



# VOICES OF FIRST-GENERATION TRANSFER STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORT SERVICES

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*This study explored the lived experiences of first-generation transfer students (FGTS) and their utilization of support structures at a mid-size, public university in New England. Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a framework, this case study presents results that sought to center the voices of FGTS as it relates to the support services they utilize. In addition to the FGTS experiences, the case included interviews with university staff members and analyses of institutional documents. Implications for higher education institutions to better support first-generation transfer students are discussed.*

Researchers have documented that first-generation college students, or students whose parents/guardians do not have bachelor's degrees, graduate at lower rates than students whose families include college graduates (D'Amico & Dika, 2014; Jehangir et al., 2012). Nearly 50% of all college students are First-generation (FG) and of these students, 34% attend four-year institutions. A disproportionate number are students of color or students from low-income backgrounds (Hebert, 2018). In addition to their race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and parental educational level, FG students tend to have higher economic barriers, increased dropout rates, or difficulty adapting to the college environment.

The demographics and outcomes for FG students parallel those found within the transfer student population. Of the 21 million students enrolled in higher education institutions (2009), 11.8 million enrolled at community colleges (Ampaw et al., 2015). Many of these students are low-income, minority, and/or first-generation. Approximately 24% of all students who begin their academic careers at community colleges transfer to four-year institutions (Wang et al., 2017). Furthermore, of those community college students who successfully transfer, only 6% earn bachelor's degrees (Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017).

First-generation student research typically focuses on levels of academic preparation prior to entering college (Atherton, 2014; Boden, 2011; D'Amico & Dika, 2013), while research on transfer students centers mainly on declining grade point average (GPA) after the first semester (Laanan et al., 2010; Strayhorn 2007). While research exists about first-generation students and transfer students, little is known about the experiences of students who are both First-generation *and* transfer students. This study highlighted the experiences of first-generation transfer students (FGTS) and the support structures they utilize at a four-year university.

## **What the Research Tells Us about First-Generation Students**

Considering effective services for FGTS, it is worthwhile reviewing current programs and strategies. The literature on first-generation college students often concentrates on the lack of students' academic preparedness (Atherton, 2014; Boden, 2011; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Strayhorn, 2007). Studies about FG students have since expanded to include articles on the institutional support structures that enhance students' sense of belonging (Becker et al., 2017; Means & Pyne, 2017; Strebleton et al., 2014). For this article, sense of belonging refers "to a feeling of connectedness that one is important or matters to others" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.3). Sense of belonging tends to be lower among FG students, particularly those who live off campus and have limited opportunities for academic

and social engagement (Strebleton et al., 2014). Support structures, including student organizations and social base centers on campus, may encourage FG students to feel like they matter, which has a significant impact on their sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017). Academic enrichment programs designed to support FG students' mental well-being and sense of belonging tend to help counter possible obstacles (Becker et al., 2017).

In addition to examining FG's sense of belonging, research pertaining to FG students' lived experiences regarding persistence and graduation has recently expanded (Demetriou et al., 2017; Jehangir, 2010; Jehangir et al., 2012). The divide between the home and school worlds of FG students can cause many to feel their experiences, ideas, and life stories do not matter in college. As a result, FG students feel limited in their learning opportunities and engagement (Jehangir, 2008). Jehangir's (2010) longitudinal study on FG low-income students revealed a need to connect their lived experiences and learning experiences. Incorporating students' lived experiences into the learning process not only sustains the FG students who may have been otherwise silent but strengthens their connections to higher education pedagogy and curriculum.

