

An Emerging Professional Identity: Influences on the Achievement of High- Ability First-Generation College Females

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Using a qualitative interview design, this study examined factors contributing to the academic achievement of gifted first-generation college females. Findings indicated an emerging professional identity as the primary influence on achievement. The participants' high ability served as a passport to accessing coursework, extracurricular experiences, and high-achieving friends who helped shape this emerging professional identity. Personal characteristics developed from their working-class backgrounds, including independence and a strong work ethic, were also found to be influential. Finally, the participants expressed a desire to explore their identities, even when this meant forming values different from those of their families and hometown communities. Implications of these findings are discussed, including suggestions for future research and recommendations for parents, counselors, and educators of gifted first-generation college females.

In our current society's constant effort to better itself, a college education is now much more accessible than ever before. Scholarship, loan, and grant programs have made college a viable option for more young people. Therefore, many more students are entering college as first-generation college (FGC) students, the children of parents who have not earned college degrees (Orbe, 2004). In 2001, out of the 1.3 million first-time freshmen who took the Scholastic Aptitude Test, 364,000 were FGC students (Ishitani, 2003). For high-ability FGC females, this trend is promising as more opportunities are available to receive the education needed to actualize their talents. The variables of class background and gender, however, intersect with the culture of higher education to raise additional issues that may work against the achievement of these young women. Such issues need to

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be explored in order for educators and counselors to better prepare high-ability FGC females for a successful college experience and future career path.

Background

First-Generation College Students

Previous studies have found that FGC students have higher attrition rates than their peers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999; Horn, 1998), with the findings of one recent study demonstrating that FGC students were 71% more at risk of attrition during their first year than were non-FGC students (Ishitani, 2003). In response to the influx of first-generation students on college campuses, coupled with the statistics on attrition, researchers have begun to explore FGC students' backgrounds and experiences as they relate to their academic achievements in college.

Findings of several research studies indicate a number of variables that may work in concert to contribute to the higher attrition rate of FGC students. For example, many FGC students seek employment in order to finance their education and may experience difficulty balancing the conflicting role demands of school and work (Brooks-Terry, 1988). In addition, work schedules often leave them unable to attend campus activities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999). This, in combination with a lack of familiarity with the college atmosphere, may leave FGC students less likely to experience the same sense of identity and social integration with the college community that other students experience (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Van T. Bui, 2002). This finding proves unfortunate, as the amount of involvement on campus has been found to directly relate to one's persistence and success in college (Astin, 1984; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Studies have also found that parents of FGC students have little or no experience with higher education, and, consequently, their children begin college with less preparation and guidance than that afforded to other students (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Hahs-Vaughn,

2004). FGC students also receive less encouragement to attend college than non-FGC students (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Moreover, while some parents of FGC students may be supportive of academic success, they still lack familiarity with professional career options, and therefore they cannot effectively guide their children in career exploration and decisions (Kastberg & Miller, 1995). Finally, FGC students are also likely to experience conflicts with the values of the college atmosphere and those they have always known, leading to identity crisis and a feeling of not belonging anywhere (Orbe, 2004; Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001).

Academically, FGC students may also be less prepared for university coursework than are non-FGC students. They may be less likely to prepare for college while in high school (Kaufman & Chen, 1999), and, compared with non-FGC students, they may have lower high school grade point averages and lower scores on college entrance exams (Riehl, 1994). They are also less likely to take academically rigorous courses in high school, and they have lower initial critical thinking skills than non-FGC students (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996). Consequently, they feel less confident about their collegiate academic achievements compared with non-FGC students (Riehl; Van T. Bui, 2002).

First-Generation College Females

Recent research findings suggest that the barriers that have historically blocked women's achievement (see Reis, 1999, for a review of these factors) may be less influential in contemporary society. For example, the gap between males' and females' test scores has narrowed (Caplan, Crawford, Hyde, & Richardson, 1997). Females are also more motivated to achieve academically (Francis, 2000; Van Houtte, 2004), they outperform males in the classroom (Jackson, 1998), and they now outnumber males on college campuses (Richardson & Woodley, 2003). For FGC females, however, the outlook is less promising. Ishitani (2003) found that FGC females were 57% more likely to drop out of college in their third year and 61% more likely to drop out in their fourth year than were FGC males. This finding may result from a working-class value system that emphasizes early

marriage, the reproductive role of females (Kastberg & Miller, 1995; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984), and rigid gender roles (Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2000). It may also result from a lack of role models or mentors available to FGC females.

High Ability

Research findings suggest that role models are critical to the development of talent in high-ability females (Reis, 1999). Yet, for first-generation high-ability females, role models of women like themselves who have successfully navigated their way through college and professional worlds are sparse. They receive little, if any, guidance about career options and limited successful role models to emulate (Kastberg & Miller, 1995).

The literature summarized above highlights potential barriers to achievement facing FGC students and female FGC students, in particular. A study completed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999), however, found that for those FGC students who do finish their degrees, employment prospects and salary earnings are the same as those for other graduates. This finding suggests that one fruitful area of research is to examine what personal characteristics and external factors facilitate the retention and academic achievement of FGC students. Brooks-Terry (1988) cited the following personal characteristics as influencing the retention rate of first-generation students: a commitment to graduation (determined by satisfaction with the degree program, perceived benefit, and the behavior of significant others); a clear vision for a future career, including specific goals; and high self-efficacy for reaching those goals. In a study examining high-ability females from working-class backgrounds, Kastberg and Miller (1995) found that their participants attributed their academic and professional achievements in part to the encouragement of former teachers, the willingness to explore different values than their families and hometown communities, and resilience.

