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# “It’s Like You are Supposed to be There”: The Meaning of Institutional Fit for First-Generation Students and Implications for Policy and Practice in Higher Education

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# “It’s Like You are Supposed to be There”: The Meaning of Institutional Fit for First-Generation Students and Implications for Policy and Practice in Higher Education

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study is to better understand what the concept of institutional fit means to first-generation college students so that higher education institutions can be better informed about the services and programs necessary to help first-generation students be more successful in their higher education endeavors. The research question that guided this study was: What constitutes the essence of good institutional fit for first-generation students attending a small, midwestern institution of higher education? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 first-generation students. There were four main themes or commonalities that resonated throughout the interviews as these 11 students deciphered what having good institutional fit meant to them: having the academic and financial resources they need to succeed; the university having their major program of study and faculty that were approachable; having an environment that was comfortable, safe, and inclusive; being on a campus and in a community where they felt they could engage, and finally, having a sense of belonging and/or a social support network. Having expectations that aligned well with the reality of transition to college life around the themes that were important to them was how they defined what institutional fit meant to them. Based on these findings, higher education needs to put aside the deficit approach to first-generation students and instead look at the strengths of these students and the successes they are having in the post-secondary environment and build on these successes to create more diverse, inclusive, and empowering learning environments for first-generation students.

## Acknowledgements & Dedication

I learned a lot during the process of working on this project and completing my doctoral degree. First and foremost: family is everything. I could have never done this without my mom who was always there to help me with my boys whether it was chauffeuring them to sports and other school/church events or having them sleep over on the weekend. It was truly her graciousness and willingness to help whenever she could that allowed me to stay on track with my goals and timeline. To my boys, Lleyton and Logan, thank you for your patience and understanding when you had to hear "I can't; I have homework I have to finish." To my partner Heath, who has been in it with me the whole time, and who lightened up the mood and laughed and made fun of me when he knew I was procrastinating some type of writing/homework. Thank goodness he had a time-consuming hobby of his own. To my co-workers at MRU, thank you for your endless support throughout my Ed.D process; you will never truly know how important your support and grace was to me. To SCSU Cohort 12 who was in it with me all the way; our group chats were always good for a laugh and a little extra motivation and encouragement when needed. And to my brother, John, who passed away very suddenly on November 19, 2021, two days after I defended my dissertation proposal. I knew I had two choices at that point: to take a break and get lost in my grief, or to keep plugging away the way I knew he would want me to, and so I kept plugging away. You are never far from my thoughts and life is forever changed with you not in it, but I thank you for giving me the strength to keep working towards my goals and the ability to laugh at myself when things get tough. Lastly, to all of the first-generation students in higher education, especially to those who volunteered to be a part of this project; you are strong and exceedingly bright, and I challenge you to continue to lend your voice to change

in higher education so that more first-generation students not only have access to a post-secondary education, but also have the supports necessary to help them achieve success!

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff in the St. Cloud State Higher Education Administration program for developing a graduate program that makes it possible for full-time working parents to continue their education. Above all, I need to thank my committee and especially my advisor, Dr. Friedensen, for all their guidance throughout my dissertation process!

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

The importance of studying first-generation students bears itself out in the statistics. Researchers now estimate that the percentage of first-generation students ranges anywhere from 20%-77% depending on how you define first-generation (Duffy et al., 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018), and first-generation students are becoming more visible on campuses across the United States. A better understanding of this group of students has implications for campus recruitment and retention programs, programs tailored toward enhancing and maintaining campus diversity, and policy decisions governing postsecondary institutions (Cho et al., 2008).

A college degree has come to be seen as essential for upward mobility in the United States, and upward mobility increases first-generation students' occupational and housing opportunities, improves their access to health care, and can break the intergenerational cycle of poverty (Amato et al., 2016; Azmitia et al., 2018). In the United States, four-year college graduation rates are stratified along lines of family income and parental education, and nationally only 21% of low-income, first-generation students earn a bachelor's degree within six years as compared to 37% of low-income, continuing-generation students and 66% of higher income, continuing-generation students (Bassett, 2021; Cahalan et al., 2020). This type of statistic raises serious questions about whether higher education eases social and economic disparity in the United States or deepens it, and further raises the concern that the group of students for whom postsecondary education holds the greatest promise of economic and social mobility is the least likely to graduate (Bassett, 2021).

Despite efforts to increase enrollment of marginalized populations, which often includes first-generation students, disparities persist in retention and degree completion particularly

between first-generation students and their continuing-generation peers (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Ho & Wei, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2018). Research on first-generation students has also come into the spotlight. There has been an overall increased focus on student attrition and retention in higher education for a number of reasons including, but not limited to, recent national policy imperatives, a developing recognition of the link between student equity and retention in higher education, and the flourishing concern about the quality of the undergraduate experience in the increasingly consumer-oriented, highly competitive world of higher education (Denson & Bowman, 2015; Krause, 2005).

**Study Background**

First-generation status is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2022) as an individual, neither of whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree. First-generation students are more likely than their non-first-generation counterparts to be older, come from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, and have a disability (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). They also tend to have lower levels of academic preparation, and lower graduation rates than their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). According to Engle and Tinto (2008), "research has shown that low-income and first-generation students are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services" (p. 3). Engle and Tinto (2008) go on to say that while colleges and universities are doing a better job of promoting access to higher education for first-generation students, persistence to graduation continues to be an issue with first-generation students. First-generation students are four-times more likely to leave higher education after their first year than non-first-

generation students; however, the strengths and resiliency of first-generation students cannot be overestimated as many of them have overcome substantial obstacles to pursue post-secondary education (Engle & Tinto, 2008). While much of the literature on first-generation students still remains deficit-based, there is much to be said about the assets first-generation students bring to their college campuses. Just because first-generation students are unfamiliar with the college environment, does not mean that they are deficient, it simply means that they bring different experiences that tend to be undervalued or invisible to the institution of higher education (Borrego, 2018).

College offers most first-generation students a path to job and economic stability but there are plenty of struggles along the way. First-generation students often face multiple barriers to success in higher education (Jehangir, 2010). Barriers can relate to family, social, cultural, and academic transitions, and can create a lack of belonging or isolation that can lead to feelings of depression and loneliness for first-generation students (Jehangir, 2010; Lippincott & German, 2007). First-generations students tend not to participate in high impact educational practices as often as their counterparts which can also lead to a lack of involvement and challenges in establishing close interpersonal connections with other students, as well as faculty (Jehangir, 2010), and according to Bowman and Denson (2014), social and academic integration have consistent relationships with student persistence.

First-generation students often begin college at a disadvantage compared to their peers in terms of social support, academic expectations, academic preparations, and access to resources (Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Schelbe et al., 2019). First-generation students are more likely to come from lower socio-economic families, racial /ethnic minority backgrounds,

work more hours while in school, study fewer hours, and have access to fewer supportive resources as compared to their continuing-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Padgett et al., 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996; Schelbe et al., 2019). One specific challenge for first-generation students is a lack of financial resources which sometimes contributes to the student's need to be employed while attending college (Schelbe et al., 2019; Stebleton & Soria, 2013). This time commitment of employment can create challenges for first-generation students who may also have the challenge of more family commitments than their peers (Lohfink & Paulson, 2005; Schelbe et al., 2019; Stebleton & Soria, 2013). All of the challenges first-generation students face, if unaddressed, have the potential to disrupt the transition to college and place first-generation students' academic success at risk (Schelbe et al., 2019). On the other hand, the challenges/barriers first-generation students face can also be used to raise awareness of first-generations students as an important demographic to target with services and support in an increasingly diverse college population (Ilett, 2019).

While first-generation students undoubtedly face challenges, first-generation students can also demonstrate tremendous resilience. Many first-generation students succeed in college, and understanding their resilience and strengths is important (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Schelbe et al., 2019). Going to school while working, supporting families, and struggling to bridge the cultures of the university and their family/home community teaches first-generation students determination; a determination that can be acknowledged and transferred to their efforts in college (Borrego, 2018). Creating space for first-generation students to make sense of their experience, to negotiate the tension of their different worlds, and to see their skills of resilience and persistence as transferrable to the higher education environment will help first-generation

students find fit with their institution and help build a richer campus environment (Borrego, 2018). Recognizing the distinct and growing needs of first-generation students can help institutions of higher education develop programs that build on the resilience of this group of students and help improve the retention and academic success of first-generation students in higher education (Schelbe et al., 2019).

**Institutional Fit**

The move to higher education for first-generation college students is often filled with anxiety and difficulty, and their experiences often involve cultural as well as social and academic transitions (Pascarella et al., 2003). Compared to their peers they often have less assistance in preparing for college, feel less supported for attending college, and lack a sense of belonging to the college they attend (Choy, 2001). It is often the sense of belonging that is linked to student-institution fit. Many higher education institutions believe that the sense of belonging that develops or does not develop for first-generation students is a result of the "fit" between institutional and student attributes and plays an important role in college students' adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence (Bowman & Denson, 2014).

A number of studies have looked to examine student-institution fit, but many of the studies have examined institutional attributes that are important or valuable for nearly all students, but few have focused on what constitutes fit for first-generation students (Bowman & Denson, 2014). In general, three broad dimensions of fit are often considered in studies: social, academic, and physical fit (Gilbreath et al., 2011). These dimensions do line up well with Tinto's student integration model which explains the process that motivates individuals to leave colleges and universities before graduating. According to Tinto's (1993) theory, attrition results from

interactions between a student and his or her educational environment during a student's academic career; persistence, therefore, is a function of the match between and individual's motivation and academic ability and the higher education institution's academic and social characteristics (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's (1993) theory also asserts that the match between an individual's characteristics and those of the institution shape the individual's commitment to college completion. Tinto (1993) further expands on his theory to include academic and social integration as necessary to maximize persistence; Tinto suggests that student, academic, and social integration into the formal and informal academic and social systems of the higher education institution impacts retention. According to Burkholder and colleagues (2013), research has generally supported Tinto's assertions about academic and social integration, and that academic integration factors are far more important than social integration factors when it comes to student retention in higher education. This integration is most important in the students' first semester on campus and needs to include faculty-student contact in and out of the classroom, and efforts on the part of both faculty and staff on campus need to be made in order to integrate and retain students (Tinto, 1993). Interactions between students and faculty are the primary drivers of student development and success (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020), and according to Rendon's (1994) validation theory institutional agents, such as faculty and staff, are central actors in students' lives in higher education and they can provide messages and cues that can affirm a students' capabilities for academic success.

**The Role of Integrated College/University Programs in Creating Institutional Fit**

Integrated programs on a college/university campus link students to existing supports on campus in a way that they can become a comprehensive, holistic support program (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020). According to Kezar & Kitchen (2020), comprehensive and integrated programs represent an opportunity to structure and coordinate an environment on a college or university campus that is oriented toward the particular needs and success of first-generation students. Successful integrated programs like TRIO/Student Support Services are found to be effective because they create what Holcombe and Kezar (2020) term a unified community of support for students, faculty, and staff. Unified communities of support incorporate structural changes to campus policies and practices to promote individual changes to faculty and staff knowledge, beliefs, actions, and relationships to organize student supports within higher education (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Integrated programs include interventions such as bridge programs, tutoring, cohort models, mentoring, intensive advising, enrichment activities, and undergraduate research opportunities; these programs are integrated and connected in a way so that participating students have exposure to multiple avenues of support (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Integrated programs like TRIO have been found to increase retention and graduation rates as well as improving levels of academic and social integration first-generation students (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). While programs like TRIO show promising results, there is very little research on precisely why or how integrated programs are successful (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020).

Recognizing the distinct and growing needs of first-generation students, institutions are further developing programs geared toward improving the retention and academic success of first-generation students (Schelbe et al., 2019). Many of these programs either focus on first-

generation students' transition to university or are support programs that are available to the students throughout their academic career, and some programs may be a combination of the two program types (Schelbe et al., 2019). The creation and implementation of programs to mitigate the differences between first-generation students and their peers is still needed; however, continuing to build these programs without direct input from first-generation students may create programs that do not effectively meet these students' needs (Schelbe et al., 2019).

Being able to understand what institutional fit means more authentically to first-generation students can help institutions of higher education create and integrate comprehensive support programs to better meet the specific needs of these students so that they can persist to graduation. With the findings from this study, I hope to be able to add to the conversation about student-institutional fit through the description of what institutional fit means to first-generation students in their own words and what institutions can take from these descriptions to create or improve programs and policies that assist first-generation students in finding a fit, both socially and academically, that creates a motivation for these students to persist to graduation at their institution of choice.

**Problem Statement**

First-generation college students are the first in their family to attend college; typically, neither parent has attended college nor has been awarded a college degree (Padgett et al., 2012). According to RTI International (2019), in the 2015-16 academic year, 56% of all college students were first-generation students. With the high number of first-generation students, colleges and universities in the United States have come to recognize that these students face

different challenges and needs when compared to their non-first-generation peers (Schelbe et al., 2019).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), when comparing six-year attainment and persistence rates between first-generation students and their continuing-generation peers, only 19% of first-generation students had attained a degree as compared to 60% those students whose parents had a bachelor's degree. According to the same report, 42% of first-generation students did not persist to graduation as compared to 19% for their continuing-generation peers (NCES, 2019). To address the disparities in retention and persistence to graduation for first-generation students, institutions in higher education have developed programs to increase academic success and retention of first-generation college students, but often without direct input from first-generation college students. Fostering academic success for first-generation students often includes a good institutional fit between the student and the institution, and without knowing what institutional fit means specifically to first-generation students it may be difficult to develop and implement effective and successful support programs because the needs of first-generation students who are transitioning to post-secondary education are markedly different than those of their non-first-generation peers.

**Purpose**

Given the increasing number of first-generation college students in the United States and the fact that they have lower retention rates than their non-first-generation peers due to academic and social support challenges, it is important to investigate the characteristics of higher education institutions that may be most effective in decreasing attrition and designing effective programs for the success of first-generation students. Good institutional fit is one of those characteristics

that first-generation students frequently cite when asked about why they chose to persist, and many in higher education believe that fit between institutional and student attributes plays an important role in college students' adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence (Bowman & Denson, 2014). In a survey of approximately 1,000 colleges and universities, a lack of student-institution fit was named as the second-most influential institutional factor that leads to student attrition (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). However, we have little understanding of what constitutes institutional fit for this group. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study is to better understand what the concept of institutional fit means to first-generation college students so that higher education institutions can be better informed about the services and programs necessary to help first-generation students be more successful in their higher education endeavors.

## Research Question

The research question that guided this study was:

**$R_1$** What constitutes the essence of good institutional fit for first-generation students attending a small, midwestern institution of higher education?

## Overview of Methodology and Methods

### *Methodology*

The methodology for this study is interpretive phenomenological analysis as I wanted to better understand the essence or structure of institutional fit for first-generation students and how they experience it as they transition into and persist to graduation in higher education (Reid et al., 2005; Smith, 2007). Generally, in qualitative research, phenomenology points to an interest in understanding social phenomenon from the subjects' own perspectives and describing the world

as experienced by the subjects, while assuming that the important reality is what the subject perceives it to be (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Reid et al., 2005). A phenomenological approach is well suited to the study of intense human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, Reid et al., 2005; Smith, 2011). Phenomenology is the study of lived experience and essences and their meanings as we live them and experience them, and it is one methodological way to explore how we find ourselves in the world (Gill, 2014; Reid et al., 2005; Vagle, 2018). The outcome or product of a phenomenological study is a complex description that presents the essence of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, the reader should come away from a phenomenology study feeling like they better understand what it was like for someone to experience that particular phenomenon.

***Methods***

My research took place at a small midwestern university, Mississppi River University, that is home to approximately 7,000 students. I will utilized nonprobabilistic sampling, which is typically the method of choice for most qualitative research (Alaise, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Nonprobabilistic sampling methods are seen as logical as long as the researcher is looking to solve qualitative problems like discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and relationships linking occurrences (Alaise, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The most appropriate nonprobabilistic sampling strategy for this study is purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling assumes that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore, needs to choose a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2015) argues that “the logic and power of qualitative purposeful sampling derives from the emphasis on in-depth understanding of specific cases: information rich cases” (p. 53).