In a follow-up study, Jehangir, Williams, and Jeske (2012) challenged the isolation and marginalization experienced by FG low-income students at a large, predominately white university. Through contextualizing and deepening discussions on critical issues like race, class, and gender roles FG students demonstrated how their experiences enrich classroom learning. For this enrichment to consistently occur, FG students require their lived experiences intentionally be recognized in the curriculum. Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, and Powell (2017) conducted an empirical investigation into FG low-income students and how their experiences support their retention and completion of college. Data collected was utilized to develop and implement FG student retention strategies which included social engagement programs. Participation in high-impact socially engaged programs, including living-learning communities, faculty-mentored research, and study abroad profoundly impacted First-generation students' success (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

### **What the Research Tells Us about Transfer Students**

Existing literature reveals that transfer student research has a long history. The first research study was published in the 1920s. Scholars focused on students who transferred from junior colleges to four-year universities (also known as receiving institutions). The studies centered on the comparison of the transfer student to that of the 'native' students, i.e., students starting at the four-year institution as a freshman (Jain et al., 2016; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). In the 1960s, transfer student studies expanded when researchers found students experienced a decline in their GPA after the first semester at the new/receiving institution. They labeled this phenomenon 'transfer shock' and it remains the focus of numerous articles for the last 50 years (Laanan et al., 2010).

Over the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of students enrolling at community colleges with the intent to transfer to four-year institutions (Stempel, 2013). The increase in community college enrollment correlates with the transfer student enrollment at four-year institutions. The surge in numbers has once again expanded research opportunities.

Existing literature centered on transfer students' engagement and involvement, paying specific attention to how students rated their educational experience once at the receiving institution (D'Amico et al., 2014; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Lester et al., 2013). Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) found that community college transfer students were less socially engaged than their native peers, which had an impact on their retention at the four-year institution. D'Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, and Ginn (2014) uncovered that integration at four-year institutions for transfer students was closely related to academic engagement, not social involvement. Involvement in clubs and organizations was not as important to transfer students. Lack of involvement did not have a negative impact on their engagement, nor their sense of belonging. They discovered academic engagement, not social engagement, could be achieved through educationally meaningful assignments. Establishing connections to faculty members proved a better indicator of student retention and success.

While research dedicated to understanding the various types of support services designed for first-generation student or transfer students remains critical, studies designed to comprehend services that support both First-gener-

ation and transfer students (FGTS) is limited. Despite their increasing numbers at four-year colleges and universities, FGTS have lower graduation rates and could benefit from additional support (Lester et al., 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014). Moreover, since their multiple identities present challenges, FGTS are likely to experience greater barriers and have more unique needs than their peers who are either First-generation or transfer, but not both.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study, I employed Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984). Schlossberg's theory defines a person's capacity to cope with transition or 'taking stock' of coping resources in terms of four factors referred to as the 'Four S' (Anderson et al., 2011; Killam & Degges-White, 2017; McCoy, 2014). The Four S, viewed as assets and/or liabilities are (1) *situation* – the time in which the transition occurs; (2) *self* – the person's identity and level of optimism when dealing with change; (3) *support* – resources, people, services that strengthen and encourage persons in transition; (4) *strategies* – the coping resources the student brings to the transition (Killam & Degges-White, 2017).

Schlossberg's theory provides a framework in which FGTS are perceived as students in transition. This structure allowed me to understand FGTS' experiences as they relate to persistence and success and how they intersected with the institutional support services provided (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Schlossberg's theory provided me with a lens through which I could explore because it shaped the study by 'taking stock' or identifying the potential resources students already possess that help them cope with transition (Killam & Degges-White, 2017, p. 25).

## METHODOLOGY

I chose an exploratory qualitative case study design because of my interest in understanding the lived experiences of FGTS and what institutional support services they utilized when persisting toward graduation. Following the traditional qualitative constructivist format, the study incorporated multiple sources of data, inductive data analysis, and participants' meaning (Creswell, 2007). The study was bounded by a single case at a four-year university conducted during the 2019 fall academic semester. Consistent with the case study design, interviews, and focus groups were conducted, as well as an analysis of documents and materials (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study was limited to the FGTS students who transferred from community colleges or other four-year universities. The study was limited to faculty, staff, and higher education administrators who had direct interaction with transfer students.