In a search of literature, no studies were found that examined the role ability itself may play in the academic achievement of FGC females. For example, high-ability FGC females may enter college with high grades, a transcript of rigorous high school courses, and

high college entrance exams, all factors that may make them similar to their non-FGC peers and therefore, likely to succeed. One purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how these potential factors, and others, may influence the academic success of high-ability FGC females.

This purpose responds to a call in the literature for research that explores the multidimensional sense of identity in FGC students and the influential intersection of these dimensions on achievement (Orbe, 2004). The present study responds to this call by focusing on the intersection of three dimensions of identity: gender, class, and ability. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions: How do high-ability FGC females perceive their ability as influencing their achievement? How do they perceive their gender as influencing their achievement? What other factors do they perceive as influencing their achievement? By becoming aware of the answers to these questions, educators and counselors will gain insights that will help them guide and prepare high-ability FGC female students for an academically successful college experience.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors influencing the achievement of high-ability FGC female students. For this purpose an interpretive research orientation, utilizing qualitative methods, is appropriate. Merriam (1998) noted that an interpretive orientation allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the experience through an inductive, hypothesis-generating mode of inquiry. In the present study, the experience examined is the education and background of high-ability FGC female students who are also achieving academically in college. Currently, no published research was found examining the intersection of these three facets of identity on achievement, thus highlighting the need for theory-building research in this area. The present study attempts to begin this theory building through an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences. The findings of this qualitative study, in addition to future qualitative work in the area, may lead to the development of

a complex theoretical model of factors influencing the achievement of high-ability FGC female students. Furthermore, the findings of this study may also assist educators and counsellors in preparing such students for future academic and professional success.

Participants

Criterion, purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select “information-rich” cases that provide the greatest amount of information to develop an understanding of the topics germane to the research question (Patton, 1990). In this study, criterion sampling allowed the researchers to select participants that each had a predetermined set of criteria necessary to investigate the research questions (Patton). In the present study, the criteria used for participant selection were (1) high ability, defined as nomination or participation in gifted programs in elementary school and inclusion into a college honors program as a result of ACT/SAT achievement test scores; (2) high achievement, defined by college GPA of 3.5 or higher; (3) first-generation college, defined as having parents and grandparents with high school or lower as the highest degree completed; and (4) female gender.

The participants for the study were recruited by flyers asking for volunteers who fit the above criteria to participate in an interview study focusing on factors influencing their academic achievement. A total of four participants were included in the study. Each of the participants was Caucasian, and each was interviewed twice for approximately 1.5 hours each time. Additional commentary to questions was received via e-mail, as well. Data saturation was reached upon analyzing the data for these four participants in that the same themes were readily reoccurring throughout each of the interviews with the participants. The flyers remained posted in an effort to recruit high-ability minority FGC students; however, no students volunteered. This is a limitation of the study and is addressed in the discussion. The participants had a minimum grade point average of 3.8, and their average age was 20. Their college majors included English, telecommunications, elementary education, and journalism.

Data Collection

The data collection process began with a semistructured, 1.5-hour interview with each of the participants. In semistructured interviews, the interviewer prepares an interview guide that specifies the content of the topics to be covered, and the interviewer maintains the flexibility to alter or waive the interview guide when appropriate. This method allows the interviewer freedom to explore a variety of topics, but also enables the participant to shape the content of the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In addition, McCracken (1988) noted that semistructured interviews ensure that the interviewer covers all the information in the same order for each of the participants. A semistructured interview guide also helps researchers control their subjectivities by including scheduled questions that may otherwise be overlooked. This allows interviewers to focus their attention on the participant, rather than splitting their attention between the participant and the larger structure and objectives of the interview. McCracken emphasized that using a guide does not preempt the open-endedness of the qualitative interview. Using a travel metaphor, he illustrates this point:

With this questionnaire in hand, the investigator has a rough travel itinerary with which to negotiate the interview. It does not specify precisely what will happen at every stage of the journey, how long each lay-over will last, or where he investigator will be at any given moment, but it does establish a clear sense of the direction of the journey and the ground it will eventually cover. (p. 37)

A further benefit to the semistructured format allows the opportunity for exploratory, unstructured responses to occur within each question. The guide for the first interview in the present study is included in the Appendix.

Following the first interview, the researchers also used a photo-interviewing technique as part of the data-collection process. Photography has long been recognized as a valuable research tool for qualitative inquiry (e.g., Becker, 1995; English, 1988; Walker, 1993). Researchers have identified many benefits to incorporating photography in qualitative data collection. For example, photographs encour-

age the participants to take the lead in the inquiry. This is essential for qualitative inquiry's focus on "grounded data" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which emphasizes the importance of emerging themes rather than a predetermined set of constructs derived in advance by the researcher (English). Photographs also provide reference points and context that may help participants frame open-ended comments or abstract ideas. In addition, photographs can keep interviews focused by providing a structured framework that researchers may use to subtly redirect participants back to the research questions (Collier & Collier, 1986). Participants also tend to examine photographs and the ideas that emerge from them in more depth than would be expected from a traditional verbal probe on the same topic (Dempsey & Tucker, 1994). Finally, an additional benefit of photo-interviewing is the use of photographs as both an original data source, as well as a tool for gathering additional data in an interview context (Secondulfo, 1997). In this way, photo-interviewing functions as a form of methodological triangulation through the blending of multiple data sources (Dempsey & Tucker).

