EXPLORING THE CONNOTATIONS AND STIGMA OF FIRST-GENERATION AND CONTINUING-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT TERMS

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Abstract

We explored the connotations and stigmas surrounding the term first-generation college student (FGCS) among FGCSs and their peers from continuing-generation backgrounds in higher education. We used a mixed-methods approach, conducting qualitative interviews to gain in-depth perspectives and a quantitative survey to gather comparative data. We found that FGCSs were likelier to experience stigma, and more participants reported a negative connection towards the word. The continuing-generation student term had either neutral or no connotations among participants. We identified key themes that illuminated these beliefs to enhance understanding and enable professionals and institutions to improve campus climate. Our research recommends using collective identifiers for CGCS, implementing support services, and educational campaigns that cultivate an inclusive and interactive campus environment to reduce the stigma experienced by first-generation students.

Keywords: stigma, first-generation college students, continuing-generation college students, connotations, mixed-method research

dentity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and others. Due to the emergence and heightened attention on the first-generation college student (FGCS) collective identity in higher education (Wildhagen, 2015), we sought to understand the connotations and stigmas associated with the term by FGCSs and their continuing-generation college student (CGCS) peers. The extensive literature has documented substantive issues surrounding the first-generation college student experience, spanning financial, academic, and emotional (Ricks & Warren, 2021). Understanding the connotations and possible stigmas can provide insight into social and collegiate peer-group experiences so that higher education professionals and institutions can improve campus climate by increasing positive interactions between student groups to empower FGCS and reduce the stigma they encounter.

Collective Identity and Identifiers

Klandermans & de Weerd (2000) distinguished an individual personal level identity from a collective group level identity. For the individual level, they relied on the distinction made by Turner and Tajfel (1979), who argued that a person has one personal and several social identities; a personal identity defines self in terms of personal attributes, and social identity defines self in terms of social category memberships. At the collective group level, collective identity is "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 771). According to Klandermans and de Weerd (2000), group identification forms the link between collective and social identity and thus begins the bridge between the individual and collective level of identity. Understanding personal, social, and collective identifiers unique to the university environment can prove helpful in understanding individual and peer-group experiences and have implications for campus climate.

Conceptually, collective identity resides in a shared and interactive sense of *we-ness* and *collective agency*. Although the concept is distinguished analytically from personal and social identity, as Snow (2001) pointed out, the three types overlap and interact: "Empirically, collective identity can surface in various contexts, although the preponderance of research has focused on its connection to gender, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, and particularly social movements" (p. 1). In recent years, scholars have explored various identifiers held by college students (Grabsch et al., 2021) and the emergence and prevalence of the first-generation identifier in the United States.

Emergence of the First-Generation Identifier in Higher Education

The term FGCS was first coined by Fuji Adachi (1979). He defined any college student whose parent has not received a bachelor's degree as an FGCS. This term was a researcher or practitioner-proposed term at first but later received enough traction to be used as personal, social, and collective identifiers by institutions (i.e., K–12, higher education) and individual students (e.g., both FGCSs and their CGCS peers).

In academic research, first-generation college research began to increase after Terenzini et al.'s (1996) "First-Generation College Students: Characteristics, Experiences, and Cognitive Development" appeared. Now, journals like the *Journal of First-Generation Student Success* are dedicated to innovative and progressive research focused on analyzing and improving the experiences of this unique group within the context of higher education. A variety of research exists on FGCSs—their position as academic learners, their perception of academic retention, their mental needs, their norms affecting their coping and help-seeking behaviors, and their identity based on institutional and familial focus (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Chang et al. 2020; House et al., 2020; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Ricks & Warren, 2021; Schelbe et al., 2019). The term's emergence and prevalence

have led to its use in high school, pre-college admission processes, and targeted scholarships and support programs.

Definitional Variations Impede Student Success Programs

Defining FGCS and CGCS can be complex, given the differences among U.S. institutional operational definitions. Bettencourt and associates (2022) expressed that there is no clear consensus within research on how to define a first-generation college student. Peralta and Klonowski (2017) further noted that the lack of a single definition of FGCS has implications for higher education and makes it increasingly challenging to generalize and compare information about this student group. Therefore, understanding how studies operationalize FGCSs is critical when developing effective first-generation programs (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011).