I conducted three student focus groups lasting approximately 90 minutes, three individual staff interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes each, and analyzed seven documents. The detailed data collection from these multiple sources allows for the assembling of rich, thick, descriptive data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The focus group and interviews were all audio recorded. The participants' responses were then transcribed verbatim, analyzed through coding, and organized into themes. The focus groups comprised of eight students yielded data on how FGTS described their experiences. As a method the use of semi-structured interviews allowed staff to discuss specific topics about FGTS. The use of an interview guide allowed me to ask a list of predefined opened and closed-ended questions. These protocols offered me chances to gain new perspectives regarding FGTS experiences. Finally, documents reviewed focused on materials, handouts, and the university website paying particular attention to themes and codes that emerged from the focus groups and interviews.

### Population and Setting

The study was conducted at a mid-sized, four-year public university in New England. Transfer students at the University comprise nearly 50% of the 11,000 undergraduate student population. System-wide first-generation data had just started to be collected in Fall 2018 for first-year students revealing that 39% of the first-year students were First-generation. This data allows the University to estimate the percentage of total FG students at the university. These data align with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that finds First-generation students make up 34% of U.S. undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Cataldi et al., 2018).

## Participants

I recruited participants through email, referral, and snowball sampling. I utilized purposive sampling to recruit FGTS participants for focus groups. As a Student Affairs professional, my knowledge of the faculty, staff, and administrators at the university allowed for the recruitment of institutional agents to participate in the semi-structured interviews (Bensimon, et al., 2019). I recruited agents whom I believed had knowledge of transfer students' characteristics and who appeared to know how to best support these students. I sent recruitment emails to transfer students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

The final sample comprised of eight transfer students who self-identified as being First-generation, six of whom transferred from community colleges and two from other 4-year institutions (*Table 1*). The three higher education professionals included an Assistant Director in Career Services, a Coordinator of Advising & Tutoring Services, and a Director of Enrollment and Student Success.

**Table 1.** *Focus Group Student Demographics*

| Name    | Ethnicity  | Gender | Age | Academic Level | Major                | Transfer From     |
|---------|------------|--------|-----|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Bin     | Asian      | Male   | 25  | Senior         | Computer Science     | Community College |
| Billy   | Asian      | Male   | 20  | Junior         | Business             | 4 yr. university  |
| Claudia | Latina     | Female | 22  | Senior         | Business             | Community College |
| Diana   | Latina     | Female | 34  | Grad           | Community Psychology | Community College |
| Destiny | Latina     | Female | 22  | Senior         | Biology              | 4 yr. university  |
| Edina   | Multi-Race | Female | 34  | Grad           | Community Psychology | Community College |
| Maria   | Multi-Race | Female | 24  | Grad           | Community Psychology | Community College |
| Montana | White      | Female | 19  | Sophomore      | Business             | Community College |

## Positionality and Trustworthiness

For this study, I position myself through the lens of a first-generation female of color (Creswell, 2007). Noting my position as a practitioner whose research and administrative work focuses on understanding the experiences of historically underrepresented students, I remained mindful of how my identity and experience could shape my interpretation of the data. To establish credibility, I triangulated the data. I created research questions for different participants and collected data through different sources. I also employed member-checking by following up with participants after the data collection process to ensure my interpretations were plausible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Emails were sent to participants to clarify certain answers, and they were given opportunities to expound. I wrote detailed descriptions that allowed the reader to conceptualize the study to the extent that the information is transferable to other situations possessing shared characteristics (Creswell, 2007).

## FINDINGS

Schlossberg's Transition Theory helped shape my analysis of how FGTS transition to the university and the role institutional support services have on their transition and success. Defined through Schlossberg's 4-S System, the transition process provides a way to identify resources students possess to cope with transitions (Anderson et al., 2012). The study explored what, if any, support services utilized by FGTS enhanced their persistence towards graduation. Common themes developed from the data analysis were attendance of transfer orientation, types of services utilized, reliance on family/community support, and accessing transfer advising/advisor. In this section, I center on the voices of the participants to examine each of the themes.