I utilized criterion-based selection in recruiting my study participants. Criterion-based selection requires the researcher to decide what attributes of the sample are crucial to the study and then find people or sites that are meet those criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria that are established by the researcher for purposeful sampling should directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide the researcher to the identification of information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the purpose of my study, the criteria I based my participant selection on was being a first-generation student. I recruited students from a general education course that includes several lab sections in hopes of getting students of varying years in college and from different majors. I also offered the students who participated in the study a small incentive which was a $20 gift card to a local business of their choice which I mailed to them upon completion of the interview process.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 first-generation students from the small, midwestern university where I am currently an assistant professor. All participants were given a letter of consent, and I collected basic demographic information and provided them with the opportunity to choose a pseudonym that was used in the place of their name to protect their identity. I utilized an interview guide to provide a basic structure for the interviews.

Data analysis involved multiple readings of interview transcripts, as well as multiple rounds of coding. The ultimate goal was to discover statements and themes that are not only relevant to institutional fit but that provide thick, rich description about the meaning of institutional fit for first-generation students. Data analysis and data collection was conducted concurrently so that there was an opportunity for follow-up and member-checking with study participants.

### *Conceptual Framework*

As a concept in higher education literature, institutional fit appears to be subjective and nebulous to the degree that it is difficult to find a standard definition that fits all circumstances and increasingly diverse groups of students. Student-institution fit has been considered a broader concept of Kurt Lewin's person-environment fit where human behavior is a function of a person in their environment (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Lewin, 1936). Person-environment fit assumes that well-being and performance is a function of the interaction between people and their environment where good fit promotes well-being, self-confidence, and satisfaction (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Gilbreath et al., 2011). Conversely, poor person-environment fit results in negative outcomes such as dissatisfaction, boredom, and depression (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Gilbreath et al., 2011). Within an overarching framework of Lewin's Person-Environment Fit theory and building on constructs of parental influence, *habitus,* academic and social capital in the context of higher education, college choice, transition to college and institutional factors such as campus culture, and policies and programs that support first-generation students, this study will examine what student-institutional fit means to first-generation students.

### *Positionality*

In doing this study, I acknowledge my history as a middle-income, first-generation student who did persist to graduation but who also struggled to find institutional fit and identity as a college student. In my undergraduate career, I attended three different schools, transferred between schools three times, and changed my undergraduate major twice before finally settling at the small, midwestern public institution in my hometown, which also happens to be where I am currently an assistant professor of public health. To this day, I am not sure why I persisted or

what made me finally decide on one institution over another, but it has sparked an interest in me to better understand the motivations and challenges of first-generation students, and what makes those who do persist resilient enough to stay. Being a first-generation student myself, it is important that as the researcher I am aware of my personal experiences, prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions that I may have acquired in my experiences as a first-generation student. Only in this way can I truly examine the meaning of first-generation from the perspective of the study participants.

As faculty at the institution at which I will be conducting my research, my hope is that I will be able to better understand how first-generation students make meaning of and interact with their academic and social environments, and how as faculty and as an institution we can take the assets that these students come to college or university with and apply them in a holistic fashion to our programs and policies in a way that enables first-generation students to persist. We also need to ensure that our policies and programs are created and implemented in such a way that first-generation students feel comfortable accessing and utilizing them. As faculty at the university where I will be conducting my research, I am conscious of the fact that if I select and interview students from the classes I instruct, there may be an ethical concern based on power and/or the potential for bias to be introduced because I am their instructor. As their instructor, student participants may feel they should tell me what they think I want to hear versus their true experiences, and this could be detrimental to the study findings as the description of their true experiences is paramount to understanding the phenomenon of institutional fit in higher education. As a researcher in this context, I am acting as a facilitator in the conversation to uncover the meaning of institutional fit from the first-generations student participants.

**Research Terms and Definitions**

Below are the key terms I use throughout this dissertation with the accompanying definitions.

*Academic capital* is the potential of an individual's education and other academic experience to be used to gain a place in society (St. John et al., 2011). Academic capital is made up of many different factors including the individual's academic transmission from his/her family, status of the academic institutions attended, and publications produced by the individual (Bourdieu, 1986).

*AAC & U* is the acronym for the American Association of College and Universities.

*CECE* is the acronym for the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model of College Success (Museus et al., 2017). The core of the model emphasizes that college students' access to culturally engaging environments is positively correlated with individual influences like sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy, motivations, and intent to persist (Museus et al., 2017).

*Cultural capital* refers to the system of attributes, such as language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms, that is derived, in part, from one's parents and that defines an individual's class status (Bourdieu, 1986).

*Cultural identity theory* is based on the idea that people adopt the traditions, values, norms, and thinking patterns of a culture, and when a person migrates from one culture to another, they are likely to experience increased levels of alienation (Lustig, 2013).

*First-generation student* is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2022) as an individual, neither of whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree.

*Habitus* or an individual's internalized system of thought, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment, conditions, and an individual's college-related expectations, attitudes, and aspirations (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006). It is the internalized set of dispositions and preferences that is derived from one's surroundings and that subconsciously define what is reasonable action (Bourdieu, 1986).

*High impact practices* are defined as "time intensive pursuits that provide structured opportunities for meaningful interactions with faculty and peers regarding course related topics as well as positive interactions with others from diverse backgrounds" (Kuh, 2013; Ribera et al., 2017, p. 546).

*Institutional fit* in terms of student-institution fit is a broader concept of Kurt Lewin's (1936) person-environment fit where human behavior is a function of a person in their environment. Desired outcomes like well-being and performance are a function of the interaction between a person and their environment (Lewin, 1936). It is often defined as "The congruence between students' needs and a university's environment" (Gilbreath et al., 2011, p. 50).

*Sense of belonging* "refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 3).

*Social capital* focuses on social networks and the way in which social networks and connections are sustained (Perna, 2006). Social capital is acquired through an individual's relationships with others, particularly through membership in social networks and other social structures (Perna, 2006).

*TRIO* is a group of federal outreach and student services programs in the United States designed to identify and provide services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are designed, administered, and funded by the United States Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

**Significance of the Study**

Much of what is in the literature around first-generation students describes who they are, where they come from, and the barriers and struggles they face as they transition to college. The research has also focused on how colleges and universities struggle to find the right formula to retain first-generation students and help them persist to graduation (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kezar & Kitchen, 2020; Pascarella et al., 2004; Padgett et al., 2012). College impacts are conditioned by the background and personality of the student to some degree, and the more, "… incongruent a student is with the overall environment of the college, the more likely they are to withdraw from the college or higher education in general" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252).

As researchers in higher education, it is imperative for us to look specifically at how first-generation students describe institutional fit within the context of higher education; more specifically, what are the characteristics and/or structures of the institution that help a first-generation student feel or be successful in their chosen academic environment? Taking it a step further, how can we use information derived directly from first-generation students to better inform programs and policies at higher education institutions to create comprehensive, integrated, and holistic systems that can better support their success and create the important institutional fit or person-environment fit necessary for first-generation students to persist to graduation? We need to hear and know from students' voices so we can better understand their

experiences, characteristics, and needs on their own terms (Ilett, 2019). This phenomenological study will help emphasize the students' understanding of their experiences and place them at the center of the research findings.

**Chapter Summary**

As first-generation students become more visible on our college and university campuses, it is important to understand how they make meaning of their educational opportunity and experience, including institutional fit, and how we can use this information to help them succeed and persist by creating campus programs and resources that specifically target their academic and cultural needs. This interpretive phenomenological study will bring the voices of first-generation students forward in creating meaning around institutional fit. The information brought forward in the student interviews has been used to take an honest look at what institutions of higher education can do to help these students have rich, culturally appropriate, and successful campus experiences.

Chapter Two of this dissertation presents the published literature around first-generation students and policies and programs that may impact their experience and their persistence to graduation. In Chapter Two I also present the conceptual framework and constructs that impact and define institutional fit in the literature. Chapter Three contains details about my methodological approach, including specifics about my methods, site choice, sample selection, and my data collection and analysis procedures. In Chapter Four I present the findings of this study, and in Chapter Five I place my study findings in conversation with the literature presented in Chapter Two and discuss the implication for policies and practices in higher education.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

First-generation students are typically the first in their family to attend college (Padgett et al., 2012). Given the increasing number of first-generation college students in the United States and the fact that they have lower retention rates than their non-first-generation peers due to the academic and social support challenges they face (Bowman & Denson, 2014), it is important to investigate the characteristics of higher education institutions that may be most effective in decreasing attrition and designing effective programs aimed at the success of first-generation students. Good institutional fit is one of the characteristics that first-generation students frequently cite when asked about why they chose to persist, and many in higher education research believe that fit between institutional and student attributes plays an important role in first-generation students' college adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence (Bowman & Denson, 2014). In a survey of 1,000 colleges and universities, a lack of student-institution fit was cited as the second-most influential factor that leads to student attrition (Habley & McClanahan, 2004).

As researchers we need to look at how first-generation students make meaning of institutional fit within their own higher education experiences. We need to hear from the first-generation students first-hand about their experiences so that we in higher education can create better, more integrated systems to better serve first-generation students. This study will emphasize the students' own understanding of their experiences in higher education and will put their voice at the center of the research. In doing so, the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study is to better understand what the concept of institutional fit means to first-generation college students so that higher education institutions can be better informed

about the services and programs necessary to help first-generation students be more successful in their higher education journeys.

This literature review will discuss who first-generation students are and how they are characterized in the research literature. It will explore the literature around institutional structure, including policies and programs that have the potential to impact institutional fit for first-generation students. Lastly, it will explore the constructs of institutional fit, including ideas around student integration and engagement, sense of belonging, theories of persistence, college choice, and campus culture.

**First-Generation Students**

Concretely defining the term first-generation student has been a complicated task because it is often coupled with other discussions of disadvantaged, non-traditional, or at-risk students (Duffy et al., 2020). According to O'Shea (2016), typically the research on first-generation or first-in-family college students is hindered by two factors: first, there is a wide-range of definitions associated with first-generation students, and second, much of the research does not focus only on first-generation students but rather reflects on broader issues related to social class background, access, and disadvantage. The parental level of education is just one factor among others, such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, used when describing first-generation students in higher education.

Many studies tend to use the federal definition of first-generation student that is outlined in the Higher Education Act of 1965 that defines first-generation students as, "…either being the first in the family to attend college or as having parents who did not graduate from a four-year institution" (Ilett, 2019, p. 179; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). I acknowledge that this

particular federal definition uses the baccalaureate degree as the standard and ignores the skills, knowledge, and experiences of those parents who attended community colleges or other types of institutions. However, for the purpose of this study which will take place at a four-year institution that awards baccalaureate degrees, I will use the U.S Department of Education (1998) definition that defines first-generation college students as those whose parents or guardians have not achieved a bachelor's degree (Garriott et al., 2015; Duffy et al., 2020). The reason I chose this particular definition is because it is the definition most commonly adopted by college admissions offices and federally funded programs such as TRIO (Garriott et al., 2015).

### *Defining Characteristics of First-Generation Students*

First-generation students are more likely to be older, low-income, come from minority backgrounds, and have a disability (Bui, 2002; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Compared to their continuing-generation peers, or peers who have at least one parent who has achieved a baccalaureate degree from a four-year institution, first-generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage. While students of color, immigrant students, and students from low-income background families are overrepresented among first-generation college students, just being a first-generation student can act as a predictor for low enrollment in four-year institutions and risk for high attrition (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Before enrolling in postsecondary education, first-generation students often lack basic knowledge about higher education, particularly about costs, application and financial aid processes, levels of family support, educational degree expectations and plans and academic preparation in high school (Pascarella et al., 2004).

In a review of 70 studies conducted in the U.S., Germany, the U.K., and Canada, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) found that first-generation students are, "…generally constructed as a group at risk who has difficulty fitting into the university environment and mastering the college role" (pp. 329-330). They are also more likely to be non-native English speakers, immigrants, single parents, and financially independent from their parents, and they tend to have lower levels of academic preparation and often need to be employed to help pay for their education and cost-of-living expenses (Jehangir, 2010; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). In their study of first-generation students, Hellman and Harbeck (1997) discovered that first-generation students have lower self-assessments of their academic ability than continuing-generation students, and once enrolled, first-generation college students more frequently encounter obstacles that compromise their academic success as compared to non-first-generation students.

However, in more recent research, it has been acknowledged that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students gain from their families can be the basis for expanding learning and successful higher education outcomes. (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). Viewing first-generation students as capable of learning and success helps to emphasize the qualities and experiences that incoming first-generation students share with all beginning students and helps them integrate them into campus culture (Dallis & Okada, n.d.; Ilett, 2019).

### *Barriers First-Generation Students Face in Higher Education*

Most Americans view education as a great equalizer in promoting upward mobility, but research around first-generation student status alludes to the economic, social, and cultural barriers first-generation students face (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Richards, 2020; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). According to Pascarella et al. (2004), there are three main themes that emerge

in the literature around first-generation students and the barriers they face in higher education. In addition to being disadvantaged in terms of preparedness and knowledge about higher education, support, and expectations around the degree, research also shows that the transition between high school and postsecondary education is much more problematic for first-in-family students (Pascarella et al., 2014). Lastly, the research literature reflects higher attrition rates and differences in postgraduation outcomes for this group of students (O'Shea, 2016; Pascarella et al., 2004). According to Chen and Carroll (2005), data from the National Education Longitudinal Study revealed that compared to their continuing-generation peers, first generation students declared their major later, did not complete as many credits in their first year, were more likely to have to take remedial courses, were less likely to take courses in math and sciences, had lower GPAs, and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat courses.

Despite colleges and universities doing a better job of promoting college access to first-generation students, first-generation students' persistence and graduation rates continue to be lower than their continuing-generation peers (Bassett, 2021; Calahan et al., 2020; Engel & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Beginning Postsecondary Study show that first-generation students are 26-27% more likely to leave higher education after the first year than their continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2012), Nearly half of low-income first-generation students leave college without earning their degrees (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Often when first-generation students do leave home for college, they feel ambivalent about their decision to enroll because their families and home-community friends may not understand their decision to leave which leads to some of them feeling like outsiders at home and at college

(Azmitia et al., 2018). Some first-generation students feel overwhelmed by their college and home responsibilities and feel homesick and lonely, and those who do drop out report feeling unwelcomed on campus and by their peers (Azmitia et al., 2018; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). First-generation students tend to report lower levels of belonging and greater experiences of exclusion in college (Schwartz et al., 2018; Stebleton et al., 2015). First-generation students as a whole also experience marginalization on college campuses and struggle to adapt to campus structures and cultures that were not designed with them in mind (Bassett, 2021).

Many first-generation college students experience higher education differently than their non-first-generation peers. Students of color, low-income, and first-generation students may experience a cultural mismatch with the norms of independence that are prevalent in the college environment, especially if they come from a community or family where collectivism is the norm (Garriott et al., 2015). With the norms of independence come struggles with college curriculum, institutional policies, and teaching practices (Garriott et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2012). Research by Engle & Tinto (2008) has shown that first-generation students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college like participating in study groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services. They experience social isolation and barriers to extracurricular participation, use fewer academic success strategies, and struggle to engage with faculty and staff and ask for help (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bassett, 2021). This cultural mismatch, alongside the deficits in social capital and self-efficacy, influences a first-generation student's academic and life satisfaction while attending college (Garriott et al., 2015).