Garriott et al. (2017) defined *FGCSs* as students whose parents have not obtained a bachelor's degree. *CGCSs* are those enrolled in postsecondary education and have at least one parent with a 4-year degree (McCarron, 2022). In 2018, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that only 29.1% of FGCS whose parents have attended some college and 19% of FGCS whose parents have no more than a high school diploma have attained a bachelor's degree compared to 58.7% of CGCSs (Cataldi et al., 2018). This finding suggests that higher education is not pinpointing and addressing student needs. Furthermore, it highlights how not having a parent finish college can have a lasting impact on FGCS. As the collective identifier of first-generation grows, it is important to understand how the term is understood by those who use it to express their identity and by institutions.

Stigma and College

Erving Goffman's (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* inspired extensive research on stigma's nature, sources, and consequences. Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in research publications on stigma (Chen et al., 2020), particularly in social psychology. Research on stigma has been highly productive since Goffman's seminal essay, resulting in elaborations, conceptual refinements, and repeated demonstrations of the negative impact of stigma on the lives of the stigmatized. The concept of stigma is now applied to various circumstances, ranging from urinary incontinence to exotic dancing (Southall et al., 2017; Armas, 2022), to leprosy (Arba et al., 2021), to cancer (Vrinten, 2019), to mental illness (Pescosolido et al., 2021), and more. Stigma is a concern within higher education. As Al-Hindawi and colleagues (2022) indicated, a person can experience stigma "based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society [and] those being stigmatized usually feel different and devalued by the society" (p. 3095).

Relevance and Purpose

We used semistructured interviews and survey responses to gain insights into the experiences of CGCSs and FGCSs. Specifically, our research purpose was to understand the connotations associated with the FGCS and CGCS terms and the stigmas associated with the FGCS community to, as mentioned earlier, improve campus climate and increase understanding of this diverse group. Our research includes both FGCS experience and their continuing-generation peers to understand its possible impact and prevalence on college students' social environment. The inclusion of CGCS extends the existing scholarship on first-generation stigma.

Method

To understand the connotations and stigma associated with FGCS and CGCS collective identifiers, we utilized a mixed-methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) approach centered on *symbolic interactionism* (Eisenstadt & Gie-sen, 1995). We

aimed to answer three primary research questions aimed at (a) gaining insights into the connotations associated with FGCS and CGCS terms by current college students, (b) investigating the perceived stigma related to FGCS at our campus, and (c) exploring the respondents' experiences regarding stigma toward FGCS. Before the commencement of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university's institutional review board.

Recruitment and Sample

Our research was conducted at a medium-sized private university in the United States' southern region as part of a larger study. As of fall 2021, the university had an overall enrollment of 12,385, of which 6,908 were undergraduate students (research site, n.d.). Undergraduate enrollment comprises 50% female and 50% male students. To determine if a student is a FGCS, the institutional process reviews the information provided in the family section of the admission application regarding their parents' education level. If neither parent has a bachelor's degree, the student is considered a FGCS. Approximately 11% of the undergraduates, 769, were FGCSs.

We chose the purposive sampling method in order to identify CGCS or FGCS that are familiar with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To identify CGCSs, we emailed a screener question to a random 25% sample of all enrolled undergraduate students (n = 6,908) in the fall 2022. Out of 1,727 undergraduates who received the email, 265 confirmed that one of their parents or guardians had completed an associate degree or higher while 84 survey respondents were FGCS. 265 CGCS students were invited to sign up for an interview, and 21 CGCS were ultimately interviewed by a research team member for 60 minutes each. Before each interview, participants provided consent and completed a demographic questionnaire as per the IRB protocol. Participants received a university-branded sweatshirt valued at roughly $55 as an incentive.

Data Collection

We employed qualitative interviews to gain in-depth perspectives and quantitative surveys to gather comparative data. We intentionally reference *respondents* when data is sourced from the survey and *participants* when data originates from the interviews within the Results and Findings section. This mixed-methods approach comprehensively explored the connotations and stigma associated with FGCS and CGCS collective identifiers.