## Attending Transfer Orientation

FGTS assess their situation by their ability to manage the transition into the university. Implementing policies and programs within four-year institutions that allow for transfer students' successful transition is essential (Bahr et al., 2013). Bahr and his associates (2013) posit that a student's perception of their connectedness to the institution plays a role in their academic integration. Orientation programs often used as a measure of academic integration are one way universities seek to address students' perceptions. All student participants attended either an online or on-campus orientation program. These same students reported receiving accurate information regarding transitioning to the University, yet the programs lacked the connectedness most were expecting. For example, Billy explained:

I did. I attended orientation, but I really don't remember what we did. We just like walked around campus basically, uh, just picked our classes. Yeah, that's pretty much it. I sorta like... was hoping they like, I don't know, we'd be able to go to the dining halls, get something to eat. I don't know if like to go to east campus check out like the facility over there. It was just like touring north campus, just walking around and then, yeah, picking your classes, getting your Ucard and walking out.

Destiny echoed the same sentiments:

I came super late. So, if you thought yours was watered down, I was like 0.0% concentration. Like it was real low... we didn't do like a real tour. We went into um, [an academic building] Right. There was like maybe like 20 of us and we just seen pictures, a slideshow of the campus. So we just watched the Slide show, the virtual tour. We just watched the virtual like slide show and that was it.

Montana shares her similar experience but added that connecting with other transfer students prior to her on-campus orientation provided for a better experience stating:

So when I transferred, they [university] opened up a Facebook transfer group ... I was like banking on to make friends but they opened it up like a day or two the weekend before, like you were supposed to move in... We all like flooded into this Facebook group and we all like did the whole Snapchat thing, made like another group chat for people who really wanted to make friends. And we became like a solid group of transfers together... and then, um, we all kind of like made a plan to hang out the night before the orientation and we did, and we all got together and met each other, and we were this like solid unit of transfer friends. and we went to the orientation together... the orientation itself, it was pretty basic orientation. I found it to be not too, not super exciting.

As stated by the study participants, successful transitions into 4-year institutions are essential to transfer students' involvement and engagement. Based on the conversations, the university seems to be missing this important opportunity. The virtual tours offered by the university are a basic service that, unfortunately, may not satisfy the student's need to experience connectedness. In Montana's situation, her connection occurred in the university's transfer Facebook group and not during orientation. Unfortunately, the transfer orientation program designed to promote academic integration seems to leave students with a negative perception of their transition experience. According to Bin's experience, the online transfer registration process seemed to be rudimentary: "I did the online...I don't remember. Certainly, because two years ago, yes... they help me like how to sign up for class...so yeah, it was helpful."

University employees participating in the study echoed the same sentiment about the support offered during transfer orientation sessions. One staff member shared their perception:

I think the one thing that we could do differently is perhaps change the way we orient them. Um, but that's a real struggle. And I don't, you know, I don't want to say that the folks in orientation are doing a good job. I think it's a real struggle because some, a lot of transfer students, they don't want more orientation. I just want to get my classes, my ID and be done. Um, and I, so I, you know, I think that there's a challenge to kind of differentiate the students that might benefit from a more in-depth orientation versus those that are like, I just want to come in and go.



Higher education institutions that recognize the need to address the specific needs of transfer students include practices like required transfer orientations. The institution's current approach to orientation often does a disservice to transfer students. The lack of academic advising and campus tours can delay the student's transition and academic integration. Taking a more specific approach to understanding the multiple yet common characteristics of transfer students may allow institutions to make a huge impact on a student's ability to persist (Miller, 2013). Orientation programs are the university's way of letting transfer students realize their worth. If the university's mission remains centered on having transfer students feel valued, then providing dedicated resources like tailored orientation programs could help FGTS feel welcomed as well as improve student outcomes.

### Utilizing Institutional Support Services

Although existing research emphasizes the importance of recognizing students' lived experiences, it was surprising to hear FGTS describe the treatment they received that hindered them from utilizing the service(s). For example, when asked about the Career and Co-op Center, Diana explained her reluctance to venture over:

Its support is there for students too, if they would like to take advantage of those supports. ... like for the careers. I, I think when I came at the beginning, I always see people who don't look like me going to the office and I feel like it was not the best for me... So I didn't feel, I saw like lot of minorities going through that door. They were always like white males with suits and stuff. I feel like, Oh, I don't know. That'd be weird. It felt like somehow intimidating even to see like an, like I recognize how they had to be like well dressing, stuff like that. But I feel like the office wasn't for me. Um, so I didn't seek out... for their support just because of that. And I shouldn't...

