors at her institution treated students of color. She explained:

Um ... Yeah, I think that ... Since I have a foreign name, [Carol's name], and, um, though it's pronounced [Carol's name], um, a lot of the professors, when I talk to them first, they don't expect me to have this, like, Midwestern accent, fluent English kind of thing. So, they're kind of taken aback by that ... Sometimes I see from afar, how white professors talk to international students, and it's kind of aggressive, and they just talk at them ... And I don't let that happen to me.

Havlik et al. (2020) found that participants at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) reported a feeling of otherness, or a feeling of being left out or misunderstood, in regard to their status as first-generation students, their socioeconomic status, and their race or ethnicity (Havlick et al., 2020). The intersectionality of multiple identities furthers the feelings of otherness first-generation students felt from peers and faculty members (Havlick et al., 2020), as demonstrated by Carol's experience and observations.

## **COVID-19**

The closing of college campuses resulted in feelings of insecurity for disadvantaged students such as low-income and first-generation students (Fischer, 2020). For these students, college can be "...a provider of hot meals and health care and a place to sleep" (Fischer, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic increased some students' risk of physical and mental health problems and put their academic careers in jeopardy (Lederer et al., 2020).

Many of the women interviewed for this study explained the ways their institutions supported them during COVID-19. They described positive experiences with their institutions and professors during the beginning months of the pandemic, saying that the support was greater than normal. Michelle described the flexibility that her professors demonstrated to her, saying that two of them "... said, you know, 'If something's wrong, if you need time, whatever it may be, just let me know and we'll adjust.'" She also described one of her professor's actions as soon as

the pandemic hit, saying he "... Eliminated the due dates and said ... 'This is the final date of the course, and you need to have it done by this date,' um, but he didn't enforce, you know, 'You've got to have it in by midnight or I'm docking five points,' kind of stuff. He did not do that."

Despite feeling strong support from some areas of their institutions, participants acknowledged needing more support in other ways. Carol described needing more understanding from her professor in terms of teaching during the pandemic.

So, um ... So, I decided to stay at home with my parents for the fall semester ... But I told the professor of the class I'm teaching, 'My parents are older and I do not want to be in a room full of ...' I'm teaching a senior design course ... 'I do not want to be in a room full of seniors who are going to be partying all weekend and bringing their germs in on Monday.' But then, he emailed me back saying that, 'You should prepare to teach mostly in class.' ... Um, but then I got advice from another female professor who said, 'You should have the right to choose to teach it online or in person.' ... So, I'm trying to fight with him right now. When asked if there were any other things that could have been done differently to make her feel more supported, Michaela said:

I think definitely, you know ... And I know that the university was in a struggle with, you know, 'What do we do next?' and stuff. I just, I felt like through this whole process, and even still now, I've been in a constant state of uncertainty. And though they're communicating with us, it's in lengthy, wordy emails that contain a lot of information that just all kind of gets lost in each other. So, I feel like there's got to be a better way to make students feel less uncertain and unstable about what's going on. So, I think that's definitely something that could have been done differently.

Michaela's perspective that the communication her university provided was too lengthy indicates that simplicity and conciseness may be key for institutional effectiveness. Consistent and clear communication with students has been necessary during the pandemic (Lederer et al., 2020).

## Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of first-generation college women as it pertained to the support they receive as students. The themes derived from the data further support the current literature on first-generation women students, as well as add new perspectives.

First-generation women students have a love of and a desire to learn but need emotional support during the process. Several participants addressed the helpfulness supportive faculty members or advisors provided to them. Supportive college faculty and administrators can help first-generation students feel a greater sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017). Mentorships such as these have a significant impact on the emotional development of women as they attend college. They also expressed the impact that negative experiences with faculty members. Kauni's experience of being put down by an undergraduate professor was impactful enough to cause her to drop out of school. That experience carries over into Kauni's current undergraduate life, causing her to question the work she submits as a returning student.

First-generation women students perceive a greater need of financial support from family and institutions. Several participants expressed facing financial hardships while enrolled in college. They stated they were not able to participate in campus events, had to drop out of

academic programs because they could not afford the necessary supplies, or had to change academic plans because of a lack of money. Christina, Michaela, Katie, Carol, and Lucy explained how much financial aid had helped them be able to attend college. In some cases, scholarships and other financial assistance were motivating factors for the women to attend school. Kauni, Michaela, and Isabel expressed the difficulties they face finding financial aid opportunities and navigating the financial aid system.

Another theme that emerged from the research is that the participants wanted more institutional support that is specific to them as first-generation women students. Participants felt that institutional support is minimal at best. Anna, Alexis, Carol, and Isabel stated that they have to ask for or seek out assistance from their institution. Christina specifically referenced the unwritten rules of college and argued that they should be published somewhere for all incoming students. She mentioned an example of this being that she did not know she could form a study group with her classmates until a professor told her it was a good idea. She believed that it was cheating until that conversation. Not knowing that this kind of academic strategy can be used is a prime example of the knowledge non-first-generation students have in comparison to their first-generation peers.