### *Deficit vs. Asset Portrayal of First-Generation Students*

Clearly, the majority of research on first-generation students highlights the academic deficits they face, as well as the lack of knowledge and experience their families have when it comes to higher education (Cunningham, 2019; Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004). The deficit model, which, according to David Ilett (2019), is the prevalent model in education, focuses on what students lack and the reasons they may fail academically. The deficit model assumes that individuals are in control of their own circumstances, have the freedom to make a variety of choices, and can respond to challenges in a predictable, logical way (Ilett, 2019). This model also reflects the behaviors of traditional students, who are understood to be white, middle-class, native English speaking, and whose parents have earned a four-year degree (Ilett, 2019). Behaviors like enrolling full-time, living on campus, and completing a degree in four years are the expectations by which all students are judged (Ilett, 2019).

Pascarella et al. (2008) and Terenzini et al. (1996) also provide evidence that first-generation students have a more difficult transition to higher education than their peers explaining that first-generation students confront not only all of the anxieties and difficulties that all college students experience, but also experience substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions. Critics of the deficit model see it as a one-size-fits-all model and inappropriate as it renders many students, including first-generation students, deficient (Ilett, 2019). First-generation students are also viewed by higher education as a problem to be solved; this view differentiates them from their peers, the traditional students who are used as the standard for success (Ilett, 2019). In this light, first-generation students are seen as lacking (Ilett, 2019). On the other hand, this view may also have the positive outcome of raising awareness of

first-generation students as an important and substantial student demographic while highlighting the obstacles they face (Ilett, 2019).

In contrast to the deficit model, Ilett (2019) also speaks to a more productive model for understanding first-generation students; this model is referred to as funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge was a model developed in the field of elementary education and refers to "…historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skill essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Ilett, 2019, p. 180). This asset-based approach assumes that students are 'enmeshed' in the contexts of their families and communities, and that students, families, and communities develop knowledge and skills in a way that allows for a network of support and exchange (Elmborg, 2006; Ilett, 2019, p. 181; Valencia, 2010). In a study involving Latino higher education students, Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, and Judy Marquez Kiyama (2005) applied the funds of knowledge concept to higher education and propose that "it can help faculty to consider students' backgrounds and living conditions as sources of valuable knowledge rather than mere impediments to college-level learning" (p. 91). Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2005) also encourage researchers in higher education to "pay attention to the ample resources and knowledge that students bring to their classrooms, and how these can be strategically utilized to improve their learning and academic outcomes" (p. 91). Instead of viewing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students gain from their families as obstacles to success in higher education, these types of knowledge and experiences can be the basis for expanding learning (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2005).

Wainright & Watts (2021) also provide an alternate perspective to finding first-generation students as at-risk of attrition and instead counter with the potential that first-

generation students have to widen participation of and support for under-represented groups in higher education. In their study of first-generation students at a London-based university, Wainright & Watts (2021) found that university participation can reverberate within the family home, "promoting a culture of learning and encouraging the educational aspirations of others" (p. 112). Families and home communities may also support the retention and integration of first-generation students. First-generation students in Bui's (2002) study named bringing honor to their families and being able to help their families as a primary motivation to persist in school (Cunningham, 2019).

**Conceptual Framework**

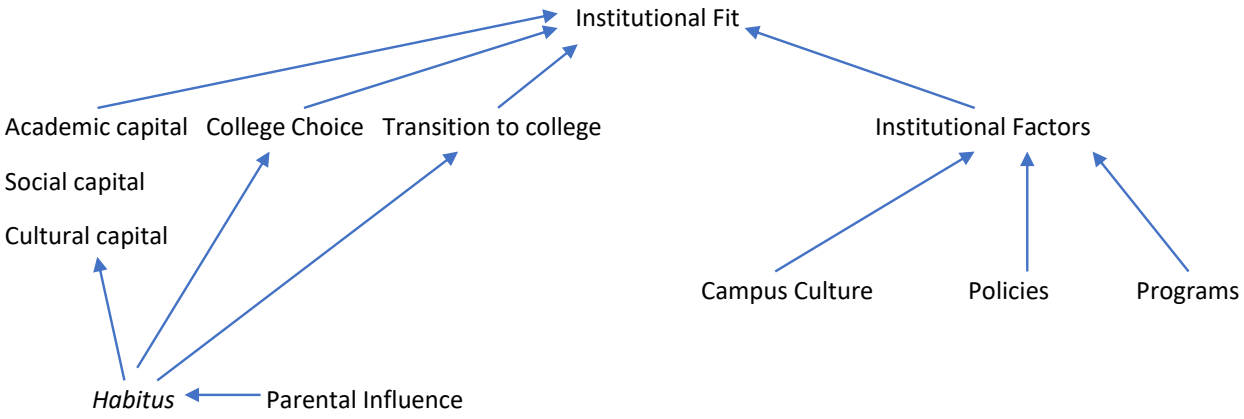
Student-institution fit has been considered a broader concept of Kurt Lewin's person-environment fit where human behavior is a function of a person in their environment (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Lewin, 1936). Person-environment fit assumes that well-being and performance is a function of the interaction between people and their environment where good fit promotes well-being, self-confidence, and satisfaction (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Gilbreath et al., 2011). Conversely, poor person-environment fit results in negative outcomes such as dissatisfaction, boredom, and depression (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Gilbreath et al., 2011). As a concept in higher education literature, institutional fit appears to be subjective and nebulous to the degree that it is difficult to find a standard definition that fits all circumstances and increasingly diverse groups of students.

Within the overarching framework of Lewin's Person-Environment Fit theory and building on constructs of institutional fit introduced in this literature review of parental influence, *habitus,* academic/social/cultural capital, college choice, transition to college, and institutional

factors such as campus culture, policies, and programs as shown in Figure 1, this study will examine what student-institutional fit means to first-generation students, and the implications good institutional fit has for policy and practice in higher education.

**Figure 2.1**

*Conceptual Framework of Institutional Fit for First-Generation Students*




## Institutional Fit

Student-university fit is often defined as "the congruence between students' needs and a university's environment" (Gilbreath et al., 2011, p. 50). In other words, it refers to the compatibility between what a student wants to have in a university and the characteristics of the institution. However, from there it becomes more difficult to define exactly what those characteristics or attributes are that may create that phenomenon of fit for an ever-increasingly diverse college student population. The amount of time, effort, and money that is spent in pursuit of a postsecondary degree makes it important that students choose an institution that is a good fit for them (Gilbreath et al., 2011). A perceived fit between personal and institutional attributes predicts more satisfactory adjustment and retention for all first-year college students, but

especially for first-generation students who face the additional challenges of social, academic, and cultural mismatch (Cho et al., 2008). Unfortunately, many first-generation students often determine whether an institution is a good fit for them by trial and error (Gilbreath et al., 2011), and the choice that a student makes can have substantial consequences for them. Unsatisfactory institutional fit is likely to result in decreased satisfaction, student well-being, and academic performance (Gilbreath et al., 2011).

Another aspect of poor institutional fit is undermatching, and first-generation students are more likely to undermatch and attend schools below their academic achievement levels (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Holland, 2020; Smith et al., 2013). Undermatching occurs when high-qualified students do not apply to schools for which they are well qualified for (Holland, 2020). First-generation students may not apply to colleges they are qualified for because they lack information about college choice, financial aid, and other resources, or they may also be concerned about financial constraints (Holland, 2020). Undermatching for first-generation students is associated with lower college completion rates and negative employment and earnings outcomes (Holland, 2020; Ovink et al., 2018). On the other hand, good institutional fit should make college less stressful for students and reduce attrition (Gilbreath et al.; 2011). The fit between a student and the institution which is particular to a students' academic and personal preferences, needs, and interest is associated with higher student satisfaction and their intent to persist (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Gilbreath et al, 2011; Holland, 2020). Institutional fit is also important for the university's well-being, as better student fit should improve retention (Gilbreath et al., 2011). Good fit between the student and the institution can lead to higher

student satisfaction which can also enhance campus reputation with diverse groups of students the university may be targeting (Gilbreath et al., 2011).

While it is difficult to find a standard definition for institutional fit that works in all circumstances and for an increasingly diverse group of students, what is clearer from the higher education literature, is that developing a sense of institutional fit starts when a student is making a college choice and continues through their transition into the college setting. Also seeming to influence institutional fit are the constructs of parental support, *habitus* or the values and beliefs of the first-generations students, and institutional factors like campus culture, and programs and policies that support first-generation students.

### *Parental Influence and Institutional Fit*

Improving college attainment rates continues to be a top priority for our country, especially for groups that are traditionally under-represented in U.S. colleges and universities (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). However, disparities do exist in college enrollment based on characteristics like socioeconomic status and level of parental education (Baum et al., 2013; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). With more first-generation students enrolling and enrolled in higher education, it is critical to understand the motivational supports these students use to persist in their educational endeavors (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Padgett et al., 2012). Research shows that parents and families play an important role in the college access pathway of these students (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Parents are overwhelmingly identified as the single strongest influence during the school selection process (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Pampaloni, 2010; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008), and according to

Choy (2001) the likelihood of college enrollment differs as a function of parental education attainment.

Parental involvement has many components; it can be loosely identified as unstructured support like encouragement, motivation, and providing a sense of expectations, or as practical support such as assisting with preparation of forms or offering to pay for or saving to pay for college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Pampaloni, 2010). In developing a list of colleges to explore, students whose parents had relatively low levels of education expressed higher levels of interest than their peers in financial aspects, rules and regulations affecting students, and the careers which a college degree might lead to (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Litten, 1982; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). The higher the level of parental education, the greater the interest in social backgrounds of student, and in extracurricular activities which leads to greater student -institution fit (Litten, 1982; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

While most potential college students typically take a relatively sequential path to enrollment in higher education that includes thinking about attending college, preparing academically for college-level work, taking standardized test, completing applications for desired colleges, and gaining acceptance and deciding to attend, first-generation students are less likely than their continuing-generation peers to complete any of these steps (Choy, 2001; Ward, 2012). The lack of knowledgeable parents confines the college choice process for first-generation students and continues to impact the student once they have arrived on campus (O'Shea, 2016). Despite their intended choice, first-generation students report a sense of bewilderment in the first weeks of college caused by institutional processes like enrollment procedures and financial requirements (O'Shea, 2016; O'Shea, 2007). Due to a lack of parental support and knowledge

about college and these processes, first-generation students also feel isolated and lonely, feelings that are exacerbated by uncertainty and lack of knowledge about university language, expectations, and protocols (O'Shea, 2016; O'Shea, 2007).

Parental encouragement of students' educational aspirations is one of the most important factors that impacts a student's decision to pursue higher education (Bergerson, 2009; Choy, 2001; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Although many parents of first-generation students have a desire for their children to attend college, they may not be equipped to offer the appropriate guidance due to their limited or non-existent experiences with postsecondary education (Choy, 2001; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). It has also been noted by McDonough (1997) that first-generation students face a differing set of choices in their college access process depending on their economic and cultural contexts, or *habitus*. A student's *habitus* can influence institutions a student will consider, or if they consider college at all (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). "The way in which students and their families access social and cultural capital and the resulting influence on motivation to go to college is an important consideration" (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018, p. 587).

In a qualitative case study of seven first-generation students, Mitchall & Jaeger (2018) explored the students' perspectives about the influence of parents and family had on their motivation to go to college. The findings of the study indicated that parents/guardians had a strong influence on students' motivation during college planning, and the role of parents and guardians was often cited as the most important motivational influence on students' decisions to attend college (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). For several of the first-generation students in this study, parents played an essential role in providing support during the college-going process regardless of their knowledge, or lack thereof, of college (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). On the other

hand, some parents and families of first-generation students did not work to promote motivation about college-going, and some were not able to provide process support or assist with questions, while others highlighted fears about paying for college (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). The implications of this study indicate that colleges and universities can do more to expand the social and cultural capital of first-generation students by making information about the college process more readily available so that first-generation students, in conjunction with support and encouragement from their family, can make college-going decisions in a way that will enhance institutional fit for the student and family (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

A primary part of making a college choice for first-generation students and their parents focuses on the finances, including family income, tuition, and financial aid (Terenzini et al., 2001; Perna, 2006). Potential first-generation college students may be particularly disadvantaged when considering the economics of enrolling in college as these students are often unable to obtain relevant financial information from their immediate family, school, or community (Perna, 2006). First-generation students and their parents generally lack accurate knowledge and information about college costs and the availability of financial aid to offset the costs (Perna, 2006).Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) also state that how active parents are in planning to finance their child's college education is dependent on their own collegiate financial experiences and having been the recipients of parental financial support and financial aid themselves, motivated them to assist and support their own children financially. This type of support and aid is often not something that first-generation college students can take advantage of.

Ultimately, parental encouragement is a pivotal force in building educational aspirations in children (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Finding institutional fit depends on many things,

including the quality of the institutions, parental encouragement, financial considerations, the student's educational and occupational aspirations, and the student's academic abilities (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Development of expectations and perceptions about the quality of the institution, campus life, availability of majors and one's ability to finance enrollment are the primary considerations that shape actual articulation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Tinto, 1993), and college-educated parents are generally more knowledgeable than first-generation college students' parents about college life and expectations (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

### *Institutional Fit and the Role of Academic/Cultural/Social Capital*

Two schools of thought tend to dominate conversations about how cultural, social, and academic capital influences educational outcomes and social mobility of students (Richards, 2020). The social reproduction perspective suggests that higher education perpetuates social inequality by placing a higher value on the cultural assets of elite groups, which give their children an advantage in higher education settings (Calarco, 2011; Richards, 2020). The social mobility perspective, in contrast, implies that students from less-advantaged families can acquire and benefit academically from acquiring cultural capital which opens up the possibility for social mobility (DiMaggio, 1982; Richards 2020). In addition, St. John et al. (2011) have highlighted the social and cultural demands on students in their work on *academic capital*. St. John et al. (2011) argue that academic capital enables underrepresented students, like first-generation students, to break the barriers that many times prevent them from accessing higher education and developing new patters of educational success not previously experienced in their families (Winkler & Sriram, 2015).

**Cultural Capital and Habitus.**

Studies in the field of educational inequality have also been driven by the work of Bourdieu and Yosso. Bourdieu (1986) has explored how education systems can reproduce social inequality by carrying out cultural practices that are associated with the dominant class (Dumais & Ward, 2010; O'Shea, 2016). According to Bourdieu (1986), capital can be economic or cultural, with cultural capital being defined by the family or social position (O'Shea, 2016). Cultural capital is characterized by tangible goods like books and pictures, institutionalized in the form of academic awards or credentials, as well as the embodied form which is described as 'dispositions of the mind and body' or what is termed by Bourdieu (1986, p. 243) as *habitus* (O'Shea, 2016). Under Bourdieu's (1986) assumptions about a students' *habitus*, *habitus* can limit a student's educational success because it can impact their ability to understand the 'rules of the game,' which are based on the dominant culture (O'Shea, 2016). For first-generation students this equates to lacking the knowledge or cultural capital that is valued in the higher education environment (O'Shea; 2016). On the other hand, non-first-generation students have parents who are experienced in selecting colleges, applying to them, choosing classes once enrolled, and understand the financial processes, and these skills are passed down to the next generation during the socialization process, so that non-first-generations students see college as a place where they belong and feel entitled to attend (Bourdieu, 1987; Dumais & Ward, 2010).

In contrast, first-generation students are not exposed to the same types of college information in their homes, and as a result do not have the same natural feel for the college application and enrollment process (Dumais & Ward, 2010). In this aspect, cultural capital plays an important role in the reproduction of social class structure where students possessing cultural

capital may receive more attention from teachers, better grades, and more encouragement to pursue higher education than students from more modest backgrounds, such as first-generation students (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Students who possess cultural capital are more likely to go to college and have more prestigious occupations, which leads to reproduction of the social structure of the previous generation (Bourdieu, 1987; Dumais & Ward, 2010).