The participants in the present study were each given a disposable camera and told to take pictures that represented their identity and influences on their achievement. Gender, FGC student status, and high ability were specifically left out of the photography prompt in an effort to see which aspects of their identities the participants themselves felt were most salient to their achievement. By giving the participants control over the camera and photographs taken, the researchers were able to gain additional insight into the participants' subjective perceptions of reality, as photographs themselves are "a construct of reality" (English, 1988).

Each participant then participated in a second interview centered on the photographs. The second interview was an unstructured interview (Payne, 1999), in which the participants were encouraged to discuss their photographs, including their rationale for taking the pictures and the meaning behind them. In this way, the direction of the interview was led by the participant, with the interviewer following up with probes to delve deeper into content the respondent initiated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Mischler, 1986). For example, one participant took a picture of a calendar featuring babies and com-

mented that she thought it was strange that she had a calendar with babies, since having children was not a current focus of her life. The interviewer followed this comment with probing questions on the participant's future plans, including whether or not she hoped to get married and start a family eventually and to what extent her career plans were influencing her thoughts on relationships and children.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the researchers used a process of inductive data analysis. This type of data analysis has been described in a variety of ways by multiple methodologists (e.g. Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although the specific strategies and techniques described vary across methodologists, they each refer to inductive analysis as a process of data management by coding, categorizing into themes, and drawing relationships among themes.

Approaches to inductive data analysis center on the researcher coding the data with words and phrases that mark emerging patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This method of coding reduces the data by allowing the researcher to organize and retrieve meaningful components (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), but it also simultaneously opens up the data, allowing the reader to understand the data, ask new questions of it, and generate interpretations about the linkages among the categories (Strauss, 1987).

The researcher then examines codes, grouping them together into categories that reflect broader, more overarching themes. For example, in the present study, the researchers categorized individual codes of high self-standards, internal motivation, perfectionism, value of a part-time job, and focus on earning good grades under the umbrella theme of "strong work ethic." After coding and categorizing the data, the researcher moves to a process of interpretation. Dey (1993) encouraged researchers to develop interpretations by exploring how categories are connected to one another. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), identifying relationships among themes is the central purpose of inductive analysis, for the interpre-

tation of these relationships allows researchers to find conceptual and theoretical coherence within their data.

Both researchers independently coded and analyzed the data. Upon completion of data analysis, the researchers compared their interpretations with each other, discrepancies were discussed, and additional analyses were conducted together to reach consensus. The discrepancies in the analyses consisted of one researcher identifying a category the other researcher had overlooked. Upon reconsideration of the data, the researchers reached agreement regarding analysis and interpretation.

Findings

Emerging Sense of Professional Identity

A developing sense of a professional identity emerged as a central finding in the study contributing to the FGC students' achievement orientation. Even though the participants were still college students, they viewed themselves as emerging professionals in their majors. This sense of professional identity drove their achievement, for they chose courses and activities that allowed them to practice in their future profession. For example, Tara¹ took a photograph of the university's student newspaper to represent journalism as a "big part of who I am" and her desire for a career in journalism. She commented, "I'm always covering different areas of life. I very much love journalism and can see myself becoming a career woman."

An English major, Kate indicated her love of the arts by taking a photograph of art in various forms, such as musical compact discs, video jackets, and playbills. Her academic endeavors focused on achievement in the arts, especially literature and drama. When explaining the photograph, she said, "I'm just constantly seeking art in various forms from pop art to high art . . . I crave it, and I get so excited by it. It's one of my driving forces." This passion had merged into a desire to become an English professor. She explained that the university environment fit best with her "tendency toward abstract,

complex thought and art endeavors and conversation and writing.” She commented as follows:

I want to be an English professor. The more I look at that career path, the more I am excited. . . . I feel that is where I am going to find the most happiness with the constant change of a classroom and students, but also with the university feel and the study atmosphere and the focus on thoughts and ideas. I definitely want to be a professor.

The participants’ emerging sense of professional identity developed as a result of their high ability, which served as a passport to accessing coursework, extracurricular experiences, and high-achieving friends.

High Ability as a Passport

When asked how they began to develop professional identities, the participants discussed how their ability afforded them different opportunities and experiences that helped to construct such identities. Because none of their parents, and, in most cases, extended family members were college educated, the participants noted a lack of resources within the family to prepare them for college coursework and the selection of a profession. However, their high ability functioned as a passport to other resources, including extracurricular activities related to their majors, engaging coursework, and a high-achieving peer group, that compensated for the lack of direct support they received from home. Each of the participants shared her family’s attitude toward higher education. Each also shared how her high ability allowed her access to alternative supportive resources that contributed to her development of a professional identity.

Tara indicated that her family “never talked about education” and said, “I never had anyone in my family tell me that I needed to go to college.” Despite this, Tara explained, “I always assumed I would go to college, even though my parents never did. It was more the influence I got at school.” Tara participated in the gifted program in elementary school, and, as a gifted student, she was also invited to participate in the Academic Superbowl and the Academic

Decathlon. As a result of these school experiences, Tara developed an internal motivation to achieve. She said, "I felt like I had to be in accelerated classes. It was engrained in me."