Although Diana was aware of the resource, she felt the service was not inclusive and felt unwelcoming. She never visited the office but felt as a female student of color she did not belong there, and that the department would not cater to her unique needs. When asked about his knowledge, experience, and use of the career center, Bin's experience proved different:

Um, I knew it's because, um, I knew my friend was there, so they, they refer me to that, that um, in the staff here they are very helpful. So, uh, they have me so like, um, uh, they help me like revamp everything. Um, before I go to the interview before I, uh, I got a job, so it's very nice, you know, like, um, so I got like, uh, um, so I got an a company call me the first time and told me and I mean they remind me, um, practice interview and I went through that interview and got, that position like two days.

As a male student of color, Bin had a positive experience, as did Billy:

Yeah. I'm in the same program too, but I'm not like, I'm not in a co-op yet, but all my experience has been pretty good with either go in there and get your resume checked out or like a mock interview or something for, I actually had a couple interviews in there too. It is a good resource to have at the university.

Both males of color, Billy and Bin did not feel intimidated like Diana. From their comments, one can infer they felt welcomed and supported. When asked about her perception of the experiences of FGTS who utilized the same career services, the interview participant stated:

So, they may not start the career piece early. And when they do, depending on wherever they transferred from, I think it's sometimes it's a lot of work to get them to even think about what major you want to get into. Have you spoken with people, done informational interviews to speak with people and we are wired such that you'd say, how about your family? Then it goes back to, I don't have, I'm the first person to come to college. And when you start talking about networking with them to them, all they're thinking about is, I don't know, an immediate family member that has been in this profession before. So, you have to break it down to them and say, forget that. How about even your cohort people in your faculty? Different people come into career events, then they get the aha moment. So personally, when I notice or realize the student is a transfer student, I put that extra amount in it.

This staff member makes the extra effort to assist the FGTS, yet it only seems to happen if the student comes into the Career and Coop Center. Students like Diana, who felt unwelcome or who did not hear about positive

peer experiences, have never visited the center. Her perception that that service was not for her prevented her from receiving assistance with resumes and interviews. One way the university could better support FGTS is to bring career service supports to the transfer student. Opportunities to increase knowledge about these important resources could include staff members visiting classes, particularly those that have a high percentage of transfer students. Career services could also offer peer student career counselors that are more representative of the student body to offer basic support for FGTS and serve as liaisons.

Questions about another student-centered resource, tutoring, revealed contrasting responses and thus warranted further analysis. Tutoring supports are heavily promoted during orientation, in recruiting materials, and on the university's website. All study participants were aware of the tutoring services, and the following is Destiny's experience with the Tutoring Center:

I'm actually at the tutoring center quite often and they're great. They are, I think, I think orgo [organic chemistry] tutoring needs a lot of work just because there's like 500 of us taking orgo 1 and another 500 taking orgo 2 with, like one or two tutors in there. So I think for one, I think that that tutoring space needs to be extended into a larger space...

Destiny's utilization of the service was positive. Although there were many students who sought out tutoring services to pass this course, it did not deter her from using it. Montana felt the same about the tutoring services and utilized them for a different course, sharing:

Love the tutor center. I'm horrible. And they are getting me through my stats class with like a solid 85. Yeah. Like I took stats once before. I got like a 68 at my community college. I was dreading taking it again. I do love my professor. She's awesome as well. But I go to tutoring and I see the same tutor every week at the same time. And he just very like, he doesn't just give me the answers. He'll be like, okay, what's the answer? And I'll give it to him, and he'll say, okay, why though? And he will not let me get past it until I figure out why. Yeah. I really appreciate the tutor center.