Quantitative Data Collection

CGCS and FGCS respondents completed a comparative survey that consisted of two main components. The first component was a demographic survey to gather background information about the participants. It included questions about various collective identifiers such as age, sex, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (SES). The second component of the survey focused on exploring the participants' perception of stigma toward FGCSs. FGCSs and CGCSs were asked to provide their views on stigma on the college campus. A single, 5-point Likert question ranging from definitely not (1) to definitely yes (5) was used to understand stimga, and was posed t respondents as "Is there a stigma toward first-generation college students at [research site]?" Open-ended questions were utilized to gather detailed explanations and insights regarding their responses.

Qualitative Data Collection

Based on the recommendations of Krueger and Casey (2002), an interview A protocol was developed for the qualitative data collection phase, which involved only CGCS. CGCS were only included in the semistructured interviews to extend the current literature beyond only perspectives from FGCS regarding the college student social environment. The interview protocol included an interviewer welcome, a research study overview, a consent process, and interview questions. This

protocol ensured dependability and maintained consistency among the research team members during interviews. The interview questions were categorized into opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions. The opening and introductory questions were crucial in establishing rapport with the participants. These questions include, "Tell us about yourself and what factors influenced your decision to pursue higher education?" and "How were your parents involved in your decision to attend college?" Key questions were directly related to the primary research purpose: to assess the participants' understanding of FGCSs and their perceptions toward them. These key interview questions explored the participants' awareness of FGCSs, the sources from which they learned about the term, and their associated positive, neutral, or negative connotations. Similar questions were also asked regarding CGCSs. Table 1 displays the demographic information of interview participants.

Qualitative Data Analysis

To understand connotations toward collective identifiers, the research team sorted responses to direct interview questions into positive, neutral, or negative perceptions. Participants clearly indicated the dimensionality.

To answer the experiences and perceptions of stigma, the qualitative data analysis in this study followed an inductive content analysis approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The analysis process involved a thorough immersion in the data, with the research team reading and re-reading the data to gain familiarity. Initial start codes were generated directly from the data, creating numerous codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) that were then organized into categories to address the research questions. The team further grouped similar or related codes to form meaningful categories, followed by abstraction into main themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This nonstatistical and exploratory method allowed for inductive reasoning and a comprehensive understanding of the data (Berg

et al., 1995; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Thorne et al., 1997). To ensure rigor and transparency, two team members independently reviewed each transcript, with the assigned transcripts not corresponding to the team member who conducted the interview. Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, facilitated the development of an audit trail to maintain the integrity of the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Quantitative Data Analysis

For the quantitative data analysis, we employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. A two-tailed t-test was conducted to compare the means of two samples to determine the statistical significance of the quantitative data. Cohen's D was calculated to determine the effect size to assess the practical significance further, thereby confirming its practical significance.

Positionality

As Wilson et al. (2022) noted, a researcher's positionality can impact the choice of research questions, data collection and analysis methods, and interpretation of data. Our research team comprised one undergraduate student, one graduate student, one staff member, and a faculty administrator. Within our team are three women, two of whom belong to the community of people of color, and one identifies as first-generation. Our fourth team member identifies as LGBTQ+ and is also a first-generation.

We employed reflexivity throughout the research process to mitigate potential bias and ensure the study's credibility. We achieved this through peer debriefing meetings, reflexive memoing, interview protocol, and training. These methods helped us to reflect on our perspectives and experiences and to consider how they may have influenced our research.

Results and Findings

To address the first research question, we analyzed data from interviews conducted with only CGCS participants while referencing the data from our survey respondents, who were both FGCS and CGCS participants. We aimed to comprehensively understand the connotations linked to FGCS and CGCS collective identifiers and specifically focused on gathering insights from CGCSs.

Connotations of Collective Identifiers

The preliminary question discussed with interview participants addressed the connotations the interviewees held toward themselves as CGCSs and FGCSs. Understanding interview participants' connotations for each term gave us perspective on why FGCSs may struggle with a sense of belonging in the college environment. The context from which the interview participants' derived connotations toward the terms ranged from various categories, such as parents, college social settings, and individual beliefs.