Dumais & Ward (2010) posit that first-generation students come from families that lack institutionalized cultural capital, and as such experience difficulties enrolling and transitioning to postsecondary education as they struggle to learn a 'new culture' and adjust to their new environment. Padgett et al. (2012) further suggest that the theoretical perspectives of *habitus* and social capital suggest that students whose parents are highly educated have a significant advantage over first-generation students in the cognitive and psychosocial development that is refined during the college years. Compared to students with highly educated parents, first-generation students are already at a disadvantage in terms of their experiences, values, and resources before they even set foot on campus (Padgett et al., 2012). In a study of how cultural capital affects the educational transitions of first-generation and non-first-generation students and whether it serves to reproduce existing education inequalities, Dumais and Ward (2010) used data from the 1988-2000 National Educational Longitudinal Study and the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study. Based on the data, they found that cultural capital that is acquired during the adolescent years has decreasing importance as students advance through higher education; however, they did also find that it is important for initial access to college (Dumais & Ward, 2010). In other words, first-generation status serves more as a barrier for initial college access than it does for educational success (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Strategic interaction such as

parents gathering information and resources on behalf of their children is associated both with increased access to higher education and graduation (Dumais & Ward, 2010). However, that interaction may be limited for first-generation students.

In a study that looked at help-seeking behaviors as cultural capital for first-generation students, Bedelia Richards (2020) argued that educational institutions can transmit cultural capital in the form of help-seeking and specialized knowledge that can positively impact first-generation students' outcomes. The findings also support the argument that institutional agents, even high school teachers and administrators, can function as cultural guides to bolster social mobility (Lareau, 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Richards, 2020). Institutional agents can alter educational trajectories for students who are traditionally described as at-risk or marginalized. When institutional agents are intentional about creating critical moments in a students' academic career, they are capable of transmitting cultural capital that is critical for improving educational trajectories and outcomes for first-generation students (Richards, 2020).

**Community Cultural Wealth.**

In opposition to Bourdieu's *habitus* lens on social reproduction in higher education, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework argues that there are other forms of knowledge that are equally valued by more marginalized, less powerful groups of students than the white majority. Yosso (2005) asserts that we need to adapt this type of lens to better retain and support students from more diverse backgrounds, i.e., first-generation students.

The types of capital Yosso refers to are: aspirational capital, which is resilience that translates into an individual's ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future; resistance capital which nurtures attitudes that challenge the status quo; linguistic capital that recognizes

the strengths and communication skills like storytelling, art, and music; navigational capital that is premised on individual agency and social networks that help navigate educational spaces; social capital refers to the networks that surround people providing practical supports; and finally, familial capital that recognizes the cultural knowledge that is nurtured by family and friends (O'Shea, 2016; Yosso, 2005). O'Shea (2016), in a study whose purpose was to deeply explore the experiences of 1500 first- generation students as they participated in higher education, used Yosso's Community Culture Wealth framework to look at how this participation informed intergenerational choices around, and perception of, higher education among family and community. O'Shea (2016) found that there was a powerful influence that family had on the learners in the study as the participants spoke to how their learning was encouraged by others within the household.

**Social Capital.**

Social capital such as information, support, and resources available to students, has also been shown to be associated with a range of positive outcomes for college students such as retention and comfort or satisfaction with school (Schwartz et al., 2018). However, during the transition to college, students' access to social capital can diminish as connections to family and home communities begin to weaken, and this is particularly true for first-generation college students (Schwartz et al., 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Tinto, 1993). In college, supportive interactions with faculty in and out of the classroom contribute to students' retention, academic success, and general well-being and are an important contributor to academic and social capital, but first-generation students are less likely to initiate contact with faculty (Ishitani, 2006; Padgett et al., 2012; Schwartz et al., 2018; Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

Schwartz et al. (2018) studied an intervention that focused on the development of skills and attitudes to empower first-generation students to cultivate social capital and on-campus connections during the transition to college. The authors found that students who participated in the intervention demonstrated improved attitudes and behavior around seeking support in college, closer relationships with instructors, and higher GPAs at the end of their first year (Schwartz et al., 2018). Ultimately this supports other key findings in research that social capital does play a key role in college success, and that social capital can be transmitted to first-generation students during their college years and can improve their academic outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Pascarella et al. (2008) and Terenzini et al. (1996) also conducted studies around first-generation students and the importance of social and cultural capital before and during the college years. They found that first-generation students tend to be at a disadvantage in terms of the institutions they attend and the kind of experiences they have during college (Pascarella et al, 2008; Terenzini et al., 1996). They are therefore at greater risk of being academically, social, and economically left behind as they struggle to understand the culture of higher education (Pascarella et al., 2008). Familial cultural capital plays a significant role in informing the choices first-generation students make about the types of institutions they attend and the kind of experiences they have once they enroll (Pascarella et al., 2008). First-generation students tend to be less prepared to make the kinds of informed choices about institutions and involvement during college that potentially maximizes their academic outcomes (Pascarella et al., 2008). However, the first-generation students who persisted in college appeared to be resilient enough that the disadvantages in cultural capital did not turn into disadvantages in cognitive and noncognitive

outcomes (Pascarella et al., 2008). In addition, Pascarella et al. (2008) found that first-generation students do gather greater benefits from extracurricular activity involvement and peer interaction than other students.

**Academic Capital.**

Academic capital, as envisioned by St. John et al (2011), encompasses elements of human capital theory (Becker, 1975), social capital theory (Coleman, 1988), and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1972), according to William & Sriram (2015). St. John et al. (2011) suggest that the term academic capital describes the "social processes that allow students from underrepresented backgrounds to successfully access and navigate systems of higher education" (William & Sriram, 2015, p. 569). St. John et al. (2011) also proposed six social processes that comprise academic capital formation and aid marginalized groups of students in overcoming barriers to higher education access. The six social processes are: (1) concerns about college costs, (2) supportive networks, (3) navigation of systems, (4) trustworthy information, (5) college knowledge, and (6) family uplift (Becker, 1975; Bourdieu, 1972; Coleman, 1988; St. John et al., 2011; William & Sriram, 2015). According to St. John et al. (2011), these social processes provide a foundation for understanding the challenges faced by underrepresented groups in higher education, like first-generation students, and can be used to create effective interventions to help students overcome those barriers (William & Sriram, 2015). St. John et al. (2011) also suggested that these interventions should address all components of academic capital formation, "…including the financial, cognitive and noncognitive elements, and each of those components should work together to aid students in gaining access to and succeeding in college" (William & Sriram, 2015, p. 570).

Specific to the context of higher education Winkler and Sriram (2015) conclude that looking at groups of higher-risk students, like first-generation students, through an academic capital lens allows institutions and practitioners to pursue innovative programs and practices to best support this group of students. Winkler and Sriram (2015) have developed an Academic Capital Scale and suggest that institutions can use the scale to examine the academic capital of its' students more holistically. Through this holistic examination of academic capital, higher education institutions can then determine what aspects of academic capital need the most attention at the institution and how the current structure of the institution and its' programs and policies fail to support high-risk students (Winkler & Sriram, 2015). Ultimately, the goal for higher education institutions is to be able to initiate programs, policies, and services that specifically target institutional deficits in the area of academic capital (Winkler & Sriram, 2015). According to Winkler and Sriram (2015) academic capital is promising because it provides a more comprehensive approach through which higher education institutions can support high-risk students, like first-generation students.

The culture of higher education itself plays a crucial role in social reproduction as well, in that it constructs, maintains, and recreates inequalities between groups (Stephens et al., 2012). Higher education is built and organized according to middle- and upper-class norms, and when transitioning from home to college, students are led to believe that this process is part of realizing their individual potential (Stephens et al., 2012). To middle- and upper-class students, this type of realization may seem intuitive and natural, but to first-generation students who are likely to have been socialized in ways that emphasize interdependence rather than independence,

the sense of a natural fit is not the same (Stephens et al., 2012). In other words, there may be a cultural mismatch.

In a series of four studies, Stephens et al. (2012), tested the hypothesis that first-generation students underperform because their interdependent norms from their mostly working-class background constitute a mismatch with middle-class independent norms common in higher education. The authors found that universities emphasize that students should chart their own course or become independent thinkers, which signals that middle-class ways of being a student are valued in the college setting and other ways of being a student do not belong there (Stephens et al., 2012). While cultural norms of independence can be positive and motivating for some students, they can undermine the sense of fit and the performance of other students from more marginalized backgrounds, like first-generation students (Stephens et al., 2012). These independent norms can also systemically produce differences in achievement that maintain the existing social hierarchy in higher education (Stephens et al., 2012). These researchers and previous researchers assume that first-generation students, especially those that come from a low-income background, underperform because of their background; however, it is entirely plausible that higher education is also doing these students a disservice by not creating and implementing programs and policies that build on the strengths that first-generation students bring with them when they come to college.

**College Choice and Institutional Fit.**

A better understanding of the college choice process for first-generation students has important implications not just for the students but for higher education institutions as well. These implications have the potential to influence institutional programs and policies such as

campus recruitment and retention programs, programs developed to enhance and maintain campus diversity, and policy decisions governing the institution (Cho et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the process of choosing a college and the balancing of institutional factors and individual needs and preferences is not well understood for first-generation students (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Cho et al., 2008; Holland, 2020). Despite the importance of the college search, higher education lacks an understanding of how first-generation college students make meaning of their college options, evaluate them, and translate them into application decisions (Holland, 2020).

David Chapman asserts that student college choice is influenced by a set of student characteristics in combination with multiple external influences, including the influence of significant persons, fixed characteristics of the higher education institution, and the institution's communication efforts with prospective students (Chapman, 1981). Understanding the search and choice process is critical because the fit between a student and the institution, which is personally aligned with a student's academic and personal preferences, needs, and interests, is associated with student satisfaction and their intent to persist (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Gilbreath et al., 2011).

Understanding more about this search and choice process is critical because which college a student attends matters. In an effort to investigate how first-generation students engage in the college search and decision-making process, Holland et al. (2020) interviewed 29 first-generation colleges students and found that first-generation students used three frames to evaluate colleges: incidental, limited, and personal fit. These evaluative frames are informed by cultural knowledge about college and social networks (Holland, 2020). First-generation students

and students with limited knowledge about college are most likely to use the incidental frame where college is considered a means to an end; the end being college attendance (Holland, 2020). Students who had less cultural knowledge about college, like first-generation students, struggled with sorting their choices and had no frame of reference by which to evaluate different characteristics, and rarely considered fit which made them more vulnerable to marketing from for- profit schools (Holland, 2020). While for-profit schools met the students' main criteria of access, it often came at a cost of poorer educational outcomes and higher levels of debt (Holland, 2020; Wei & Horn, 2013). During the college choice process, students are evaluating a complex cultural and institutional good, and many times, especially for first-generation students, lack the basic knowledge of differences across institutions (Holland, 2020). As a result, they may end up at an institution that is costly or where they lack fit which in turn impacts their persistence and social mobility and maintains social and educational inequities (Holland, 2020).

A students' *habitus* also plays an important role in the idea of student-institution fit and college choice (Cho, 2008). *Habitus* is crucial to the student's perception of fit between psychosocial needs and the capacity of the higher education institution to meet those needs (Cho et al., 2008; Nora, 2004). According to Cho and colleagues (2008) how psychosocial, institutional, and personal preferences factors come together influence a student's decision to apply and actually matriculate to a given institution. Although these factors are not as important as financial and academic factors, this supports the importance of *habitus*, or the fit between a student's social and psychological needs and the perceived campus environment in the choice of a college.

Much of the research around college choice brings together the idea of a student's *habitus* in combination with external influences. According to Chapman (1981), external influences can be grouped into three different categories: the influence of significant persons, the fixed characteristics of the institution, and the institution's efforts to communicate with prospective students. Student characteristics combined with these external influences contribute to a student's expectations of college life or the 'freshman myth' (Chapman, 1981). Student characteristics can include factors like socioeconomic status, academic ability, educational aspiration, gender, and ethnicity (Center on Educational Policy, 2012; Iloh, 2018). Parental influences are parent income, parent education, and parent encouragement and support (Iloh, 2018; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Institutional factors can include institutional reputation, location, cost of attendance, academic and nonacademic programs, religious affiliation, social atmosphere, and size (Iloh, 2018; Pampaloni, 2010). When combined into an ecological model of college choice, these factors are advantageous because it allows for the multiplicity of realities that students face, and the model assumes that students' realities around institutional fit are constrained and shaped by their own specific circumstances (Iloh, 2018).

College choice researchers have revealed that students whose values and beliefs fit with that of a specific institution were satisfied with their choice of college and ultimately persisted (Bean, 1990; Nora, 2004; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Williams, 1984). On the other hand, students who find themselves in a mismatch between themselves and the institution are more likely to fail to withdraw from the institution (Nora, 2004). Studies indicate that students are more satisfied and less likely to withdraw when there is congruence between their personality types and the college environment (Antonoff & Friedman, 1991; Nora, 2004). *Habitus*, again, is

specific to the fit between a student's values and belief system and his or her academic environment (Bourdieu, 1986). This fit between a student's psychosocial needs and the perception that they can be met on a specific campus is believed to pay a major role in the degree of satisfaction a student feels with their college choice (Bourdieu, 1987; Chapman, 1981; Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Nora, 2004).

In a study that examined the dimensions of precollege psychosocial factors that were reflected in students' college choices and the effects of those factors on measure of student satisfaction, Nora (2004) found that, overall, students choose colleges where they experience comfort, acceptance, and fit. Feeling accepted, safe, and comfortable in a new academic and social setting are qualities of the college choice process that have greater relevance for a student making their final decision than other factors such as institutional quality, location, diversity, or cost (Nora, 2004). This study further revealed that student perceptions of personal and social fit with a college are more likely to lead to a commitment to an institution than the aforementioned other factors (Nora, 2004).

According to Bowman and Denson (2014), student-institution fit is associated with greater college satisfaction and lower social isolation, and fit is indirectly and positively related to intent to persist. Higher education institutions need to be more transparent about their attributes and unique characteristics so that first-generation students will be more likely to select and attend schools in which they will thrive (Bowman & Denson 2014). As a result, institutions may have greater retention and stronger institutional character which is also related to learning and persistence (Bowman & Denson, 2014).

A primary part of making a college choice for first-generation students and their parents focuses on the finances, including family income, tuition, and financial aid (Terenzini et al., 2001; Perna, 2006). Potential first-generation college students may be particularly disadvantaged when considering the economics of enrolling in college as these students are often unable to obtain relevant financial information from their immediate family, school, or community (Perna, 2006). First-generation students and their parents generally lack accurate knowledge and information about college costs and the availability of financial aid to offset the costs (Perna, 2006). While the financial aspect of college choice is important in and of itself, it does not paint a complete picture of college choice and has limited usefulness (Perna, 2006). Including a sociological approach to college choice emphasizes the ways in which socioeconomic background characteristics of students and their parents influence the students' decisions to enroll (Terenzini, et al., 2001; Perna, 2006). According to Perna (2006), "Sociological approaches are useful for understanding the ways in which context, influenced in part by structural constraints and opportunities, shapes an individual's perspectives about and orientations toward college choice" (p. 114).

The integrated conceptual model of college choice proposed by Perna (2006) is a multi-layered model that shows that an individual's college choice decision is shaped by four layers: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the social, economic, and policy context. In having this multi-layered approach, the model recognizes differences across students in the resources that shape college choice (McDonough, 1997; Perna 2006). Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model highlights that the assessment of costs and benefits of college enrollment are shaped not only by the resources to

pay for college, but also by the student's habitus and, directly and indirectly, by the family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context. By drawing on both economic and sociological approaches to college choice, this conceptual model seems to have the potential to generate a more comprehensive understanding of student college choice.

**Transition to College and Institutional Fit.**

First-generation college students undergo critical transformations as they begin to negotiate the difficult transition into the social and academic culture of college. The first year of college is the cornerstone of the college experience and the foundation for the for the entirety of a student's academic experience (Ward, 2012). As such it represents one of the most important transitional periods a student will encounter in their life as it sets the stage for their academic achievement (Upcraft et al., 2005; Ward, 2012). They are faced with all of the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any other college student, in addition to the academic and social transitions (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2003).