Tara also said she credited participation in the gifted program for her career choice as a professional journalist because it "developed my English and creative writing." In the gifted program, students were encouraged to explore ways in which professionals used writing in their careers. Tara said this early journalistic preparation in her gifted program allowed her the opportunity to work on the school newspaper in middle and high school, as well as the high school yearbook. All of these experiences gave Tara an opportunity to explore a potential career path to which she gravitated. She explained as follows her high school experiences:

The good thing about journalism in high school is that you were allowed to go out and practice it. You were not just taking a class. Through [working on high school and college newspapers] I was able to get experience, and it helped me. I'm pretty set in my career.

In college, Tara continued to gain experience in her chosen profession by earning a prestigious position on the college newspaper. In addition, she also credited her colleagues on the newspaper staff and her friends in the Honors Program as contributing to her achievements. She explained, "Making friends at the [newspaper] has really helped me out because they give me a lot of advice [about things] I did not know. They've guided me a lot." She also said that "living in the Honor's dorm freshman year helped me get involved" in social activities on campus.

Similar to Tara, Teresa also did not receive much educational and career guidance from her family. She said her parents "told me that I had to figure out what I wanted to do by the end of my senior year, but they didn't tell me what I was going to do." Through school experiences, she nurtured her talents, including leadership and oral and written communication skills. She said these experiences led her to develop an interest and finally a commitment to telecommunications as a profession. Teresa took a photograph of her high school to illustrate its importance in shaping her professional identity.

In high school, Teresa discovered that she enjoyed writing for the high school newspaper and interviewing people, which led her to explore telecommunications at the college level. In college, she had the opportunity to practice her future profession by working on the production of a television show sponsored by the university.

Teresa said her extracurricular experiences in college have also allowed her to hone her leadership skills. She included several photographs that represented leadership, including a trophy case, a Web site of a conference she directed, and various social activities she led in her dormitory. When explaining the photographs, Teresa described herself as “someone with leadership skills. That’s my talent, being able to disperse everything and handle everything.” Her leadership achievements included working on numerous committees for residence life, serving as a resident assistant, and chairing a professional conference in her field. Each of these experiences has given Teresa the opportunity to practice the communication skills necessary to become a professional in telecommunications.

Similar to Tara, Teresa also included photographs of friends and highlighted their contribution to her achievement. In particular, she discussed the Honors Program and the benefits of living in the Honors residence hall. Of her friends in the Honors Program, she said they “keep me on track, and they’re always there for me. Whenever I need to vent about classes, I can go to them and they’re always there, and they help me get through.” She also took a picture of her Honors’ residence hall director and said, “The Honor’s hall director helps you out. The whole Honors atmosphere, I really like it. They do a really good job.” Tara thought that friendships in college were instrumental to academic success and cautioned that to be a high achiever in college, it is necessary to “pick your friends and role models wisely.”

In contrast to Tara and Teresa’s family experiences, where their parents neither encouraged nor discouraged higher education, Molly’s father actively discouraged her educational goals. Molly was the product of a blended family, with five older siblings. None of her siblings had gone to college, and, according to Molly, most of them had made poor choices in their lives that led to legal and financial problems. Molly thought her father considered her need for inde-

pendence as a catalyst for future problems, similar to those her siblings had experienced. She described her relationship with her father as being tumultuous and explained how this actually motivated her to higher levels of achievement:

[My dad] was constantly saying I wasn't going to college, I wasn't going to become anything, and I was going to be just like my brothers. I think part of me wanted to prove it to him that I could. He was a motivator.

She also considered her siblings' experiences as examples of "what not to do, what path not to take," which helped her stay focused on her achievements and career goals.

The external resources Molly said influenced her career choice of elementary education and achievement were her teachers, curriculum, and work in a daycare. From kindergarten through second grade, Molly said she had energetic, creative teachers who stimulated her love for learning and also a desire to be a teacher herself:

It was so much fun to learn so many new things that I wanted to teach kids. . . . I have a letter I wrote in fifth or sixth grade that the teacher gave back to us when we graduated high school, and it said, "I'm going to go to [University name], and I'm going to be a teacher."

Due to her high ability, Molly was also placed into advanced classes. The challenging coursework instilled a "love of school" in Molly. She made friends who encouraged her achievement through competition. She said, "We were all friends, but we would try to beat each other [academically], and I loved that [competition]."

Currently, Molly said her work in a daycare, coupled with her student-teaching experiences, has solidified her decision to be an educator. Her daycare experience has also encouraged Molly to think about opening her own daycare facility in the future.

In contrast to Molly, Kate's parents encouraged Kate's pursuit of higher education. Her father grew up in poverty, and Kate perceived his valuing of education as "a rejection of how he grew up and the need to make our lives as good as they can be." Although Kate's parents encouraged her education, they did not share her passion

for intellectual hobbies and her appreciation of art. Kate attributed her giftedness to opening experiences for her to develop her intellectual interests and achievements. Of the courses she took in which students were not graded according to ability, she described shock at the anti-intellectual “temperament of the classes.” She was grateful for her coursework geared to gifted students:

I grew up in the gifted and talented programs. I know that being in [the Honors environment] has made it so that it is not weird for me to be like that, to try really hard or to do all of my homework. It comes naturally to me.