Eleven out of 21 interview participants' connotations regarding the term FGCS were positive. These CGCSs categorized FGCSs as hardworking, exceeding family norms, empowering, and proud. Participants' positive beliefs about FGCSs came from believing how determined students who did not have parents with previous college experience must have been to figure out the application process and successfully obtain a degree.

The other 10 participants were equally divided between five neutral and five negative connotations. The thinking behind CGCSs neutral connotation was that the term *first-generation* was a term that labeled students, but the term did not define their identity. When they recalled learning the term for the first time, they similarly felt indifferent about it because it seemed enate or unchangeable to the individual. Therefore, they derived a neutral connotation; as Chinya explained, being labeled as an FGCS is just "how the cards are dealt."

Individuals' perspectives when deriving a negative connotation toward the term first generation were rooted in how society stigmatizes FGCS. The reasoning behind these five participants' negative connotations is that the term FGCS defines these students' lesser privilege and sensationalizes the term as their identity. Though the term genuinely attempts to celebrate FGCSs, as Atticus explained, the label can forcibly make FGCS "their defining trait, when it shouldn't be." Liz and Charlie shared similar sentiments, noting that people backhandedly compliment FGCSs in a way that "gawks" at them by sensationalizing their journey to get to college and the obstacles people assume they have gone through.

Continuing-Generation Connotations

An overwhelming majority of the interview participants (18 out of 21) derived a neutral connotation regarding the term CGCS. The first neutral connotation theme addressed by participants was curiosity about why CGCS seems to be the norm. To Charlie, "it should be the norm, even though rationally I know that that's not true, it sounds like the norm." Cader added to the feeling of normalcy, stating she was curious about why it seemed "natural and expected to go to college" in her culture. So, the term CGCS seems to connote more feelings toward FGCSs' status since going to college seems too normal to define with a term for CGCS.

The second neutral connotation was the feeling of indifference. Nine individuals highlighted this type of response, and half of the interviewees felt a neutral connotation. CGCS is a term not often used in conversation. Chinya, Taylor, and Jane had limited experiences with the term; therefore, they drew neither a positive nor negative connection from the word, thus creating a feeling of indifference. Jane, also neutral, had only ever heard the term expressed in a "factual way." The term had a neutral connotation of awareness for other participants because both CGCSs and FCGSs are "respected in terms of having [a] term," said Blake, meaning every student is naturally catego-

rized into either term based on whether their parent completed an associates level degree or higher.

A third neutral connotation was that the term did not seem to mean much or was seen as normal. Lauren "didn't think much of" the term because CGCS represents a group she has always belonged to. Being in the continuing-generation community caused participants to feel as though the term was obvious or a "no brainer." Kattie Kim said, "It's a default term because it's just expected that everyone is a continuing generation college student."

Eight participants did not know the term CGCS until our research study. These individuals had formed no connotations from the word since they had never interacted with it outside of the study. Three of those eight participants referred to the term as the "antithesis" to FGCS because FGCS was the only term they could relate to being a CGCS.

Of the 18 interview participants with neutral connotations, four outliers had positive or negative connotations about CGCS. The two students who expressed a positive connotation toward the term thought that continuing the tradition of going to college was "something to be proud of," according to T-Swift. The two participants with a negative connotation described the term as having a privileged connotation. Jasmine explained that—based on the context in which she learned the term—being a CGCS seemed like "a bad thing to be—privileged."

Second Research Question Results

We employed quantitative methodology to collect data from our CGCS and FGCS respondents to investigate the second research question, the stigma associated with FGCS. The Cohen's D result presented in Table 2 shows the practical significance of the study.

The Cohen's D effect size of 1.403 indicates a substantial practical significance, suggesting a large difference between the two groups in the perceived stigma. This effect size underscores the notable distinction in the experiences of stigma re-

ported by FGCS and CGCSs. The positive value of Cohen's D indicates that FGCS, on average, reported higher levels of perceived stigma than CGCS.