Another difference between these two groups is the role of family support in their lives. Several of the participants indicated that their parents did not know how to support them in college. Christina, Michaela, Katie, Georgia, Carol, and Isabel explained this sentiment further. A few of them indicated that their parents offered various levels of emotional support. However, the overarching theme was that parents were often unsure of how to support their daughters and were not able to give them input about college. These responses correspond to previous findings about parents' responses to their first-generation children attending college, and range from supportive to dismissive (Gofen, 2009; Wang, 2014).

None of the white participants felt that their race had influenced the support they were given while in college. Christina and Georgia specifically acknowledged having white privilege. Meanwhile, Alexis, Carol, and Isabel, the three students of color, described having experiences that were influenced by their race. Specifically, participants mentioned experiencing microaggressions from professors and advisors. Considering the definition of Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality and Carastathis's (2014) further explanation of it, the stories of first-generation women students explain how the intersection of their race with their womanhood and first-generation status play into levels of power and oppression they feel at the university level.

Four of the participants identified as mothers. Christina, Katie, Michelle, and Georgia described different experiences and challenges they faced as mothers and college students. Christina mentioned how difficult it would have been to be a mother as an undergraduate student and explained that she saw a need for more childcare assistance at universities. Indeed, the CCSSE (2020) reported that first-generation students are more likely to find childcare services provided by their institutions very important in comparison to their peers (p. 12). Georgia expressed feeling guilt for the time she had missed with her children and grandchildren while earning her degrees. The intersection of motherhood, womanhood, and being a college student offers unique challenges to first-generation women students.

This research study took place as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded across the globe. Participant interviews were conducted several months after colleges and universities

transitioned to remote learning. The largest theme that participants addressed was that they felt greater levels of support than usual during the pandemic, particularly from their professors. Participants indicated that they felt flexibility from faculty and enjoyed periodic check-ins from their professors and other institutional members. There were, however, mentions from participants of places where more support could have been offered, such as providing more certainty to students and more understanding for their personal needs. The levels of support that were and were not provided to the women during the start of the pandemic align with what first-generation students need when they begin college. Gist-Mackey et al. (2018) identified these supports as informational, emotional, appraisal, and instrumental. Participants in this study indicated needing support in all those ways during the pandemic.

### **Implications**

Based on the research findings, we recommend several areas of improvement for future practice. First, there is a need for institutional support in bridging the gaps between first-generation and non-first-generation students. The “unwritten rules” are difficult for these first-generation women to ascertain when they do not have personal resources, such as parents, to show or tell them what to do or expect. It is the responsibility of higher education administrators and faculty members to find ways to assist first-generation students in learning about the norms they do not know or have access to. Second, institutions need to more clearly provide resources for first-generation students. Institutional leaders should identify areas where they can improve access to first-generation women students, such as assistance with FAFSA and other financial aid or first-generation campus initiatives where first-generation students can connect with their first-generation peers. Third, institutions need to better support students who are mothers. Students with children should be given equal opportunities to attend classes. Institutions should find ways to provide this much needed resource on campus. Finally, institutions should aid the families of first-generation students. Many participants expressed their family members being supportive of their college journeys, but not knowing how to support them. Institutions should consider offering an orientation directed towards the parents of first-generation students. At these orientations, institutions could provide parents with pamphlets and trainings that share resources specific to them and their first-generation children.

The results of this study display areas for further research. First, the interviews for this study took place after the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants had completed part of their spring 2020 semester online and were preparing for the uncertainty of the upcoming fall term. Now in 2022, the state of the pandemic is ever-changing. Future research could be done to assess if first-generation women students perceived any changes to the levels of support they felt as the pandemic continued into 2021.

There is room for research on the family of first-generation women students as a motivation to attend college. Several women in this study expressed a desire to support their families, whether it be their parents or their children. I was not able to further explore these statements in this study but believe them worthy of future examination. Another point addressed by Isabel was the cultural expectations she faced as a Hispanic woman. This study had only three participants of color. Further research on a greater population of first-generation women students of color could be done to understand the impact cultural implications have on first-

generation women students and their decision to attend and stay in college. The role of intersectionality in first-generation women students is worth further exploration.

More research could be done to understand the impact that motherhood has on the decision to attend and remain in college. It was apparent during the study that the women who were mothers faced challenges that those who were not mothers did not face, such as mother's guilt and access to childcare. More attention should be paid to the experiences of college students who are mothers.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study sought to explore the perceptions that first-generation women enrolled in college have of the support that is offered to them. As demonstrated in this article, first-generation students are a vibrant and critical part of the college and university population. The women of this group are determined, intelligent, and motivated to achieve their academic goals. The challenges that they face are unique. They deserve institutional support and guidance to ease the impact of those challenges and make their journey in higher education a more equitable one.



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