As a result of taking gifted courses, Kate found herself forming friendships with peers who were “more academically minded than my family” to share her intellectual interests. Kate also described her friendships as contributing to her achievement and professionalism by setting standards and providing a healthy dose of competition:

It’s really hard for me to learn when I’m surrounded by people who don’t care and are doing the minimum. I think having high-achieving friends has helped me because I see that as the norm, and I don’t choose to slack off. And I see myself as wanting to succeed in the way that they do or more than they do.

Independence and Work Ethic Developed From Working-Class Background

In addition to the external supportive resources outlined above, the participants also felt that two personal characteristics, independence and a strong work ethic, were responsible for their high achievement and professional focus. All of the participants viewed their independence and strong work ethic as products of growing up in a working-class family.

Tara explained that her desire to be self-sufficient has “come from my economic background” because she was “raised to be independent.” By necessity, Tara had to work throughout her high school years. She believed her independence came from the need to take care of and partially support herself financially. She took a photo-

graph of her car to represent her independence and said, “I hate relying on other people, and my car is one of the main objects that lets me be as independent as I am.”

Teresa also credited her social-class background to shaping her independence. She explained that both parents needed to work full-time jobs to support their family. Often, this left Tara on her own and responsible for taking care of herself and making her own meals. She said, “I always grew up [needing] to be independent and to do things on my own.” As a result, Tara said she now has little tolerance for “people controlling me.” She described how this independence has influenced her achievement motivation:

I decided that when I went to college I was going to do what I wanted to do. I was going to set goals, and I was going to achieve those goals. I was not going to enable myself to do what everybody thought I would do. I was going to do what I [wanted] to do.

Similar to Tara and Teresa, Molly said that her independence was also rooted in her social-class background. Both of Molly’s parents worked full time, and, according to Molly, they “always pushed [me] to take care of myself, to stand on my own two feet.” Molly explained one of the reasons she wanted a professional career:

I can’t rely on other people to take care of me. If something happened tomorrow where nobody could support me, I would have to be able to support myself. I can’t just sit around and hope that everybody takes care of me.

In addition to independence, the participants each described a strong work ethic as stemming from their working-class backgrounds. Growing up, they watched their parents work several jobs to support their families, and they adopted their parents’ work ethic and values that led to the participants’ achievement in college. Molly explained as follows:

My dad’s a workaholic, and I think I have that in me. . . . [My parents] instilled hard work in me. Work to achieve what you want. I never got anything handed to me. If I wanted something other than a necessity, [they said], “You know

what to do to get this.” Whereas a lot of people have parents who say, “Here’s a hundred dollars. Go to the store. Get what you want.”

Molly viewed her strong work ethic as a core reason for her achievement in school. She said, “I’m the type of person, that if I have a job, I go to the job. If I have class, I go to the class. I don’t skip out ever.” Molly’s experiences growing up also made her realize the need to achieve professionally in order to provide for one’s family. She explained that part of her motivation to succeed stems from her desire for her future children to have “not everything they want, but everything they need” without struggling financially.

Teresa described growing up in a predominantly working-class town where “all the high school students worked. If you didn’t work, people would make fun of you.” As a result, Teresa adopted the community’s value of hard work. With language similar to Molly’s, she explained that she “was never really handed anything in life; I always had to work for it.” Balancing a part-time job and high school also taught Teresa time management skills that she credits for her current achievements in college. She is comfortable “overworking herself” for she says, “the more I do, the more I get done.”

Tara credited her work ethic to her father and commented that he thought she was lazy if she was not working several jobs at a time. She said she realized that “things are not just going to be handed to you.” Tara explained her frustration with her peers who did not share her work ethic and did not have professional goals:

What I don’t like is people who are just kind of lazy when it comes to [their career]. You should really care about your future and what you do. . . . If you are doing well at your job that means that you’re working hard and you probably like it. I really respect a strong work ethic.

Exploration of Identity

The participants in the study credited their desire for identity exploration as one of the factors influencing their achievement. They also viewed identity development as a fluid process rather than a product,

and they were not afraid to explore values and career options that were different from those espoused by their families and hometown communities. Kate summarized her perception of identity development in this way:

I feel like I've got a pretty good hold on [who I am], but it is like in literature, where the meaning of the text evolves. I feel like I've got a meaning of my text. I'm constantly trying to sharpen that, but, at the same time, aware that I don't think that I'm ever really going to get there.

Similar to Kate, Teresa also indicated a need for identity exploration, which she felt the college atmosphere was more conducive to than that of her hometown. She explained that at home "people categorized me," which made it difficult for her to explore her identity. She said,

That really bugged me, so I made a conscious effort when I came to college that I wasn't going to let people categorize me and not let me change. When I came here, this is what I always wanted to be. I want to open up about myself. It's been freeing.

When discussing identity development, Tara also highlighted the need for identity exploration. She said, "You need to care about your education and your future. You need to actively get involved and find out what you like."

Understanding the need for identity exploration gave the participants the freedom to develop separate interests and values from their parents and hometown communities. These personalized values, in turn, allowed them to carve their own path toward professional achievement. Molly took a photograph of a tree and a flower that represented the importance of "change and growth." Her family background was a major influence on her drive to achieve. Watching her troubled older siblings made her realize she wanted a different future for herself. She said, "I always tried to be the opposite of them . . . they motivated me indirectly. I think they taught me what not to do, actually." Whereas her siblings did not value education, with several not graduating from high school, Molly chose to excel in school,

maintaining strong achievements in both extracurricular activities and academics.