For first-generation students, the transition into college is a pivotal time that involves questions about who they are, what precollege characteristics describe them, what their educational aspirations are, how they are socialized to higher education in general, and more specifically, to their institution, and what their initial interactions with the institution will be (Terenzini et al., 1994, Upcraft et al., 2005; Ward, 2012). In the critical first year, first-generation students must effectively complete key transitional tasks like adapting to the campus culture, establishing a personal identity, coping with new time demands, balancing freedom and responsibility, developing academic skills, and mastering social settings (Ward, 2012). Many of

the challenges first-generation students face take place during the first year on campus because this is when their academic and social viewpoints are constructed (Ward, 2012). Some of these issues can be mitigated through strategies such as pre-enrollment and student orientation programs, but much more can be done in the first year of college to help first-generation students employ campus resources that assist them with adjusting to their new reality and gain the cultural capital needed for success in higher education (Terenzini et al., 1994; Ward, 2012). Compared to their peers, first-generation students often feel like they are entering college in "…a ten-foot hole, and they are only equipped with a five-foot ladder" (Ward, 2012, p. 28).

Colleges and universities sometimes do not successfully communicate with first-generation students about the opportunities for engagement on campus that might actually make their transition to college more successful. The factors that are most closely related to student engagement are those that require some level of interaction and involvement with the campus community like social factors, bureaucratic factors, academic performance, and institutional fit (Bean, 2005, Ward, 2012). These are factors that affect the level of connection students feel towards their institution, and according to Bean (2005), the most important interactions for first-generation students are those they have with faculty, staff, and their peers. These relationships represent "points of connectedness within the campus community, ideally leading to self-confidence, loyalty, fitting in, and remaining enrolled (Bean, 2005, p. 229).

***Perceived vs. Reality Gap.***

Prior to arriving on campus, students imagine what college will be like for them, what the institution might expect of them, how they will engage with others, and what aspects of the

college experience will have greater value than others, Ward (2012) terms this ‘anticipatory socialization’:

> Anticipatory socialization is the result of formal college counseling; recruiting and admissions processes in which students seek and receive information about various institutions (their mission, structure, resources, policies, courses, services, programs, and soon); as well as informal processes in which teachers, parents, alumni, peers, and mass media paint a picture of what college will be like. What students come to believe in advance about their impending college experience often dictates their attitudes and behaviors once in the campus community (p. 24).

First-generation students are more vulnerable to false impressions about college than their continuing-generation peers because they lack some of the parental wisdom about the college experience; thus, their impressions about college tend to be father off the mark and more difficult to overcome (Ward, 2012).

Because parents of first-generation students often cannot accurately shape their child’s beliefs about the college experience, first-generation students can be insufficiently prepared; they are then left with the difficult challenge of trying to reconcile their distorted notions of college-life with the reality (Ward, 2012). According to Tinto (1993), this process of reconciliation is critical because those students who are unable to complete it are more likely to experience a mismatch with their chosen institution, and they are more likely to be dissatisfied with their experience to the degree that they are not able to achieve academic and social integration. This type of acculturation process (Pascarella et al., 2004) in which students come to gain an accurate

picture of their campus and what is expected of them, does not come as easily to first-generation students as their continuing-education peers (Ward, 2012).

***Sense of Belonging.***

Sense of belonging is another important construct of institutional fit in the context of transition to higher education. According to Strayhorn (2019),

> In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or other on campus (e.g., faculty, peers) (p. 3).

Studies have noted how variations in belonging exist across marginalized groups, which often include first-generation students (Duran et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). According to the Person-Environment Fit framework (Lewin, 1951; Suhlmann, et al., 2018), human behavior is a function of both the individual and the environment. In the context of higher education P-E/Institutional Fit is what leads to the perception of lower task difficulty which results in higher academic success (Stephens et al., 2012; Suhlmann et al., 2018). According to Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, institutional fit includes both economic and sociological constructs, while sense of belonging is more about the social environment that students experience once on campus (Suhlmann et al., 2018).

The college environment is characterized by personal interactions with other students and academic staff and is a social environment, so it would make sense that students who experience a fit between themselves and college norms, which are communicated to them through faculty and shown by their peers, are more likely to feel that they belong to the

university (Suhlmann et al., 2018). It is likely then that those students who hold values and beliefs or *habitus* that is in line with what is expected from them in their campus environment will experience a greater fit and sense of belonging to the university (Suhlmann et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Suhlmann et al. (2018) found that student-university fit increases students' well-being and academic motivation as well as decreases dropout intention. Conversely students who feel that they do not belong to the university community are less content, do not experience a good fit and have a greater likelihood of dropping out (Suhlmann et al., 2018).

Lack of sense of belonging can undermine academic performance and even a student's plan to stay in college. For college students, peers play an important role in creating or hindering a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Through interacting with others on campus first-generation students can establish meaningful relationships, which in turn can be viewed as important to their first-year college experiences (Strayhorn, 2019). These types of feelings are what can enhance a student's commitment, connection, and ultimately retention and persistence (Strayhorn, 2019). Conversely, when students' needs are not met by their campus environment their motivation to do well wanes and they perform poorly academic-wise (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Strayhorn, 2019). Students have difficulty sustaining academic engagement in a campus environment where they do not feel personally valued and welcomed (Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging, then, is particularly meaningful to those who see themselves as marginal to the mainstream culture of college life, for example first-generation students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019).

In a six-year longitudinal study of first-generation students' transition to and through college, first-generation students cited their most common sources of belonging to be peer

groups, residential colleges, academic departments, ethnic student organizations, sports teams, off-campus volunteer groups, and student government (Azmitia et al., 2018). These sources of belonging could be linked to first-generation students' values and beliefs, and many of the students who participated in the study considered these groups their families (Azmitia et al., 2018). Whatever social expectations students have, those students who consider social aspects like cultural values and tolerance/acceptance of diversity when making their college choices, are more likely to be satisfied with their social situation on campus and their overall decision to matriculate, and thus tend to be more loyal to their chosen institution (Nora, 2004; Williams, 1984). Students prefer to attend an institution where they will fit in without having to change who they are (Nora, 2004). The fitting-in factor extends beyond matching academic credentials with institutional attributes and includes positive personal and social feelings that facilitate social interaction and a sense of belonging with other students and faculty (Lang, 2000; Nora, 2004; Nora & Cabrera, 1993; Terenzini et al., 1994; Tinto, 1993).

For first-generation students who may have limited time to put towards schoolwork because of work commitments and family obligations, a sense of belonging may be harder to come by. These other commitments lead to lower academic achievement and an interference with gaining a sense of belonging on campus (Sanchez et al., 2011; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Challenges related to financial issues and lack of full immersion on campus make college acclimation difficult (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Similarly, first-generation students often face difficult cultural, social, and academic transitions with limited familiarity of the dominant culture on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Williams & Ferrari, 2015).

Individuals seek environments that are in line with their own expectations, values, and attitudes, and if campus environments are broad and diverse in their norms and values, then the factors that facilitate students' belonging in that environment will also be broad and diverse (Strayhorn, 2019). When students have a lack of campus interactions and negative experiences related to college in their first year, they are more likely to drop out of college (Strayhorn, 2019). Hence a sense of belonging includes the perception of inclusion within the college climate along with welcoming and supportive interactions on the part of the institution (Strayhorn, 2019). For first-generation college students, social and peer network engagement not only has been shown to be beneficial academically, but also lends to a greater sense of control over students' lives on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Generally, a sense of belonging among faculty and peers and strong sense of community leads to an easier transition and better fit and academic outcomes for first-generation students (Strayhorn, 2019).

### *Institutional Factors that Impact Institutional Fit*

Making a satisfactory college choice is considered essential to a student's satisfaction with their college experiences and their decision to reenroll and persist. College administrators can assist students in making the right choice as they can focus dollars on information highlighting the attractiveness and safety of their campus or on student support services among other things (Nora, 2004). Research shows that it is college programs that focus on establishing personal and social connections, acceptance, belonging, and comfort for first-generation students that will facilitate student fit, satisfaction, and reenrollment (Nora, 2004).

In general, policies that lower structural barriers for first-generation students are crucial in helping these students navigate the college experience from college choice to graduation and

everything else that falls in-between (Hurtado et al., 2012). Educational policies at the local, state, and federal levels work to create environments that shape campus and student outcomes (Hurtado et al., 2012). Institutions of higher education operate within the confines of the policies and practices of the states in which they reside, as well as those at the federal level (Hurtado et al., 2012). These state and federal policies also impact the actions that higher education institutions can take to support first-generation student success (Hurtado et al., 2012; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Berger and Braxton (1998) studied the effects of organizational attributes on social integration and the student withdrawal process in higher education. They found that successful first-year retention is based on how well campuses can effectively communicate the rules and expectations, enforce rules fairly, and encourage students to participate in campus activities and decision-making processes (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Likewise, in the classroom, it is also important to have well-articulated, consistent, and clear expectations for students in terms of assignments and grading (Berger & Braxton, 1998). It is also important for academic leaders and administrators to make sure that faculty members know this and to provide professional development opportunities that can support faculty efforts in this area (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Student affairs, admissions, financial aid, counselors, service providers, and other administrators also need to be participants in clearly communicating the expectations for students (Berger & Braxton, 1998). It is incumbent upon all higher education practitioners to be sensitive to potential misfit on their campus (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Institutions should work to identify the most pertinent aspects of misfit and to provide opportunities and resources for first-generation students who might not fit in with the broader campus norms (Bowman and Denson, 2014).

Institutional support structures that enhance sense of belonging include need-based scholarship programs, social identity-based student organizations, community-building within residence halls, supportive faculty, academic support services, and high-impact educational practices (Means & Pyne, 2017). For students, these institutional support structures make them feel like they mattered which Strayhorn (2012) found to be a critical component of sense of belonging on campus (Means & Pyne, 2017). Colleges need to investigate their institutional structures that promote exclusion and inclusion for underrepresented groups of students, like first-generation students (Means & Pyne, 2017). They should work to develop solutions and opportunities that address issues around equity and social justice in order to enhance a sense of belonging and fit in higher education for these students (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Institutions of higher education should also consider implementing more comprehensive support programs that go beyond offering financial aid and that include cohort-based academic and social support that helps to retain students (Means & Pyne, 2017). Means and Pyne (2017) go on to suggest that colleges and universities need to pay attention to the role of belonging and fit, and that student affairs and academic affairs need to consider how to integrate equity and social justice into their curriculums and strategic plans in order to develop programs, services, and policies that enhance a sense of fit for all students, but that specifically target underrepresented groups. The remainder of this section will further discuss the research around programs and policies currently in higher education that contribute to the success of first-generation students persisting to graduation, why persistence is still an issue, and why there is a need to continue the research on first-generation students and successful academic outcomes.

### *Retention Initiatives that Impact Institutional Fit for First-Generation Students*

Because college success is often measured by persistence and graduation rates it has been touted as an issue for first-generation students. According to U.S. Department of Education (2022), 28% of first-generation students drop out of college after their first year. Six years later, nearly 42% of first-generations students have left college without earning a degree (NCES, 2019). First-generation students often face multiple barriers to post-secondary success as they often need to bridge two cultures, not feeling a sense of belonging to either one (Stebleton et al., 2015). First-generation students frequently encounter specific obstacles that compromise their academic success compared to non-first-generation students. Challenges can include things such as competing job responsibilities, competing family responsibilities, weak English and math skills, inadequate study skill, and feeling depressed and stressed, and often students face multiple obstacles at one time (Stebleton et al., 2015). While there are truly challenges to first-generation students attending post-secondary education, the onus to succeed should not be placed on the students themselves, but rather the institution and institutional agents that play a serious role in sustaining structural barriers for groups of students, like first-generation students (Pendakur, 2016).

Based on their study of student experiences at six large, public research universities, Stebleton et al. (2015) suggested several broad recommendations that institutions can take to assist first-generation students, and these include: easing transition to college, encouraging engagement on campus, promoting entry for young and working adults, targeted advising, tutoring, and mentoring by faculty and peers. In general, according to Pascarella (2008), there needs to be a more focused and sustained effort on campuses and public policies that are

designed to increase first-generation students' involvement in both the academic and non-academic structures of the institutions they attend. Pascarella (2008) also states that first-generation students derive more benefit when there is greater programmatic and structural integration and greater collaboration between student and academic affairs when learning experiences and other programs and/or policies are developed. However, building programs to close the gap between first-generation students and their peers is needed, but without direct input from first-generation students themselves, programs may not fully appreciate the impact that specific components of these programs have on a first-generation student (Schelbe et al., 2019). Currently there are few studies that examine the experiences of first-generation college students from their perspective (Nichols & Islas, 2016; Reid & More, 2008; Schelbe et al., 2019; Stebleton et al., 2015; Swanbrow et al., 2017; Yee, 2016).

Recognizing the distinct and growing needs of first-generation students and their intersectionality of multiple identities, institutions in higher education have developed programs geared toward improving the retention and academic success of these students. These programs can be "bridge programs" which focus on the transition to college, supportive programs that are available to the students throughout their academic career, or a combination of these two types (Schelbe et al., 2019). Programs that encompass initiatives aimed at developing preparatory academic skills, building strong academic skills, and building social and academic support networks to retain first-generation students increase the likelihood they will persist to graduation (Petty, 2014; Reid & Moore, 2008; Schelbe et al., 2019). Many institutions use support programs to improve first-generation students' academic success, but often these programs isolate first-

generation students, creating a protective group that does not fully integrate into campus culture (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

Unfortunately, programs that aid first-generation students are often unpublicized or inaccessible to students, and many students argue that it is difficult to fit in because the programs create separation between first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). First-generation students then have an internal multicultural dilemma of needing their identity as first-generation to access the supports and resources they need, but also needing to be a part of the larger campus culture (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). As such, many college campuses have supports and resources for first-generation students and even though the first-generation students understand the value of these services, naming these services for first-generation students only makes the students reluctant to use them (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Higher education institutions need to intentionally expose first-generation students to resources available on campus (Ward, 2012). According to Ward (2012), it is critical that institutions encourage both academic and social acclimation.

The way that students experience and respond to our college campuses is varied. College environments continue to become increasingly diverse in terms of social identities like college-generation status. Quaye and Harper (2015) note that dependency on ‘sameness’ is no longer appropriate because present-day cohorts of students at colleges and universities are different. First-generation students may experience a cultural mismatch with the norms that are prevalent in college environments and may struggle with college curricula, institutional policies, and teaching practices (Garriott et al., 2015). This cultural mismatch alongside deficits in social

capital and self-efficacy influences academic and life satisfaction for first-generation students while attending college (Garriott et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2012).

Given the diversity of the cohort of college student identities today, it is important for campuses to maximize belonging among diverse groups of students and to consider which communities are most important to different groups (Museus et al., 2018). Campuses need to determine how they can ensure that their campus environments engage these cultural identities in a meaningful way (Museus et al., 2018). Cultural inclusivity can be seen as important for all college students and should be considered a critical piece for discussions about cultivating conditions for all students to thrive in college (Museus et al., 2018).

This type of cultural inclusivity is also particularly important for marginalized groups of students, like first-generation students, who may struggle to find that cultural connection and sense of belonging and fit once they arrive on campus. When students struggle to find cultural connection and fit on campus, postsecondary educators and administrators can use the tenets of Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) to structure spaces, curricula, policies, and programs that are relevant and respond to the social identities of all students regardless of racial or college generation identity (Museus et al., 2018). Museus et al. (2018) also highlights the need for congruence between a student's precollege and campus culture, concluding that there is a need for college educators to prioritize providing students with culturally familiar spaces or spaces to connect them with people who share their background and understand them.

Colleges need to focus on the availability of various supports for first-generation students as they adjust to college. Access to mentors, supportive friends, and family members, as well as helpful instructors may be important, as well as ensuring adequate funding for system-level plans

and resources to connect students with supportive people on campus or to reach out to important people in the student's life (Garriott et al., 2015). Institutions of higher education also need to send a clear message to validate students and affirm that their cultural communities are respected by the institution (Museus et al., 2018). "It is critical for college educators to promote collectivist culture on campus and to make an effort to provide holistic support and serve as their conduit to broader campus support networks" (Museus et al., 2018, p. 481).