Third Research Question Findings

The third research question centered on exploring the experiences of respondents regarding their perceptions of stigma associated with FGCS. An online survey incorporating open-ended questions was employed to collect the data for this section. The qualitative analysis tool *Dedoose* was utilized for the analysis process. Through this analysis, six key themes emerged: (a) *actual stigma*, (b) *assumptions and stereotypes*, (c) *conflating or confluence of identity*, (d) *institutional specific, (e) non-prevalent identity*, and (f) *no stigma related to the respondents' perception of stigma toward FGCS.*

Actual Stigma, Discrimination, and Bias

The first theme identified was actual stigma and discrimination expressed by respondents' personal experiences. Six individuals who completed the survey shared stories of negative interactions with others based on their parents' non-higher education background. One respondent was discriminated against by people who "tried (and failed) to make me feel bad for my parents pursuing other avenues outside a college education." Another respondent explained that the discrimination was because "people see their parents as lazy or impoverished, or not good enough for today's society." They explained that they were personally treated similarly. The third respondent noted that the university environment is centered around students from successful families of continuing generations of college students, which creates a challenging environment for students without a family "filled with success and notable names."

Another form of stigma that the two respondents described was the self-inflicted stigma experienced by FGCSs. This form of stigma is generated from some FGCS lack of personal identity within higher education, causing it to be "harder to connect with the rest of the student body, as they have

less generational experience and more personal hurdles to overcome in terms of discovering their own identity separate from their parents." Another respondent questioned whether feelings of inadequacy FGCSs experience comes "from their own self-doubt from things like culture shock and the general sense that they don't belong."

Assumptions and Stereotypes

The second theme that emerged from respondents was the different forms of societal assumptions and stereotypes toward FGCSs. A respondent believed unawareness of this privilege most have grown up with means society "may have a tainted view on what being first-generation means." Another respondent said some people "may have stereotypes or other negative ideas on first-generation students" even though the respondent believed there to be few to no people with negative emotions. Overall, six main categories describe the assumptions and stereotypes that emerged.

The first category is a positive stereotypical view of FGCSs. One respondent explained that "most people congratulate me on taking this step, especially taking on pre-med when no one in my family has a degree." However, respondents all mentioned other stereotypes and assumptions that may exist on a campus other than the positive stereotypes they have experienced.

The second category concerned financial aid and the belief that FGCSs have an unfair advantage over CGCSs regarding need-based financial assistance. A respondent explained that FGCSs "receive certain scholarships and benefits over continuing college students." A second respondent corroborated this idea, sharing that "some students feel that other students with need-based aid or first-gen students might be getting an unfair advantage."

The third category was the assumptions and stereotypes students can have about familial success. The assumption is that CGCSs have parents who have achieved conventional success through education and prosperous careers. Seven respon-

dents replied that they recognized this assumption. One respondent explained that students at their university come "from upper-class families which have general education and wealth." Most of these students, the respondent points out, "do not understand that sometimes families are not able to obtain higher education."

The fourth category of assumptions focused on perceived beliefs of inferiority toward FGCSs. Although not all respondents have encountered this stereotype, all their replies mentioned that CGCSs can think less of FGCSs because they take "higher education for granted and look down on people who are first-generation students." Thus, CGCSs have specific advantages and access to opportunities surrounding college that FGCSs do not have.

The last category in assumptions and stereotypes is the perception of being surprised by an individual identifying as an FGCS. Thus, students are surprised when individuals with wealth indicators are FGCS. One high SES first-generation respondent said, "People have certainly been surprised that I am first-gen given my socioeconomic and educational background, but never negatively reacted." Another respondent explained that revealing the first-generation identity might cause judgment or surprise people.

Conflating or Confluence of Identity

The third theme is conflating or confluence of identity. *Conflating* means combining two ideas and *confluence* is the process of merging. One respondent described this theme as "predispositions towards first-generation students because many of us are already racial or socioeconomic minorities, so it's easy to discriminate against those who are already discriminated against." Four main categories explain the different perspectives of this theme.