Other students' experiences with tutoring were less than positive. Maria shared:

I never liked the tutoring centers here... to this day, avoid them. I always felt discriminated against using those services. I found that especially if it was like white students, I would find that it was kinda like, they were just rude... it wasn't even like, I just didn't feel like they were editing myself or they were trying to help me. I think it was just like, you know, like it just left me feeling like dumb a lot of the times. And even when it was just like people that like work there full time, like look the actual advisors and stuff like that, if I were there, like I just never felt empowered. And so it got to the point where whenever I would go to these services, like I would just stop saying that English is not my first language. And the treatment was very different.

Claudia agreed with Maria and stated she had a similar experience saying: "I go to the tutoring centers, [but] they don't want me there." When asked about tutoring, both Bin and Billy indicated they knew of the service but did not have a need to utilize them.

Maria and Claudia's experience with tutoring may not have necessarily had to do with them being FGTS but more so because of their race/ethnicity and because English is their second language. The tutoring centers, mostly staffed with students, can intentionally or unintentionally create an unfriendly environment. Implementing a training program that includes modules on cultural competency and unconscious bias should be required. This training model could create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students, including FGTS.

One little-known campus resource was the Study Abroad Office. Although listed in the Transfer Guide, many study participants did not know this resource existed. Studies uncovered that participating in or utilizing programs and resources could benefit all students, no matter their background. Resources such as study abroad, career services, or faculty research projects are more likely to be underutilized or unfamiliar among FGTS, although participation in such activities can help FGTS advance toward successful college outcomes (Demetriou,

et al., 2017). This study's findings mirrored existing research about the reasons why FGTS underutilizes support services. Like career services, the study aboard office should look for additional marketing and informational strategies that are geared to FGTS.

### **Family/Community Support**

FGTS may receive less support from their parents or families to attend college. Living at home, busy work schedules, and family responsibilities can often have a negative impact on their persistence and graduation. Given their unique challenges, it is likely that students may seek out and receive support from individuals outside their family, including faculty, university staff, or peers (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Familial and community support was present in much of the FG literature, sparking my interest in learning about the role it played in the participants' lived experiences. Montana, who lived with her 94-year-old grandmother before moving to campus, shared that although they are from different generations, they work everything out together. Destiny also lives on campus and feels support from some family members but not others:

So, my parents, they support me but like no one in my family has a college degree. So my mom, a lot of times she's unsupportive because all she sees is me just leaving my family. And I have like a very like nuclear family. It's just me and my mom, my dad and my brother. So she just like, a lot of times she, there's like some level of resentment because I'm leaving.

Marie, who also lives on campus, shared similar experiences:

My mom is super supportive. But my mom is also a lot of pressure... I know that she's struggling with the fact that like I'm 24 and I'm not married yet. I don't have kids. Like I don't have my own house, you know what I mean?

Even though her mother is supportive, Maria feels the pressure to start a family rather than continue her education. Claudia, who is a commuter and lives with her mother, receives support from people outside of her family:

Um, so when it comes to support, so I had a lot, like, I depended a lot on like my friend's support in the beginning of my community college career because I, we did, we all didn't know what we were doing together. So we were like, let's help each other and not fail together. Um, and so, um, personally you, I couldn't depend on family because it's just me and my mom. I'm gonna like I'm her only child and she's sick. And the reason why it was so hard is because, um, her being sick out of that pressure of like if something happens to her, like I'm 18 and homeless and so what am I doing with college? Like that's why I kept kinda like playing with the idea of like dropping out of school. Cause like, what do I do with college? And then I would go the office and tell my boss I'm thinking of dropping out. She's like, no you're not. She's like, no you ain't. Um, and like she would get me resources that I would need.

Claudia's home life pressures caused her to consider dropping out of college but persisted due to the support she received from the community college faculty and staff. Bin could not solely rely on his family and looked to others for support: "They couldn't help me, so expect my friends to help me." Like Montana, Billy felt that he could just do it on his own:

I feel like I just did it myself because it's easy to navigate. You can just Google anything and yeah, I mean I didn't really seek help cause I didn't really need it, if I did then someone would pointed me in the right direction.