Demetriou et al., (2017) examined the lived experiences of first-generation students to explore how the students evolve and develop while at college. They found that by engaging in activities, roles, and relationships, the study participants enhanced their understanding of their environment and how to act within that environment in a beneficial manner (Demetriou et al., 2017). The authors also point out that traditional retention researchers have not focused on student success, rather they tend to focus on attrition and the negative outcomes of attrition (Demetriou et al., 2017). However, these models fail to consider the dynamic nature of the student and the environment over the course of the student's college education (Demetriou et al., 2017; Guiffrida, 2006). This study of first-generation students demonstrates that the traditional attrition model can be replaced by a perspective that considers the adaptive development of successful first-generation students (Demetriou et al., 2017). In this model, first-generation students should be challenged in the college environment as a means to grow and develop, and the university should offer supportive relationships to help them negotiate the challenge (Demetriou et al., 2017).

## Relevance of First-Generation and Institutional Fit Research

### *Persistence/Retention and Institutional Fit*

Many in higher education believe that fit between institutional and student attributes plays an important role in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of college students (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Although it is difficult to precisely measure fit, it is important to shed light on what fit means, particularly when it comes to how it helps shape student success (Bowman & Denson, 2014). In higher education student-institution fit is integral to Tinto's (1993) early theory of college departure where Tinto argues that misfit between students' needs, interests, and preferences and those of the institution can play a key role in students' decisions to drop out (Bowman & Denson, 2014).

Later versions of Tinto's (1993) theory assert that students may ultimately become integrated with a group of friends, a faculty member, a student organization, and/or other support systems, and these personal connections may compensate for lack of fit with the institutional environment as a whole (Bowman & Denson, 2014). According to Tinto (1993), fit is not synonymous with social and academic integration in that lack of fit could lead to departure from college regardless of integration:

> Incongruence…springs from individual perceptions of not fitting into and/or being at odds with the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life. In such situations, individuals leave not so much from the absence of integration as from the judgement of the undesirability of integration. Withdrawal mirrors, in effect, the person's decision that further attendance would not be in his/her own best interests (p. 50).

For example, a first-generation student may find a few friends with whom he/she interacts frequently, which is an indicator of social integration, but that student might still feel like they do not have much in common with other peers who are predominately from upper-middle class backgrounds (Denson & Bowman, 2015).

The concepts of campus climate and sense of belonging also provide some indirect evidence of the potential role of institutional fit. College students who recognize a more positive campus environment tend to report a greater sense of belonging to their chosen institution (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Locks et al., 2008). In the literature, sense of belonging is associated with intent to persist and actual persistence (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). However, it is important to also note that positive perceptions of campus climate and sense of belonging are not necessarily indicative of fit; it is possible that students who feel they belong may fit mainly with a specific campus niche, group, or campus organization without fitting in to the broader campus climate (Bowman & Denson, 2014).

In their study on institutional fit, Bowman & Denson (2014) utilized the Student-Institution Fit Instrument (SIFI). The SIFI survey is designed to measure several dimensions of fit identified from previous research and discussions with practitioners and researchers in Australia and the United States (Bowman & Denson, 2014). This overall fit measure is used to predict academic adjustment and disengagement which in turn predicts students' intentions to persist at their particular institution (Bowman & Denson, 2014). The U.S. version of the study included eight domains of student-institution fit: academic, social, cultural, physical, athletic, religious, socioeconomic, and political (Bowman & Denson, 2014). What the authors found was that overall, student-institution fit is associated with greater college satisfaction and lower social

isolation, while fit is also indirectly and positively related to intent to persist (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Bowman and Denson (2014) go on to argue it is important that higher education practitioners be sensitive to potential misfit on their campuses and provide opportunities for engagement for students, like first-generation students, who might not fit in with the broader campus.

Guiffrida (2006), in his cultural advancement of Tinto's theory, begins by recognizing that cultural and familial connections play a more prominent role in student persistence and retention. Tinto (1993) asserts that students come to college with certain background characteristics, like family background, skills, and prior schooling, that have helped shape their level of commitment to education and completing a degree (Guiffrida, 2006). Tinto (1993) also held that students' levels of commitment were continually shaped by their interactions with academic and social systems of the college (Guiffrida, 2006); essentially the more that students are academically and socially integrated into the college, the greater their level of commitment to completing their degree (Guiffrida, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

According to Guiffrida (2006), Tinto's theory fails to help us understand the students' motivations for that commitment. Students' motivation to commit to persist is an important piece of the puzzle when considering the academic achievement and persistence of minority and first-generation students. Guiffrida (2006) proposes a cultural advancement of Tinto's theory by recognizing the need for minority and first-generation students to remain connected to supportive people in their home community and to replace the term integration with connection. The term connection recognizes the "students' subjective sense of relatedness without implying the need to break ties with one's former community" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 457). This connection to

supportive people in their home community allows students to become more comfortable in their college environment without having to reject the supportive relationships and values and norms of their home communities (Guiffrida, 2006). The supportive connections to home also help minority and first-generation students deal with racism, cultural isolation, and other challenges at college to the degree that these cultural connections play a much more significant role in college persistence than social integration into the college itself (Hurtado et al., 1996; Guiffrida, 2005; Guiffrida, 2006).

Engagement matters and connections matter. They matter most during the critical first year (Tino, 1996). What is less clear is how to make engagements and connections in different settings and for differing students happen in ways that enhance retention and graduation (Tinto, 1996; Upcraft et al., 2005). Student affairs, admissions, financial aid, counselors, service providers, and other administrators all need to participate (Berger & Braxton, 1998). College retention efforts are especially successful when both academic and student affairs combine their efforts and develop a holistic attitude toward retaining students (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Tinto, 1993), especially those minority and first-generation students who may have different cultural values. For these students that means the institution must recognize the relationships between cultural norms, motivational orientation, and academic achievement and persistence (Cabrera et al., 1999; Guiffrida, 2005; Guiffrida, 2006).

Much of what is in the literature around first-generation students describes who they are, where they come from, and the barriers and struggles they face as they transition to college. The research has also focused on how colleges and universities struggle to find the right formula to retain first-generation students and help them persist to graduation. College impacts are

conditioned by the background and personality of the student to some degree, and the more, "… incongruent a student is with the overall environment of the college, the more likely they are to withdraw from the college or higher education in general" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252).

It behooves us, as researchers, to look specifically at how first-generation students describe institutional fit within the context of higher education; more specifically, what are the characteristics and/or structures of the institution that help a first-generation student feel or be successful in their chosen academic environment? Taking it a step further, how can we use information derived directly from first-generation students to better inform programs and policies at higher education institutions to create comprehensive, integrated, and holistic systems that can better support the success and create the important institutional fit or person-environment fit necessary for first-generation students to persist to graduation? We need to hear and know from students' voices so we can better understand their experiences, characteristics, and needs on their own terms (Ilett, 2019). This phenomenological study will help emphasize the students' understanding of their experiences and place them at the center of the research findings.

**Chapter Summary**

With increasing numbers of first-generation students attending colleges and universities in the United States, higher education practitioners have come to recognize that these students face different challenges and have different needs than their continuing-generation peers (Schelbe et al., 2019). Once enrolled, first-generation students are four times more likely than their peers to drop out at the end of their first year (Engle & Tinto, 2008), and at the end of five years in higher education, first-generation students are less likely to have remained in college

and earned a bachelor's degree than their non-first-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). To address disparities in retention and persistence to graduation for first-generation students, institutions in higher education have developed a variety of programs and policies to increase the sense of institutional fit for first-generation students that can lead to an increase in academic success and retention. However, these programs and policies are often designed and created without direct input from first-generation students (Schelbe et al., 2019). Due to declining enrollments and tight budgets most institutions have not been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to a gain in first-generation student persistence to graduation, and unfortunately, the answer is often complex with many different and competing ends (Tinto, 2006). Fostering academic success for first-generation students is often a function of good institutional fit between the student and the institution, but without understanding what institutional fit means specifically to this group of students it becomes difficult to create, develop, and implement efficient, effective, and successful support programs that address their particular needs and challenges.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter I discuss in detail my constructivist/interpretivist research approach and how that led to my choice of using interpretivist phenomenological analysis (IPA) to conduct my qualitative research. I include information about IPA methodology, why I chose this particular methodology, and details about my methods including recruitment and selection, data collection and analysis, along with my efforts to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity in an attempt to answer the following research question: What constitutes the essence of good institutional fit for first-generation students attending an institution of higher education?

## Epistemology

As a researcher, my view of the world is embedded in the social constructivism/interpretivism point of view. In the field of public health and in my work as an educator, I need to make meaning of the world around me, so I can better understand the populations I work with, how they interpret the world around them, and how they interact with and in their environments. Qualitative research is grounded in a philosophical position that is in essence constructivist; however, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) use the terminology social constructivism/interpretivism to describe a reality that is socially constructed in an interpretive process where the researcher interprets the meaning of the lived experience. A social constructivist/interpretivist point of view assumes that there is no single, observable reality, and that there can be multiple realities, or interpretations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this view, subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that are a part of the individual's life (Cresswell, 2014). This point of view is concerned with how the social and

cultural world are “experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context and at a particular point in time” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 42). Social constructivist/interpretivist researchers address the interactions among individuals and focus on specific contexts in which people live and work to better understand the historical and cultural settings of the research participants (Cresswell, 2014). Social constructivism/interpretivism also points to the unique experience of an individual and how we make meaning of or interpret that unique individual experience (Jones et al., 2014). The intent of social constructivist/interpretivist qualitative research is to examine social situation or interactions in an attempt to attain a holistic understanding of a phenomenon or experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

The central assumption of social constructivism/interpretivism is that reality is socially constructed, that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences, and that these different experiences derive multiple meanings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The primary aims of this framework are to understand and reconstruct experience and knowledge (Laverty, 2003). It is then the researcher’s goal and job to understand and make meaning of the multiple realities from the perspective of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The investigator and the participants are linked in the creation of findings in a process of interpretation and interaction where the primary aim is to understand and reconstruct experience and knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Laverty, 2003). Epistemologically, there is a relationship between the knower and the known (Laverty, 2003), and the researcher recognizes and acknowledges that their background and cultural, social, and historical experiences shape their interpretations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

According to Pascale (2011), interpretivists believe that the social world "is produced through meaningful interpretations" (p. 22). Interpretivists emphasize meaning people make rather than the facts, and interpretivism is closely linked to hermeneutics as it seeks to take researchers and participants to a deeper understanding of a phenomenon by uncovering aspects that may have been hidden (Jones et al., 2014; Pascale, 2011). In adopting both constructivist/interpretivist point of view, my goal in this research is to be able to better describe, understand, and interpret how first-generation students define institutional fit in the context of their journey through higher education so that colleges and universities can design and implement programs and policies that better serve this sub-population of students.

**Positionality Statement**

With the findings from this study, I hope to be able to add to the conversation about student-institutional fit through the description of what institutional fit means to first-generation students in their own words. I want to take from those descriptions information that can be used to create and improve programs and policies that can assist first-generation students in finding a fit with their institution, both academically and socially, so that persistence to graduation is a more possible outcome for them. As a researcher, I think the most important piece of this research is centering the voices of first-generation students. As a public health educator in the field, it has always been important for me to include the populations I am working with whether in research or program design, implementation, and evaluation. It is my belief that you work *with* your population of interest, not *for* them. When you work *with* a population, they are more invested in your outcomes. It is important for me to hear the perspective of first-generation students themselves and how they interpret institutional fit so that programs and policies can be

designed and implemented in a way that will be appealing, helpful, and easily accessible to them. As faculty and staff, we can be change agents, and we can adopt reflective, identity-conscious policies and programs that empower this group of students. By centering the voices of first-generation students, it is my hope, as a researcher, that what I learn about institutional fit can be utilized to create and implement a holistic educational experience that draws on the strengths of first-generation students in a way that makes them feel welcomed and enables them to succeed.

In doing this study, I acknowledge my history as a middle-income, first-generation student who did persist to graduation but who also struggled to find institutional fit and identity as a college student. Having been a first-generation student myself, it is important that, as the researcher, I am aware of my personal experiences, prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions that I may have acquired in my experiences as a first-generation student. I need to be aware that some of my interview participants may have different identities than I do, such as race, religion, or sexual identity, to name a few, in addition to being a first-generation student, and may have experienced institutional racism or other institutional experiences that I did not. Awareness of differences in the intersectional identities of first-generation students can help me examine and understand more fully the meaning of first-generation from the perspective of the study participants.

As a faculty member at the institution at which I conducted my research, my hope is that I am now able to better understand how first-generation students make meaning of and interact with their academic and social environments in ways that may or may not create institutional fit. I also want to, as faculty and as an institution, recognize and acknowledge the assets that these students come to college or university with and apply them in a holistic fashion to our programs

and policies in a way that enables first-generation students to persist. As staff and faculty in higher education, we also need to ensure that our policies and programs are created and implemented in such a way that first-generation students feel comfortable accessing and utilizing them. As faculty at the university where I will be conducted my research, I did not interview my current students in order to avoid potential ethical issues. As a researcher in this context, I acted as a facilitator in the conversation to uncover the meaning of institutional fit from the first-generation student participants.

## Research Design and Research Methods

What constitutes the essence of good institutional fit for first-generation students attending an institution of higher education? In an effort to answer this research question, I employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Alase, 2017). This research took place at the small, midwestern university, Mississippi River University (MRU). I conducted interviews with 11 first-generation students in order to understand the meaning of institutional fit for first-generations students.

### *Methodology*

Phenomenology is basically the study of lived experience (van Manen, 1997). At its core, phenomenology is the study of lived experiences and the development of the essence of these experiences rather than explanations or analyses of experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). Generally, in qualitative research, phenomenology points to an interest in understanding social phenomena from the subjects' own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, while assuming that the important reality is what the subject perceives it to be (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). A phenomenological approach is well suited to

the study of intense human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as its emphasis is on "the world as lived by a person, not the reality as something separate from the person (Laverty, 2003, p. 22). A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This type of methodology asks, "What is this experience like?" as it tries to unravel the meaning of the experience as it is lived in everyday life (Laverty, 2003). Phenomenologists focus on describing what all of the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) so that they can then reduce the individual experiences to a synthesized description of the universal essence of the experience, or as van Manen (1990) states, "a grasp of the very nature of the thing" (p. 177). The outcome or product of a phenomenological study, then, is a complex description that presents the essence of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, the reader should come away from a phenomenology study feeling like they better understand what it was like for someone to experience that particular phenomenon.

Edmund Husserl is often referred to as the father of phenomenology (Koch 1996; Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983). Husserl viewed consciousness as a "co-constituted dialogue between a person and the world" (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). Laverty (2003) explains that Husserl believed that by intentionally directing one's focus, one could develop a description of particular realities or the essences that make an object or experience identifiable and unique from others. Husserl also developed the process of phenomenological bracketing (Laverty, 2003; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983). Husserl proposed that the researcher needed to bracket the outer world as well as individual biases in order to successfully understand and interpret the essence of the phenomenon of study (Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983). Essentially this process involves

suspending one's judgment or bracketing beliefs about the subject of study in order to see it clearly (Laverty, 2003). Husserl's goal in doing this was to be able to show the pure character of the experience through careful description (Laverty, 2003; Osborne, 1994). However, bracketing personal experiences can be difficult, and so it may be more reasonable for the researchers to acknowledge in what ways their own personal understanding can be introduced and usefully incorporated into the study and analysis of the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Researchers developed a newer type of phenomenological research, referred to as interpretive phenomenological analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). IPA, which is the chosen methodology for this study, targets how "…particular people in particular contexts make meaning and interpret their experiences" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 54). The aim in participant selection in this type of phenomenological research is to select participants who have lived the experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to create the possibility of rich and unique data regarding the phenomenon of study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2003; Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983; van Manen, 1997). In this newer type of phenomenology, as is consistent with phenomenological research in general, the researcher is a writer (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Writing is intricately linked to analysis as the researcher tries to capture and interpret the essential characteristics of the phenomenon of study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Ultimately it is the objective of the researcher to develop a rich, descriptive text of the experiences of the participants' that conveys an overall essence of the phenomenon of study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

The importance of IPA as a qualitative research approach is its ability to examine and interpret the lived experiences of research participants as it is concerned with examining subjective experience (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) states that the bottom line with IPA research is that it is participant-oriented and is concerned with the "human lived experience and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it" (p. 34). IPA researchers represent a dual position as the researcher is making sense of the participant who is making sense of their lived experience:

> The dual role of the researcher as both like and unlike the participant. In one sense, the researcher is like the participant, is a human being drawing on everyday human resources in order to make sense of the world. On the other hand, the researcher is not the participant, she/he only has access to the participant's experience through what the participant reports about it, and is also seeing this through the researcher's own, experientially lens (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35-36).