The first category addresses the stigma toward automatically associating FGCSs with low-income earners. A respondent explained that the perception exists because there is a bias about an individ-

ual's parents' SES that usually reflects on the economic status of their child. Another respondent similarly replied that people typically assume that FGCSs are low-income and that stigma is prevalent at their university.

The second category represents the experiences of people judged for not identifying with the historical norm of the institution. At the research site and other predominantly White institutions, students can face potential stigma and stereotypes if their identities deviate from the institution's historical norms. Both respondents in this category explained that most students at their university come from a "long legacy of college graduates," causing them to not relate to FGCS and to hold assumptions about students whose identities do not align with the university's educated family norm.

The third category explores the stigma of being judged for financial status or wealth. One of the seven respondents in this category explained that students often cannot conceptualize that some students have parents who have not obtained higher educational achievements. Another respondent revealed that wealth status depends on who an individual is talking to and determines how well a person will be treated in specific environments. This respondent described the environment at their university as toxic and said one must learn who to talk to feel comfortable on campus.

The last category to converge the conflating identity theme is a stigma toward race and SES. This notion explains how societal prejudice toward FGCS, exacerbated by students' experiences with racial and socioeconomic minorities, can result in discrimination toward marginalized individuals. Six respondents wrote responses that conveyed stigma conflating race and SES with FGCSs. These comments revealed that being a FGCS is an identity commonly associated with other marginalized communities, such as minorities and people with low incomes.

Institutional Specific

The fourth, institutional-specific theme re-

gards the prevailing perception at the research site that most students come from affluent families with highly educated parents. Some respondents felt that the campus's student body, particularly students from long legacies of college graduates and successful businesses, find it difficult to relate to FGCSs. One respondent expressed that "most students do not understand that sometimes families are not able to obtain higher education." Respondents further associated this opinion with a perceived disparity in experiences and backgrounds that impedes the complete integration of FGCSs into the student community. Several respondents also mentioned the influence of family wealth on the institutionally-specific campus social dynamics.

Non-Prevalent Identity

The fifth theme that emerged from our analysis was non-prevalent identity, which revolved around the experiences of FGCSs who possess an identity not widely represented within their academic community. When the notion of *not overarching topic* was explored, they indicated that discussions about being an FGCS rarely come up in social or academic settings, suggesting that it is not a prominent or defining aspect of their experiences.

Talk about FGCS more was another term used to describe the concept of non-prevalent identity. Respondents generally did not recognize a stigma associated with being a FGCS, nor had they encountered negative reactions when disclosing their first-generation status. However, a respondent explained that some first-generation students do not "openly talk about it". Furthermore, they believed that discussions about FGCSs should occur more frequently and be celebrated as a significant accomplishment.

Respondents used *uncertainty* to express their limited understanding or awareness of FGCS experiences because they did not "interact enough with other first gen students.". They indicated that their perceptions of FGCS might be unclear or in-

complete because they have not engaged in extensive discussions about FGCS. Respondents seldom brought up their first-generation identity unless directly asked since college experiences were generally assumed rather than seen as an opportunity.

The concept FGCS *not being cared or valued enough to discuss* was evident in respondents' accounts. Some participants did not feel the need to disclose their first-generation status to others because they believed it was not significant or impressive within their social circles. One respondent explained, "my friends all know that I am a first-generation student, and they do not care" they felt that being first –generation student was "very irrelevant to who I am, and not important whatsoever."

No Stigma

The sixth theme that emerged from our analysis was *no stigma*. Responses ranged from not having personally experienced stigma to acknowledging that it may exist even if they have not witnessed it directly. Respondents who "didn't experience stigma so far" shared their personal experiences of not encountering any stigma or discrimination in their college experience so far. On the other hand, respondents who mentioned that they "didn't witness stigma but it might exist" acknowledged the possibility that hidden or subtle forms of stigma may be present, despite not having personally observed them.