Tara included a photograph of the novel *Clockwork Orange* to represent free will. She believed that “people need to choose what they want to believe in and what they want to do.” She described her own decision to break free from her family’s values. She decided to take out a loan for her college education, despite the fact that her father’s whole family “hates loans and hates being in debt” and had discouraged her. Tara decided for herself that it was worth the debt because of the payoff of a promising career. Tara also described additional difficulties relating to her parents as a result of her career choice. She explained, “It’s hard for me to relate to [my parents] because they really haven’t had much experience with [journalism].”

Teresa described feeling disconnected from the people in her hometown because of their stereotyped viewpoints and fear of change. Teresa gave the following description of her town:

People don’t go anywhere. They don’t make names for themselves. They don’t get anything accomplished. They stay in the same rut that they’ve always been in. It’s a beautiful, little, good, safe town, but everybody stays the same there. There’s no change and no progress.

In contrast, Teresa described herself as “being open minded” and wanting to explore other religions, ideas, and cultures, in the process of her own identity development. She explained that her desire for exploration caused a disconnect between her and her parents. As an example, she described her mother’s reaction to her exploration of different religions:

When I told my mom about how I went to church, she was like, “Hey, great.” But then I said, “I went to the Mormon church.” She got all freaked out that I was going to convert. I said, “Don’t worry, mom. I’m just learning.”

Teresa summarized that she and her parents were not always on the same wavelength because “they just haven’t learned about as many people, so they just don’t know. That’s where we are different.”

Kate also described deviating from her family's values in terms of her interests and hobbies. She explained, "My family just doesn't have intellectual hobbies. I love to read, I love foreign films, and I do enjoy classical music, and none of those things is like my family." She explained that after digesting college courses and university productions in the arts, she noticed that she began "to look down on [popular culture that my family enjoys], as an English major and someone who appreciates great literature." She continued, "It always amazes me that I come from that environment and have such a love of difficult literature and things that challenge me."

Nontraditional Attitudes Toward Gender. One of the major areas in which the participants noticed a difference in their values from those of their families and hometown communities was their perception of gender roles. They all resisted traditional gender role expectations common to their families and communities, and they tended to prioritize their career over plans for a future family.

Teresa said she "came from a really conservative town with traditional [gender roles]." She described her parents' relationship as one that was defined by gender-stereotyped roles, which upset her. She did not see herself getting married until she was at least in her late 20s. She explained that this decision was quite a contrast from her community, saying, "That's really old for people from my community. They don't get married to people in college or that they met outside my county." Teresa could not understand the tendency to marry young:

I cannot see myself settling down for a long time. The whole thought of someone [getting married young] drives me crazy because you have not lived your life at all, and you're getting married already. There are so many things I want to do, so many places I want to see. . . . I can never fathom that for me.

Kate's opinion of marriage and family echoed Teresa's comments. She used a photograph she had taken of a baby calendar to discuss the prevalence of engagements and births among her college-aged peers:

A lot of my female friends, especially now that we are in college, are trying to pair off in very serious relationships. I know a lot of people who are getting married and having

babies, and I'm not there. That's not in my mind right now. My school and things are much more important to me right now than settling down and having a family. I would rather take the steps to hit the career that I want and go the path that I want than to cheat myself out of it by adhering to someone else's plan.

Similar to Teresa and Kate, Tara held different gender role expectations than her hometown community and family. She said that now that she is in college, she is "really a feminist and all for equality." Her gender expectations in high school were traditional and similar to her family's. They had changed only recently as a result of her experiences in college. She said, "When I was in high school, I just thought I had to get married and go and have kids. My love and focus on my career didn't really come until college." Already, as a college student, she felt that her "career has taken a bigger part of my life" and said, "I have noticed that while my desire to have a relationship is not very high right now, my desire to have a career is [high]."

In contrast to the other three participants, Molly was currently in a serious relationship and assumed she would be married in a couple of years. However, when asked how she thought marriage would influence her career plans, she said firmly, "It won't." She emphasized that even though she and her future husband could afford to live on his income alone, she would work because she never liked the notion of relying on someone else for financial support.

Discussion

The FGC females in the present study indicated several contributors to their college achievement, including resources available to them as a result of their high ability. These resources included friendships with other high-achieving students and early beneficial academic experiences that contributed to an emerging sense of a professional identity. The participants also attributed their achievement to personal characteristics and a willingness to explore values distinct from their families.

The participants each noted that her high ability led her to participate in early academic experiences that prepared her to be a high achiever in college. For example, they attributed exposure to potential career choices to the challenging and varied coursework in their gifted programs. As a result of their enriched and accelerated coursework, they were also more academically prepared for college than are many FGC students (Kaufman & Chen, 1999). In addition, they also established friendships with high-achieving peers that served as academic role models, as well as resources regarding their specific college majors. Orbe (2004) indicated that these relationships are especially critical for FGC students' achievement. Because high-ability FGC students lack a sense of community with other FGC students, individual relationships with other friends have a greater influence on their identity development than do other FGC students (Orbe). For the participants in the present study, these friendships, coupled with their early academic experiences, initially encouraged them to think more seriously about attending college, and, after entrance into higher education, helped support their academic and professional pursuits.