IPA allows for multiple participants who experience similar events to tell their stories without any distortions (Alase, 2017). The most important aspect of IPA is its ability to make sense of lived experience of research participants and truly allow the research study to explore the phenomenon (Alase, 2017). It is not necessary in IPA for the researcher to bracket their previous understandings of the phenomena under study during the process of interpretation; instead the researcher uses previous understanding and theory to "bring all helpful texts to bear on one's interpretive understandings of the phenomenon under investigation (Vagle, 2018, p. 82). IPA is concerned with the detailed investigation of human lived experience, and it aims to conduct the investigation in a way that enables the experience or phenomenon to be expressed in its own

terms, rather than according to predefined categories or systems (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is an approach to qualitative research with an idiographic focus, which means it aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon, and usually the phenomena relates to an experience of personal significance like a major life event (Smith, 2007). IPA is different or distinct from other phenomenological approaches because of its combination of psychological, interpretive, and idiographic components (Gill, 2014). IPA "…produces an account of lived experiences in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions and it recognizes that this is an interpretive endeavor as humans are sense-making organisms" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). Two primary differences between a descriptive and interpretive phenomenological approach are in how the findings are generated and in how findings are used to supplement professional knowledge (Lopez & Willis, 2004). An important component in Husserlian or descriptive phenomenology is the belief that it is essential for the researcher to shed all prior personal knowledge to grasp the lived experiences of those being studied (Lopez & Willis, 2004). To this point, some researchers might advocate that the descriptive phenomenologist not conduct a detailed literature review prior to the study and not have specific research questions other "…than the desire to describe the lived experience of the participants in relation to the topic of study" (Lopez & Willis, p. 727, 2004). In descriptive phenomenology, the impact of the researcher on the study is constantly assessed so that their biases and preconceptions do not influence the object of study (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2007). In contrast, the philosophical assumption underlying interpretive phenomenology is that expert knowledge on

the part of the researcher can act as a valuable guide to inquiry and make the inquiry a meaningful endeavor (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Heidegger articulates that it is impossible to rid the mind of background knowledge and understanding that has led the researcher to consider the topic of their research to begin with (Koch, 1996; Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Interpretive phenomenology also differs from descriptive phenomenology in that the interpretive approach does not negate the use of theoretical or conceptual frameworks as part of the inquiry (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Theoretical frameworks are not used in a formal way to generate hypotheses, but rather they are used to inform the focus of the inquiry in that research is needed and used to make decisions about the sample, subjects, and research questions (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Another important concept in interpretive phenomenology is constitutionality. Koch (1996) asserts that this concept states that the meanings that the researcher arrives at are a blend of meanings articulated by the participant and the researcher. As a result, there could be more than one interpretation of the narrative, but the meanings found must be plausible within the study framework and must reflect the realities of the study participants (Annells, 1996; Lopez & Willis, 2004) with the aim being to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world and the meanings of their experience and events (Smith & Osborn, 2007). It involves detailed examination of the participant's lifeworld and attempts to explore their personal experiences and perceptions of those experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Because of the detailed examination of meaning and perception of life events that IPA provides, this is the best phenomenological approach for my study of first-generation students and how they make meaning of institutional fit in their college experience.

### *Recruitment and Selection*

In conducting an IPA research study, it is important to get an understanding of the overall perceptions of the participants in terms of their lived experience that reflects the phenomenon under study (Alase, 2017). According to Cresswell (2013), it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied. It is important for the IPA researcher to select people or a site that can best help you understand the central phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Cresswell, 2013). Written consent from participants is imperative and choosing participants from amongst a homogeneous sample pool of participants to understand the true make-up of the subject matter is a must (Alase, 2017; Cresswell, 2013). Smith et al. (2009) state that the sample in IPA research needs to be selected purposively because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience. Additionally, because IPA research studies are conducted on a relatively small, homogeneous sample size, it will create rich detail and allow for a descriptively deep analysis process (Alase, 2017).

My research took place at a mid-size regional public comprehensive university that is home to approximately 7,600 students. This university offers 80 majors/programs with a student to faculty ratio of 19:1, according to the school's website. Also, according to the school website (2021), 83% of the university's students are White; 3% are African American, 2.6% are Asian American, and another 4.5 % are Hispanic/Latino. Females make up the majority of the student population at 67%; the other 33% identify as male. I interviewed 11 first-generation students, all of whom were White. Similarly to the student population, about 70% of the students I interviewed were females, and the other 30% identified as males, including one trans student. Interestingly, two of the first-generation students came from families with incomes over

$150,000. There were four students that came from families who made less than $50,000. Two of the students transferred in from other colleges, and four of the students in the group were accessing TRIO program services at the time of the interviews.

I utilized nonprobabilistic sampling, which is typically the method of choice for most qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Nonprobabilistic sampling methods are seen as logical as long as the researcher is looking to solve qualitative problems like discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and relationships linking occurrences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The most appropriate nonprobabilistic sampling strategy for this study is purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling assumes that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore, needs to choose a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2015) argues that "the logic and power of qualitative purposeful sampling derives from the emphasis on in-depth understanding of specific cases: information rich cases" (p. 53). I utilized criterion-based selection in recruiting my study participants. Criterion-based selection requires the researcher to decide what attributes of the sample are crucial to the study and then find people or sites that meet those criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria that are established by the researcher for purposeful sampling should directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide the researcher to the identification of information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For the purpose of my study, the criterion I based my participant selection on was having first-generation student status. First-generation status is defined by the Department of Education (2022) as an individual, neither of whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree. In the 2020-2021 academic year, approximately 3,000 or 39.6% of students that attend the university where I

conducted my research are first-generation students. I recruited students from a general education personal and community health course that approximately 300 students take each semester. This course includes several lab sections from which recruited students in hopes of getting a broad, diverse group of first-generation students. With written permission from the lab instructors, I attended four lab classes to introduce students to my study with the purpose and goal of recruiting at least ten first-generation students. I was able to recruit 11 students who fit my criteria of being a first-generation student. In introducing these labs to my project, I utilized a pre-written script to describe the purpose of my study, the research question, and a description of the data collection process. I used a short recruitment survey to identify first-generation students, and then followed up with the first-generation students by email to further identify those students willing to participate in my study. I also obtained written consent from each participant before moving forward with the data collection. A copy of my recruitment script and survey and the letter of consent is included in the appendices. Students who participated in the study were given a small incentive of a $20 gift card to a local business of their choice which were distributed upon completion of the interview process.

***Data Collection***

The most often used strategy for phenomenological data collection is the interview (Vagle, 2018). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “to get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection” (p. 27). The interview is often selected as the primary method for data collection because it has the potential to obtain rich, thick description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). A semi-structured interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday

world from the subjects' own perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Semi-structured interviews seek to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the phenomena of interest (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interviews also offer the researcher the opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Another major benefit of collecting data through individual, in-depth interviews is that they offer the potential to capture a person's perspective of an event or experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

I used a semi-structured interview protocol to interview 11 first-generation students for this study. According to Cresswell (2013), in a phenomenological research study, "the process of collecting information involves primary in-depth interviews with as many as 10 individuals. The important point is to describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it" (p. 161). Semi-structured interviews are flexible so in the event that I needed to ask a follow-up question during the interview process, I could. Utilizing semi-structured interviews also provided me with enough structure to ensure that I received rich description about my phenomenon of study. Utilization of an interview guide also provided some structure in the interview process. I provided students with a copy of the interview questions a few days prior to their interviews so that they could put some thought into their answers ahead of the interview. Student participants were asked questions that related to how/why they chose the university they did; what/who helped them transition to life at the university, what/who influenced their decision to persist in college, and how they defined institutional fit and how institutional fit has impacted their experience in higher education. They were also asked about programs and/or policies that are influential in helping them be successful throughout their

journey in college. I did face to face interviews with students over Zoom due to high transmission rates of Covid in the community. I utilized the Otter application to do an audio recording of the interviews. Both Otter and Zoom provided written transcripts of the interviews for analysis; I edited each transcript for accuracy.

In a phenomenological approach to research, it is important for the researcher to keep their preconceptions out of the process during the interviews and data collection process (Alase, 2017; Vagle, 2018). According to Smith et al. (2009), "The IPA approach to data collection is committed to a degree of open-mindedness, so you will have to try to suspend (or bracket off) your preconceptions when it comes to designing and conducting interviews or other data collection events" (p. 42). However, in IPA research it is considered plausible to situate the study in a theoretical framework and use that knowledge to inform the design of the study and the interview questions (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Personal knowledge is both useful and necessary to interpretive phenomenological research (Geanellos, 2000; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Prior to conducting the interviews for this study, I explored my own experiences with the phenomenon of being a first-generation student to become more aware of my personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions; this process is called "…epoche, a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). I used memoing as a way to explore my assumptions and knowledge around being a first-generation student and how first-generation students make meaning around institutional fit.

Although semi-structured interviews were my main source of data collection in my study, I included a short survey to collect some demographic information about the study participants, including information like their year in college or university, race/ethnicity, gender, and parental

income level. On the demographic survey, I also asked participants to choose a pseudonym that they would like used in the write-up of my research, so that their true identity could be protected. Table 3.1 includes information from the demographic survey. I may also use some of the demographic information to do future research on how the intersectional identities of first-generation students may impact the meaning of institutional fit for this group. The interview guide and demographic survey are included in the appendices.

**Table 3.1**

*Demographic Survey Data*

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Year in College | Date of First Semester at MRU | Race/ Ethnicity | Family Household Income | Participate in TRIO |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abby | 18-24 | Woman | Junior | Fall 2019 | White | $10K-$50K | No |
| Annie | 18-24 | Woman | Sophomore | Fall 2020 | White | Over $150,000 | No |
| Brooke | 18-24 | Woman | Junior | Fall 2019 | White | $50K-$100K | Yes |
| Elizabeth | 18-24 | Woman | Sophomore | Fall 2020 | White | Over $150,000 | Yes |
| Ella | 18-24 | Woman | Senior | Spring 2021 | White | Unsure | Yes |
| George | 18-24 | Man/Trans | Sophomore | Fall 2020 | White | $100K - $150K | No |
| Hannah | 18-24 | Woman | Junior | Spring 2022 | White | $10K-$50K | Yes |
| Jacob | 18-24 | Man | Sophomore | Fall 2020 | White | $10K-$50K | No |
| John | 18-24 | Man | Sophomore | Fall 2020 | White | $50K-$100K | No |
| Katie | 18-24 | Woman | Sophomore | Fall 2020 | White | $50K-$100K | No |
| Linda | 25-34 | Woman | Senior | Fall 2019 | White | $10K-$50K | No |

### *Data Analysis and Coding*

Phenomenological research, in general, makes use of significant statements, generation of meaning units, and the development of a description of the essence being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). Researchers who utilize phenomenology are often reluctant to describe specific techniques for analysis concerned that this might constrain and become too inflexible for a thorough analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Hycner, 1985). Instead, the aim is to achieve an analysis that describes the phenomenon in a way that is not affected by prior assumptions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). van Manen (1990) refers to data analysis as phenomenological reflection where the researcher is able to grasp the essential meaning of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) refers to phenomenological data analysis as an attempt to highlight significant statements that provide understanding and insight with regard to how participants experience the phenomenon.

I chose van Manen's Hermeneutic Phenomenology Thematic Analysis as my guide to analyzing the data collected in the interviews (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2001). Van Manen's (2001) analysis provides for three options: wholistic, selective and detailed. For my analysis, I utilized the selective approach which entails reading or listening to the text several times and then highlighting and coding the statements that are revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described, and then further reducing them into themes (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2001). Theming is considered most applicable to IPA phenomenology and involves coding the data first and then clustering codes according to commonalities or thematic statements (Saldaña, 2016). Analysis in IPA is said to be 'bottom-up," which essentially means that the

researcher generates codes *from* the data, rather than using a pre-existing theory to identify codes that can be *applied* to the data (Reid et al., 2005).

Because of the small size of my study, I coded manually. For first-time or small-scale studies, Saldaña (2016) recommends manual coding. “There is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that gives you way more control over ownership of the work” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 29). In an IPA qualitative data coding process according to Alase (2017), researchers should begin their data coding process by reading the interview transcripts several times to get a feel of what the participants are saying verbally and also to get a better sense of the participants’ state of mind and how the subject matter of the study has affected their lived experience.

Alase (2016) states that data coding in IPA requires three cycles. The first cycle is a process that gradually codes the lengthy responses by research participants into meaningful chunks or statements that the researcher can then condense and manage more easily. This process in the first cycle can also help the researcher be more aware of key words or phrases that are repeated or expressed by the participants (Alase 2016; 2017). I used an open coding process where the descriptors emerge from the data; this open coding process is also what Patton (2015) refers to as inductive analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). An open coding process is important because if the researcher uses predetermined codes, the researcher runs the risk of analyzing the data by codes they expect to find, instead of being flexible and open to change throughout the analysis process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The second cycle then condenses the material further into fewer words that helps the researcher get closer to the core essence of what research participants are actually expressing (Alase, 2017). The third and final cycle, according to Alase

(2016; 2017), allows the researcher to narrow down the responses of the participants' to extremely few words. This final cycle further assists the researcher in capturing the core essence or central meaning of the lived experience and can be used to develop themes (Alase, 2016; 2017). Saldaña (2016) refers to this final cycle as theming the data, and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) call this same process thematizing. As I cycled through the interview responses of my research, I was able to identify common themes, searching for words or phrases that were repeated in the participants' responses without misrepresenting the core meaning of their responses or lived experiences.

I then used what Saldaña (2016) refers to as code weaving. Code weaving is the integration of key themes and phrases into a narrative form to see how the pieces and/or themes fit together (Saldaña, 2016). The goal is to provide rich, thick description where the reader feels as if they are living the experiences described (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Denzin, 2001). The themes of the research should be seamlessly woven into the discussion in narrative form by using the participants' own words to build the readers' confidence that the reality of the participants and the situation studied is accurately represented (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019

**Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

To ensure that my study was ethical and of high quality, I conducted member checks to solicit feedback from the study participants to establish that I did not misrepresent or misinterpret the information provided to me through the interviews. Conducting member checks is a common strategy to ensure internal validity or credibility in qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Conducting member checks can also be referred to as respondent validation, and according to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of

misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and can also be an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because I coded solo, I also did initial coding as I transcribed the interview data and kept a reflective journal of the research along with analytic memos. These methods, along with the member checking, also assisted in generating the trustworthiness of the research (Saldana, 2016). After transcribing the data from the interviews, I asked the study participants to look through their transcripts to ensure I had not misunderstood or misinterpreted information. Five out of the eleven students responded to my request. It was also the same five students who responded when I asked them to look over my first draft of Chapter 4: Findings. All five of the students responded that they felt both the transcripts and the draft of Chapter 4 were accurate in terms of how I represented what they had told me in the interviews. The member checking requests were done through email, and while 45% of the students responded, I would have liked more participation in the member checking process. Timing may have been a factor in that this work was being done towards the end of Spring semester which is often a busy time for students.