Discussion

The results showed that approximately half of the participants had a positive connotation. Regarding FGCS, the remainder had either neutral or negative connections. In contrast, an overwhelming majority of interview participants (18 out of 21) expressed a neutral connotation about the CGCS collective identifier. Regarding stigma, higher levels of perceived stigma were reported for FGCSs than for CGCSs. The analysis revealed six key themes related to the respondents' perception

of stigma toward FGCS. Based on our mixed-methods study, we propose several recommendations stemming from our findings and results.

Collective Identifiers and Definitions

Institutional databases categorize first-generation and continuing-generation peers differently due to varied definitions (Garriott et al., 2017; Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Ward et al., 2012). However, higher education has inadequately relied on "not FGCSs" as a definition for CGCS. This lack of a collective identifier can result in misunderstanding their identity. Higher education should more widely adopt continuing-generation college student status in its reporting, student marketing, and campus climate assessments.

We define *collective identity* as the set of characteristics intrinsic to and constitutive of a group of actors who share a specific purpose and similar outputs (Wry et al., 2011). Being recognized as an organization subscribing to a collective identity brings legitimacy and reduces the cognitive challenge facing stakeholders as they work to make sense of an organization or group and what it does (King et al., 2011; Patvardhan et al., 2015). This issue is similar to the distinction between tenured and non-tenured faculty in higher education. In more recent years, some institutions have adopted academic professional or clinical track titles as umbrella non-tenure-track positions. Both groups are defined by what they are not, which may not thoroughly explain their collective identity. Therefore, universities should begin cultivating a sense of the continuing-generation identity to engage them in supporting FGCS.

Stigmas May Exist and Have Implications for Collegiate Life

Our findings indicate the presence of stigmas on the research campus, with FGCSs reporting higher overall stigmas than CGCSs. This aligns with previous studies by Hartfield (2020) and Stebleton and Soria (2013), which found higher levels of perceived stigma among FGCSs in uni-

versity settings. These challenges may adversely impact the collegiate experience and success of FGCSs. Interventions and support services can be implemented to address this issue based on recommendations from prior research. Educational programs, awareness campaigns, mentorship, and tailored academic advising can challenge stereotypes and foster inclusivity (Ward, 2013). Cultivating a campus culture that celebrates diversity and encourages interaction among student groups can reduce stigmatization and enhance a sense of belonging.

Actual Stigma, Stereotypes, and Assumptions

This study adds to existing research on stereotypes and assumptions about FGCSs, offering a unique perspective by incorporating views from both FGCSs and CGCSs (Marco-Bujosa et al, 2024; Morrison, 2017; Ward, 2013) . While previous research highlighted stereotypes and their impact on academic outcomes, our study goes further by recognizing and addressing the stigma faced by FGCSs in addition to assumptions. Drawing from Goffman's (1963) definition, we identify stigma as negative social labeling attached to FGCSs due to their first-generation status, aligning with Orbe's (2008) framework on navigating multiple identities. Acknowledging this stigma is crucial, as it validates their experiences and struggles, contributing to their psychological well-being and academic success. By naming and recognizing this stigma, colleges can implement proactive measures to create a more inclusive environment, including mentorship programs and cultural competency training, ultimately empowering FGCSs.

Intersectionality, Salience, and Identity Conflating

As demonstrated earlier, students with merged marginalized identities find it difficult to have a stable college experience when most other students at their university come from a higher economic status family with a legacy of higher education attainment. Rodríguez-Hernández et al. (2020) analyzed how SES and academic performance correlated in higher education. Based on current research and our findings, we recommend that institutions invest in programs and environments that address the needs of students with multiple marginalized identities. This initiative within the university can help encourage campus acclamation, curate knowledge of university resources, and forge a positive campus environment that accepts FGCSs without negative stigmas, assumption biases, or stereotypes. Our study underscores the importance of ensuring conflating and confluence of the first-generation identity with other collective identifiers.

Since this study occurred at a single site, we recommend future research be conducted at other institutions to see if findings are unique to the research site or may be transferable to other locales. We found institutional-specific manifestations of stigma, but our mixed-methods study supports that FGCS identity may also be prevalent at other U.S. colleges and universities.