High ability, then, also appears to have an indirect influence on success for FGC females, as it provides exposure to resources and support systems that can facilitate achievement and the beginnings of a professional identity. Such exposure was critical to the participants in the present study because the majority of their parents did not encourage higher education. Even those parents who did offer encouragement were still unable to provide specific guidance, due to their lack of experience. This finding calls for the need to develop identification procedures that enable gifted students from lower- and working-class backgrounds to receive gifted services. Such students are typically underrepresented in gifted programs (Struck, 2003). As the findings of this study support, such participation may give them an early advantage to academic success in college by providing them with resources and early academic experiences that contribute to achievement and the development of professional goals (Rodriguez, 2003; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 1994).

In addition, high school counselors may need to take special notice of high-ability potentially FGC students. This population of

students may be completely unfamiliar with the college admissions process and therefore may need more guidance in selecting colleges, earning scholarships, and preparing goals for a particular career path. They may also benefit more from opportunities that bring high-achieving students together, such as various clubs or Honors societies. As Orbe (2004) indicated, these students especially need the support and encouragement of peers to continue their academic endeavors.

The participants in the present study also described their involvement in extracurricular activities as contributing to their emerging professional identity because they provided opportunities to practice their future profession. For example, Tara described working for a campus television show, which gave her the opportunity to explore a facet of a future career in telecommunications. Molly and Teresa described the same opportunities in their education and journalism majors by participating in cadet teaching, working in a daycare, and working for the university newspaper, respectively. Educators of high-ability high school students may want to consider this finding and develop more opportunities for students to act as practicing professionals. For example, in addition to offering elective courses that apply to particular fields, such as band, art, and journalism, high schools may want to consider coordinating internship or shadowing opportunities for credit.

Prior research has shown that as a result of conflicting loyalties stemming from family and part-time work commitments, FGC students are less likely to be involved in extracurricular organizations on campus and are more likely to drop out of school than second-generation students (Brooks-Terry, 1988). Moreover, other research has found that the level of student involvement is correlated to persistence in college (Astin, 1984). Even prior to entering college, participation in extracurricular activities has been related to developing career goals and commitments (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 1994).

The findings of the present study offer support for this previous research in that participation in extracurricular activities related to college majors was associated with academic achievement. These findings highlight the need for FGC students to remain active in campus activities. If FGC students need to work to support them-

selves, they should be encouraged to find jobs that are related to their majors. For example, they could seek work as tutors for lower level courses in their majors or working in laboratories or as professors' assistants. Positions such as these enable them to stay connected to campus, and they simultaneously help them develop a sense of professional identity.

The early academic experiences, extracurricular activities, and friendships with high-achieving peers in their fields all contributed to the participants' emerging sense of a professional identity. Prior research supports the finding in the present study that the ability to see oneself in a future career role and practice in that role encourages academic persistence and career commitment (Astin, 1984; Brooks-Terry, 1988; Niles, Sowa, & Laden, 1994). This finding highlights the need to provide high-ability females opportunities for career exploration, so that they may begin to visualize themselves in these future roles. For example, Shoffner and Newsome (2001) suggested that educators should consider sponsoring career fairs, coordinating guest lectures by young professional females, creating mentorship programs, and showcasing a variety of nontraditional career opportunities.

Future studies may also want to examine which component of identity, FGC student or high ability, is the most salient to developing a sense of professional identity, as this was not clear from the findings of this study. Perhaps FGC status leads to an increased focus on professional development, as these students may be more likely to view the primary reason for completing college as securing financial independence through a stable career, consistent with the values of their working-class background. In contrast, students from middle or higher socio-economic backgrounds may view college as more of an opportunity to become well-rounded and to develop all aspects of their identity, including, but not primarily developing a career mindset. Or, perhaps it is not FGC status that is most salient to the development of a professional identity but instead high-ability status. Perhaps high-ability students, given their increased educational opportunities and others' expectations for their success, are more likely to focus on professional identity than students of lesser ability. Finally, it may be an interactive effect of high ability and FGC status that encourages a focus on professional identity. Future studies with

larger numbers of participants could explore the weight of these possible influences on the development of a professional identity.

In addition to external influences, the gifted participants also noted that their independence and strong work ethic influenced their academic achievement. They each felt these characteristics developed as a result of their working-class backgrounds. Their parents modeled a strong work ethic and independence developed from necessity, due to their parents' work schedules and financial limitations. This finding supports previous literature on characteristics contributing to academic achievement for first-generation students (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001). This finding, however, also raises the following question: In the absence of a good model of independence and work ethic, what influence would high ability alone have on the achievement of FGC students? Such a question calls for a future study comparing two groups of FGC students, one with role models of independence and strong work ethics, and the other without such models. The implications for counseling and preparing the latter students for academic and professional success may be significantly different than the recommendations for working with students similar to the participants of the present study.

The final theme in the present study centered on the participants' desire to explore their identities, even when this meant developing different values from friends, family, and community. Brooks-Terry (1988) wrote about the necessity of this individuation from family and community as the "double assignment" (p. 123) of FGC students. She suggested that FGC students not only share the assignment of proving their mastery of course material at a high enough level to graduate, they also have a second assignment: to internalize the lifestyle of the college-educated middle class. She concluded her argument:

In order to achieve his or her career goals, the student must reject the values of home, peers, and neighborhood, and take on the attitudes and behaviors associated with the work world he or she wishes to enter. (p.123)

The participants had begun this rejection of family and community values early, as evidenced by their decision to pursue intellectual hob-

bies and careers foreign to the parents. In addition, they also developed gender role perceptions different from the traditional notions held by their families and communities. Perhaps because they held less traditional views on gender roles than what is typical of individuals from working-class backgrounds (Kastberg & Miller, 1995; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Trusty et al., 2000), the participants did not perceive their gender as influencing their achievement or their career goals. It would be interesting to see if other female FGC students, who were less independent than the participants in this study, would hold traditional gender role perceptions more similar to those of their families and working-class communities. Consequently, these FGC students may view gender as a more significant influence on their achievement and career orientation than did the participants in this study. The role of independence in mediating gender role perceptions merits further study.