Family and community support for FGTS college students can play a critical role in their academic success (Demetriou et al., 2017; Lester et al., 2013; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). The importance of these types of supports cannot be overestimated because FGTS with family obligations rely on such supports to enhance their academic success; it is the support students bring to college with them. The cultural capital FGTS possesses that often helps them to succeed, especially when the necessary institutional supports are not available, accessible, or known. Though Billy and Montana are FGTS, they possess the cultural capital necessary to navigate the university system and have successfully sought out and utilized campus support services.



## Accessing Academic Advising/Advisor

The participants' coping strategies informed their decisions and choices as they managed the transition. FGTS each had prior experience with advising and academic advisors. These experiences assisted them in controlling the direction of the transition as they sought advice on selecting courses. Literature is rich with studies on the impact positive advising interactions can have on student retention, particularly for FGTS (Lockhart, 2019; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Academic advisors have the unique opportunity to initiate and develop a strong relationship with FGTS before they step foot on campus. Unfortunately, not all study participants had opportunities to create such a relationship. Billy transferred from another four-year university and shared his experience with his advisors from each institution:

I think my advisor is my professor also, so I don't really like that cause I feel like a professor like teaches and does a lecture and they don't have to like help kids, like make their schedule. I don't really like [to] burden them with coming in for like a million questions. But like at [my other institution], they had like your advisor was like, that's their job was to be an advisor. So I think that was better over there as opposed to here having a professor be your advisor and also they don't really know well in my experience they don't really know as much as what an actual advisor would know cause I had like a question about like taking a freshman seminar and then they were like, Oh, I don't know.

Montana's experience with an advisor she met when arriving on campus was positive:

I went last semester for this schedule that I'm currently in and she was great. She totally like if I didn't really want to take something like my math courses, she asked me if I want to take one. I said, I'm not really comfortable like there yet. And she was like, that's fine, but like, let's like figure out something else you can do instead like to get you there; she was super personable.

Unfortunately, Destiny's experience was lacking as well:

My advisor that I had from the beginning as transfer for bio, she like seriously ruined a big chunk of my life because she was like, your grades are terrible. You're never going to be a doctor, find another career.

Like Billy, Claudia discussed her experiences with a professor as her advisor:

So basically they're teachers, they're professors or advisors, but I don't feel like they're trained. Like I don't feel like they know what to tell me. Like if I ask them a question they don't know. So like if you asking us all at once I'll tell you something and they don't know. Then like where do you go? And then like you try to contact other people and then they don't answer. So it's like literally where do I go if no one answers.

Receiving frequent and in-depth advising remains crucial, particularly to FGTS. Students and even institutions may not consider advising as a support; nonetheless, it is imperative. Advising provides an opportunity to select courses, and it is also a way to foster engagement, build relationships, monitor student progression, and provide guidance. These opportunities are frequently missed when advising becomes nothing more than a meeting to check off required boxes. Offering academic advising early and often can minimize obstacles FGTS may face when persisting toward graduation. Students who benefit from specialized, tailored advising can stay on track and graduate in a timely fashion (Lockhart, 2019; Wetzel & Debure, 2018).

## DISCUSSION

The study's findings revealed that FGTS were aware of various support services offered by the university, yet utilization of such supports varied for several reasons. For example, only two of the study participants utilized the campus tutoring services and had positive experiences. Although two others knew of the tutoring services, they did not need to utilize them. Other participants expressed how they felt unwelcome or discriminated against and, therefore, never sought out tutoring. Similar findings emerged regarding discussions centered on the Career and Coop Center. While most students at least utilized the services or planned to do so in the future, one

student felt the service was not for her. As a female student of color, she perceived that career service supports were designed for white males and consequently never sought the center's services.

Other services, such as the Study Abroad Office, remained inaccessible to the study participants; most expressed having very little, if any, knowledge about its' existence on campus. Research has revealed study abroad programs can benefit FGTS (Demetriou, et al., 2017). Although information about the Study Abroad Office and its 300+ programs appear in the Transfer Guide, none of the study participants knew of the office's existence.