Limitations

We acknowledge three limitations. First, confusion may exist between the concepts of SES and being a FGCS, leading to a potential conflation in respondents' answers regarding stigma. Although the survey method allowed for many participants to represent the student population, it lacked the depth to understand emotions toward first-generation stigma fully. Second, the sample consisted of 345 participants, 11% of which were FGCSs, reflecting overall population proportions. However, there were more female respondents than males, which deviated from the research site's sex distribution. Last, the findings and recommendations are based on a specific private institution, limiting their applicability to other types of universities.

Conclusion

Our team explored the connotations of FGCS and CGCS terms, investigating the stigma towards FGCSs. We gained insights into perceptions and experiences in collegiate environments using a mixed-method approach. Findings showed that around half of the participants viewed FGCS positively, while others viewed it as neutral or negative. Conversely, most interviewees (18 out of 21) had a neutral opinion of CGCS. FGCSs reported higher perceived stigma than CGCSs, highlighting unique challenges. Recognizing and addressing stigma in the collegiate environment is crucial, requiring awareness among administrators, faculty, and peers. Implementing the recommendations can create a supportive environment for FGCSs, enhancing their college experience and success.

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Table 1. *Continuing generation college student interview participants*

Pseudonym	sex	Race/Ethnicity	Classification	CGCS Connotations	FGCS Connotations	Parental Income Level	Highest Parental Education
Ana Barberie	Female	Two or more races	Junior	Neutral	Positive	$164,926 to $209,425	Master's Degree
Ashley Lawrence	Female	White	Junior	Neutral	Negative	$164,926 to $209,425	Doctorate
Atticus Finch	Male	Hispanic (regardless of race)	Sophomore	Positive	Positive	$209,426 to $523,600	Doctorate
Blake Jones	Male	Asian	First-year/ Freshman	Neutral	Positive	$9,951 to $40,525	Master's Degree
BP	Female	Asian	Sophomore	Neutral	Neutral	$523,601 or more	Bachelor's Degree
Cedar	Female	Asian	Junior	Neutral	Positive	$40,526 to $86,375	Master's Degree
Chaniya Jones	Female	Black or African American	Junior	Neutral	Neutral	$209,426 to $523,600	Doctorate
charlie dolan	Female	Hispanic (regardless of race)	Senior	Neutral	Negative	$164,926 to $209,425	Doctorate
Indie Baker	Female	Two or more races	Sophomore	Neutral	Positive	Prefer not to answer	Bachelor's Degree
Jamie Smith	Female	White	Junior	Neutral	Positive	$40,526 to $86,375	Bachelor's Degree
Jane Porter	Female	White	First-year/ Freshman	Neutral	Positive	$9,951 to $40,525	Master's Degree
Janet Doey	Female	White	Senior	Neutral	Positive	$86,376 to $164,925	Bachelor's Degree
Jasmine Kamal	Female	Two or more races	Senior	Negative	Positive	$0 to $9,950	Bachelor's Degree
June De La Rosa	Female	Two or more races	Senior	Neutral	Positive	$523,601 or more	Master's Degree
Katie Kim	Female	Asian	First-year/ Freshman	Neutral	Neutral	$209,426 to $523,600	Master's Degree
Lauren	Female	White	Senior	Neutral	Neutral	$164,926 to $209,425	Doctorate
Liz Smith	Female	White	Senior	Neutral	Negative	$209,426 to $523,600	Bachelor's Degree
Matt	Male	Hispanic (regardless of race)	Senior	Neutral	Positive	Prefer not to answer	Master's Degree
Song Yang	Non-binary / third gender	Asian	Sophomore	Neutral	Negative	$86,376 to $164,925	Master's Degree
Taylor Swift	Female	Asian	Junior	Neutral	Neutral	$86,376 to $164,925	Doctorate
T-Swift	Female	White	Sophomore	Positive	Negative	Prefer not to answer	Master's Degree

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics and Practical Significance of Stigma Toward FGCS by group*

	Count	M	SD	Cohen's D
First-Generation	*39*	*3.025*	*1.224*	
Continuing-Generation	*89*	*2.730*	*1.008*	*1.403*
Total	*128*	*2.8775*	*1.585*	