A deviation from family and community values may lead to conflict and strain in familial relationships. In addition, FGC students may fail to identify with second- or third-generation college students and begin to feel as though they are intruders in the professional-class world (Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001). The participants in the present study did not appear to experience this sense of falling in between two worlds, perhaps because of the characteristics noted above. They were each independent, which may have facilitated their assimilation of a value system distinct from their parents'. In addition, they each described supportive friendships that allowed them to feel a sense of belonging in the campus community. Finally, their occupational identity was prioritized such that conflicts in their relations may not have seemed as significant. However, the finding does have implications for educators and counselors working with FGC students. Educators and counselors need to help FGC students assimilate these new values and feel a sense of belonging. For example, first-year students who are also FGC may benefit from being placed together as roommates or on the same floor of dormitories. They also may benefit from a mentoring program that matches first-year students with older students or professors from similar backgrounds to guide them through their college experience. Finally, counseling may need to be avail-

able to help first-generation students work through conflicts that may arise with parents over changing value systems.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

The present study had several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, only Caucasian females volunteered to participate in the study, perhaps as a result of the low minority enrollment on the college campus where the data were collected. Findings of a study conducted with first-generation minority gifted students may reveal different influences on their achievement, due to unique cultural conflicts and identity issues facing these populations (Orbe, 2004). As the percentage of first-generation minority students pursuing higher education increases, it is important for researchers to critically examine the factors that influence achievement in these populations, as well.

Second, the present study was also limited in that it did not include gifted females pursuing nontraditional college degrees, such as mathematics, the physical sciences, or engineering. As with minority students, females pursuing predominantly male career paths may have additional influences on their achievement that merit study. Finally, none of the participants in the study were graduating seniors. It is possible that some of the relational conflicts noted in other studies were not seen in the present study because the participants were not far enough along in their identity development for these to fully materialize. Future studies with newly graduated FGC females would be informative, as these participants might be commencing careers without guidance and recognition from their families and community members (Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001), and, as such, may experience additional relational conflicts that deserve attention.

The findings of the present study highlight how high ability, in addition to other factors, may influence the achievement and professional identity of FGC females. Such studies are most important for educators and counselors, as they provide information that may

function as a tool for designing programs and interventions that better prepare high-ability FGC females for a successful college experience and future career path.

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End Notes

- 1 All names are pseudonyms.

Appendix Interview Guide

- Family
 - Describe your background, beginning with where you are from.
 - Parents
 - Tell me about your parents' educational background and occupations.
 - Describe your relationship with each parent in as much detail as possible.
 - Describe specific examples that illustrate this relationship.
 - Describe your parents' attitude toward achievements and giftedness.
 - Give specific examples that illustrate this attitude.
 - How would you describe your parents' attitude toward your career path?
 - Examples that illustrate this attitude?
 - Siblings
 - Describe your siblings' educational experiences.
 - Describe your relationship with each of your siblings.
 - Give specific examples that illustrate this relationship.
 - How have your siblings influenced your own achievement?
 - Give examples of this influence.
 - Extended family
 - Describe any other significant relationships you have with extended family members and explain how each relationship has influenced your achievement.
- School Experiences
 - Elementary School
 - Describe significant relationships you had in elementary school with teachers or friends.
 - How did these relationships influence your achievement?

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- Describe your curricular experiences in elementary school. Were you in a gifted program? What was your reaction to your curricular experiences? How did this influence later achievement?
 - Middle and High School:
 - Same questions as elementary, but also ask about extra-curricular activities.
 - College
 - Describe process of selecting a college.
 - Describe extracurricular activities.
 - What factors do you think are contributing to your achievement in college?
 - Give examples for each.
 - What obstacles have you faced toward your achievement?
 - How have you overcome these obstacles?
 - Describe your path toward choosing a major and a career.
 - How has your peer group influenced your achievement in college? Give examples.
 - Are you in the Honors Program? If so, what influence does that have on your attitude toward achievement? Give examples.
 - Personal Characteristics and Goals
 - If I met your best friend, how would s/he describe you to me? What characteristics would be mentioned? What examples do you have to illustrate those characteristics?
 - Describe your attitude toward gender roles and gender role expectations. Examples?
 - Goals for the future
 - What are your career goals? How have you arrived at them?
 - What are your relationship goals? How have you arrived at them?
 - Other aspects of identity:
 - Describe your process of developing your beliefs in politics, religion, and other values.

- Do you have the same values as your parents? If not, how are they different, and why do you think they are different?
- Socioeconomic background
 - In what socioeconomic background were you raised (working class, middle class, etc.).
 - How has this background influenced your identity development? Give examples.
 - How has it influenced your friendships? Give examples.
 - How has it influenced your achievement? Give examples.
 - Tell me about the process of coming to know yourself in as much detail as possible.
 - Do you feel like you know yourself well?
 - How do you think identity development influences achievement? Examples?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me relevant to the interview topics that we have not covered?