One very interesting finding was the varied success of academic advising. While some students had initial positive experiences with their advisors, others did not. Those who had success during the first semester experienced less favorable results in subsequent semesters. FGTS seem to be yearning for solid student-advisor interactions. Several participants expected and desired to build such a relationship with their advisor above meeting once a semester to select courses. Students stated in the focus group they had worked with life coaches at their previous colleges and expected to find something similar at the university. This unintended finding seems to be a crucial support service that can enhance FGTS success.

### **Limitations**

This study contains some limitations that should be noted. First, all study participants came from the same university, making generalizations limited to this study. Second, students of color were overrepresented in the sample, which is not an accurate model of the minority rate at the university. Lastly, only staff members participated in the study due to scheduling conflicts with faculty and decision-making administrators.

### **Practical Strategies to better support FGTS**

Community colleges and four-year universities provide services such as advising or orientation. These support services, however, should be specialized to better promote success for FGTS. Based on findings from this study and review of first-generation and transfer student literature, I outline practical strategies that can better support the unique needs of the FGTS.

**Strategy 1: Enhancing Transfer Advising.** Creating partnerships between community colleges that allow four-year universities' transfer advisors to conduct academic advising on the community college campus as soon as the student starts at the community college can ensure that students receive adequate information. Such advising enhances the transfer process and timely degree completion. Like four-year university advisors at community colleges, there should be opportunities as well for community college advisors at the four-year university. Community college advisors could receive training across both institutions on admission requirements, degree requirements, transfer credits, and articulation agreements. Such training allows for a deeper understanding that better guides students through the transfer process. Informal transfer advising can be encouraged within the classroom. Faculty can do so by emphasizing course content the student will need to know in order to succeed at the four-year university.

Dedicated transfer advisors at the four-year institution allow transfer students to receive advising that is specific to their unique needs. Since no two transfer students are alike, having transfer-specific academic advising guides transfer students in decision-making around enrollment and course selection. Doing so helps point students in the right direction toward degree completion instead of going down unintended pathways, which can delay graduation. In addition, training transfer advisors helps them gain professional development in honing their skills as life coaches to meet the needs of the FGTS.

**Strategy 2: Enhancing Transfer Orientation.** Pre-Orientation provides opportunities for students to visit the four-year university before or during the transfer process. Transfer students are invited to open houses conducted by the university. In addition, transfer students can tour the campus, visit academic departments, and sit in on faculty or student presentations. Allowing FGTS opportunities to get a 'sneak peek' at what the university has to offer can further inspire and enhance the transfer process.

Once admitted into the university, students are given the option to attend full-day transfer orientations that include campus tours, student club fair, and university resources fair. This is particularly important for students who did not have the option to attend a pre-orientation or open house. In addition, incorporate concurrent sessions into the orientation programs that allow students the opportunity to attend many workshops on various topics, such as major or career exploration.

**Strategy 3: Tapping into an Underutilized Resource - Familial/ Community Supports.** Informational programs should be designed to introduce families to what their student's college experience will entail. This allows for a better understanding for families when students must stay after classes end to attend tutoring or work on group projects. Invite families and communities to special events that recognize and honor student accomplishments, such as award ceremonies, induction ceremonies, poster presentations at symposiums, or speaking/performance events. Not only does it allow for involvement and engagement of the family, but it also strengthens the support students receive from their families. Implement family liaison programs that allow First-generation transfer students' families to be involved in the development of programs designed for this unique population. Not only are the families in the program providing support to incoming FGTS students but also to their families.

## CONCLUSION

This study attempted to identify existing institutional support services for FGTS and how they access those supports. Examining the types of services FGTS access helped to better ascertain the effectiveness of these services. Just because universities design and implement student-centered resources does not guarantee they will serve FGTS. To assist this student population, higher education leaders must use their agency to implement effective, accessible support services to address FGTS' unique needs.

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