In keeping with tradition in phenomenological philosophy, it is important for the researcher to bracket themselves away from the lived experiences of the research participants (Alase, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). Cresswell (2013) advises researchers to first describe their own experience with the phenomenon under study. In doing so, it may help the researcher to avoid interjecting their own personal experiences into the stories of the research participants (Cresswell, 2013). In order to take a more open reflective stance towards my phenomenon of study, I did attempt to bracket (Vagle, 2015). In doing so, I tried to bracket what I already knew

or thought about institutional fit going into my study so that I could fully engage in the present information that came to me through the interviews.

Bracketing involves a process whereby pre-understandings are put to the back of the mind so that they do not limit openness to new information (Vagle, 2015). By restraining pre-understandings, the researcher can then be open and reflective to see the phenomenon of interest in a new and authentic way (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003; Vagle, 2015). Moustakas (1994) stated that it is important to understand the underlying dynamics of the participant's experience, so to capture the essence of a true research investigation, researchers need to try and bracket themselves away from the issue they are investigating. "We must set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things we are trying to understand" (Moustakas, 1994, p.85). Although this may be difficult to do in qualitative research, the intent of the IPA research approach is to tell the true lived experience of the participants, so that when the reader reflects on the lived experiences, they can say they better understand what it was like to have that experience (Alase, 2017).

Chan et al. (2013) suggest that bracketing should be adopted upon initiating the research proposal, not only during the data collection and analysis process. Chan et al. (2013) go on to propose strategies for doing bracketing that are guided by reflexivity of the researcher: begin with the mentality assessment of the researcher; decide and define the scope of the literature review so that the researcher knows just enough to justify the research while maintaining curiosity in the area; keep a reflexive diary to track the researchers' own preconceptions; engage participants in bracketing during the data collection process; thorough research planning before data collection; interview participants using open-ended questions; adopt a not-knowing stance

to maintain the curiosity in the participants, and generate knowledge from the participants using semi-structured interviews.

I attempted to use several of Chan et al.'s. strategies in trying to bracket my own preconceptions during my research process. I was very interested in investigating the meaning of institutional fit for first-generation students having been a first-generation student myself and having struggled to find fit in higher education. I was also aware of my preconceptions as I started to research the topic, starting with my own thoughts about what institutional fit means to first-generation students and how they determine fit throughout their college career. I genuinely wanted to know about the experiences of this group of first-generation students and their context for defining institutional fit. The research I conducted in my review of the literature guided my broad, open-ended questions in my semi-structured interviews with the students which allowed me to follow the cues of the participants in terms of being able to ask follow-up questions. I journaled following each interview to clarify my thoughts around student answers which sometimes led to additional questions for follow-up at a later time with study participants. I was also able to validate my data analysis through member checking which ensured that at least some of my participants' experiences were correctly interpreted. It was my goal as an ethical researcher/interviewer to conduct the interviews and data analysis in a way that was ethical and considered any personal biases I may have had as either a first-generation student or faculty at the institution where the study was conducted.

***Human Subject Approval***

Prior to conducting this research, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board. Before conducting the interviews, I explained to the participants the letter of consent and

made it known to them that they had the right to withdraw from the study or stop the interview at any time. Study participants were also provided the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity in reporting of the findings of the research. The letter of consent and documentation of the IRB application are provided in the appendix.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I specifically describe the methods used for conducting my research study seeking understanding of the meaning of institutional fit for first-generation students. Based on my constructivist and interpretivist epistemology, I utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as my research methodology for describing the essence of institutional fit from semi-structured interviews done with 11 first-generation students at the small midwestern university, MRU. Analysis procedures included multiple readings of transcripts along with multiple rounds of coding to discern the statements or themes that lead to the essence of institutional fit for first-generation students.

# Chapter 4: Findings

Given the increasing number of first-generation college students in the United States and the fact that they have lower retention rates than their non-first-generation peers due to academic and social support challenges, it is important to investigate the characteristics of higher education institutions that may be most effective in decreasing attrition and designing effective programs for the success of first-generation students. Good institutional fit is one of those characteristics that first-generation students frequently cite when asked about why they chose to persist, and many in higher education believe that fit between institutional and student attributes plays an important role in college students' adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence (Bowman & Denson, 2014). However, we have little understanding of what constitutes institutional fit for this group. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study is to better understand what the concept of institutional fit means to first-generation college students so that higher education institutions can be better informed about the services and programs necessary to help first-generation students be more successful in their higher education endeavors. The research question that guided this study was: What constitutes the essence of good institutional fit for first-generation students attending a small, midwestern institution of higher education?

Through the interview process I was able to ascertain what was important to students in terms of their social and academic integration as they transitioned to college life, specifically asking what was important to them as they were choosing a college, what was important in helping them transition to college life, and what was important to them in terms of making their decision to stay at the institution until graduation. I also asked them to then define what institutional fit meant to them. Findings revealed that, for first-generation students finding

institutional fit starts when they are in the application and choice process, as well as in the transition to college life. Supports in persisting to graduation also resonated in how they defined institutional fit. I discovered that the features students looked for as they applied to colleges and the supports that helped them transition into college life and in persistence to graduation often filtered into what institutional fit meant to them.

**Figure 4.1**

*Themes Related to College Choice, College Transition, and Institutional Fit for MRU Students*

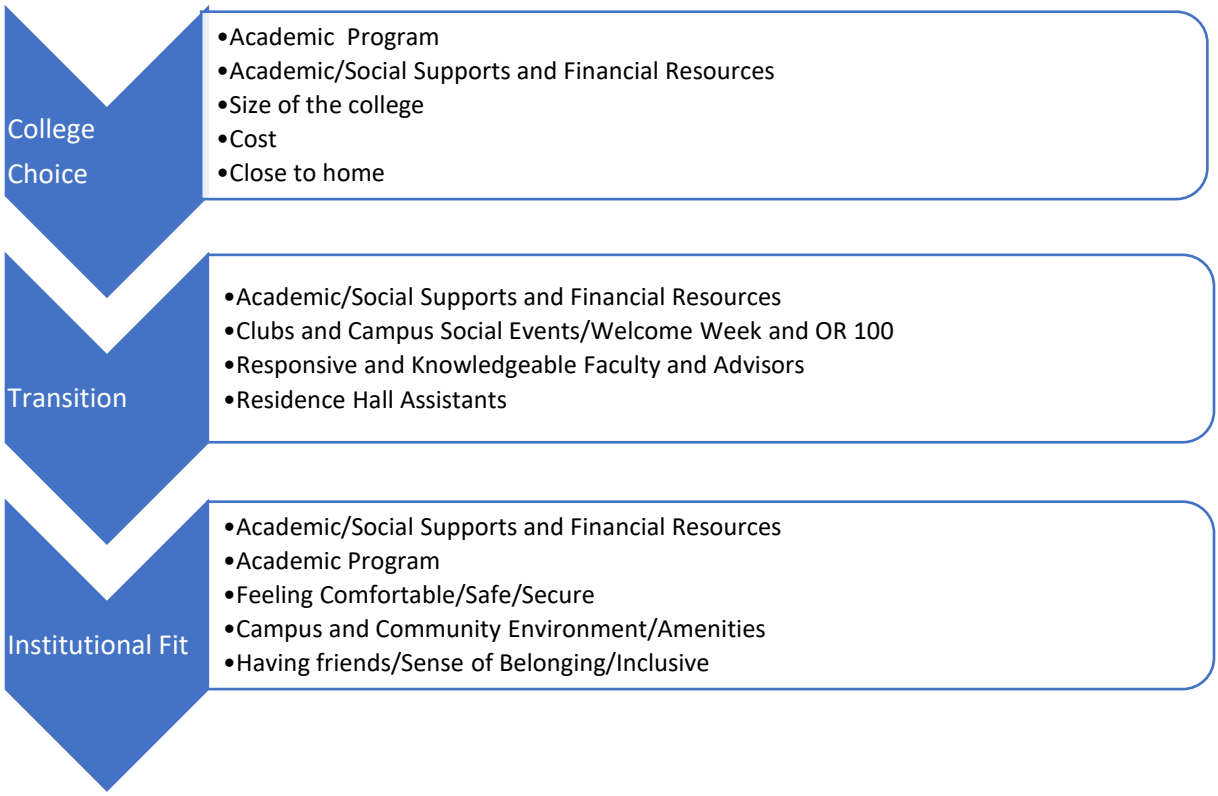



Figure 4.1 represents the themes I was able to pull out from the interviews related to college choice, transition, and institutional fit. The themes were fairly similar in all three areas which indicated to me that if the needs of the first-generation students were met or the reality of their transition matched up well with their expectations in college choice and transition, then

they experienced institutional fit. In other words, the way this group of first-generation students defined fit was related to what characteristics they were looking for in college choice and the expectations they had in making a successful transition to college.

There were four main themes that resonated throughout the interviews, although the priority of the students' needs and wants was very contextual. For this group of students, institutional fit means having the resources they need to succeed. Having academic resources was important to the students in their choice of college, as well as in their transition to college life. Academic supports were also the most identified need they had for resources necessary to persist to graduation. Having the financial resources to help them so that they can concentrate on their education defined fit for at least three of the students. Another common theme in defining institutional fit for this group of first-generation students was having their academic program of interest and faculty in their major that were friendly, knowledgeable, and responsive. Other themes necessary for fit included having an environment that is comfortable, safe, and inclusive, and being in an environment where they could make connections and surround themselves with people/friends who were going through similar things or had similar interests. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will further discuss in more detail these findings related to how first-generation students describe the essence of institutional fit based on their lived experience in higher education.

**Having the Resources to Succeed**

Having the resources to succeed was a theme that I heard throughout the interviews with the students, particularly when speaking about supports that helped them be successful in their transition to college and when referring to the resources or supports they would need to persist to

graduation at Mississippi River University (MRU). Participants mentioned a variety of resources, including academic resources like TRIO and Access Services programs such as tutoring, testing assistance, and advising. Some students also mentioned financial resources, while others mentioned faculty relationships, and still others referred to assistance to social connections and supports.

Abby, a junior, simply stated that institutional fit means, "…having the resources I need to succeed." Linda, a senior, who struggles with issues related to ADD, OCD, and anxiety disorders stated that TRIO, as well as Access Services, which at MRU are student academic support services, were critical to her being successful and having a good fit with the institution, as well as within her major. "TRIO, and my TRIO advisor, and Access Services helped me a lot through my years here. The academic advisors, particularly those in my major have all been so helpful. The school was able to adapt to my needs through the years." Elizabeth, a sophomore, spoke of resources as well, stating that, "Institutional fit is feeling comfortable with the resources that the school has to offer that will help you be successful academically and socially."
Some of the students interviewed also described institutional fit as being comfortable with the resources that are available to students on campus. Elizabeth defined institutional fit as,

> … feeling comfortable with the resources that the school is willing to offer you specific to the campus that will help you be successful academically and socially. The fit for me, personally, it's been really good because I feel very comfortable here at MRU. I use the resources that are provided for either my major or my style of learning, that are available on campus, and all those resources are easily accessible to me.

***Financial Resources***

Elizabeth also spoke of financial resources, as did another student, Jacob. Both are first-generation students trying to pay for college on their own. Having ample financial resources to enroll and stay enrolled in higher education is one area where both students mentioned it is a struggle to find a good fit as a first-generation student. Elizabeth wished there was more financial assistance for first-generations students who do not qualify for financial aid but are paying for school on their own. Elizabeth's parents make too much money for her to qualify for aid, but they wanted her to take on paying for college as her own responsibility.

> I do wish there was more financial assistance for first generation students. It's hard because some of the parents, like mine, make too much money, but they still want me to try and take on the responsibility of paying for college on my own, but they never went through it and they don't understand how much tuition is going to be and then there are costs for textbooks, supplies, and groceries, and all of the other things you need or want to do when you live on a college campus. But there weren't many financial resources for me.

Jacob, on the other hand, is from a low-income family, and has run into trouble in previous semesters when he could not afford to buy his books, so he had to look for additional loans.

Both Jacob and Elizabeth, along with several of the other students, also mentioned that one of the reasons they chose MRU was because it did fit into their ideas about what they could realistically afford. In making their college choice almost every one of the students I interviewed said that the cost of college was a significant feature or factor that they took into consideration. What I also found in my interviews, when asked about college choice, if two schools had similar

features and the students' desired academic programs, often the choice came down to the cost as most of the students and their families were price-sensitive and the students were taking out significant student loans to attend college.

***Relational and Social Resources***

Relationships and social supports and resources were also integral to the meaning of institutional fit for this group of students as well. Annie mentioned feeling like she found a fit on campus because she "…likes that everyone smiles at each other and the simple act of saying hi to someone is the norm. People on campus care about each other." Brooklyn, a junior, stated that, "… the relationships you have with the people teaching you are important, and if I did not have close relationships with faculty, I would be more likely to transfer or drop out." Having validation and recognition in the classroom for doing well was part of creating a good fit for her. Annie also mentioned the importance of support from faculty and that they can have a big impact:

> They are very helpful and make you feel like you matter and are cared about. All the staff here care about every student. And I think that made me realize that if I do need help or feel uncomfortable, I have places to go, so it's the faculty and staff here that really made me feel like fit in.

For Linda and Brooklyn, having teachers who care and faculty who are willing to get to know them personally has had a positive impact, not only in how they feel they fit in at MRU, but also in how they have been doing in the classroom as well. Linda, who sometimes struggles in her classes because of learning difficulties spoke of her professors who have made accommodations for her and have made her feel a part of the class and like her instructors want her to succeed.

"Faculty here are willing to get to know their students. They are more willing to go in depth for students and it made me realize that I could succeed in the classroom, and that my teachers and MRU want me to succeed." Both students remarked that they feel more engaged, they started to like college more, and they are excited to go to class and be more involved in the classroom. Brooklyn stated that having those close relationships with faculty made her feel like she wanted to stay.

> I think relationships with the people who are teaching you are really important. I don't think that if I had or if I didn't have any close relationships with any of my professors I think I would be more likely to transfer or drop out. It also makes me want to do well in the classroom. I want to do well, and I need validation or recognition from my professors.

Hannah, a transfer student in her first semester at MRU, also spoke about the importance of having a support system in her decision to transfer. Just in the short time she had been at MRU, she had developed close relationships with her Access Services counselor and a graduate student working in Access Services, as well as an Admissions counselor. She told the story of meeting with the graduate student from Access Services at a time when she was struggling, and the graduate student walked her over to the counseling center on campus so that she could make an appointment. Similarly, she told a story about telling her Access Services advisor that she was struggling, and since that time a couple of weeks ago, according to Hannah, "I have a million people reaching out to see if I'm okay, and they want to meet with me. It's good to know that people care and want to help. I couldn't see myself going to college anywhere else."

***Orientation Resources***

Other social supports/resources that helped students to feel a sense of connection to the University were the Welcome Week activities and the first semester Orientation class, OR 100. John stated that Welcome Week and other first week activities were how he met most of his friends. Brooklyn also mentioned that Welcome Week was very helpful in not only getting her involved socially on campus, but also in just learning some of the basics about college and "…how college works." Brooklyn, along with several students who also lived in the residence halls, mentioned that their Residence Hall Assistants (RA) were integral in getting them involved and engaged socially as well. Jacob stated that his RA had a lot to do with his successful transition to college:

> He (RA) was super duper fun. He engaged with us all of the time. He required us to do different floor activities, so that really got me to make more friend. Even though I had friends from home, I was able to branch out and make friends with so many more people.

Providing these types of social connections/supports seemed important, particularly for first-generation students who struggle socially. Ella, a senior, who transferred in as a junior, stated that having these social supports were integral to her finding her fit at college. Transferring in as a junior was the first time she was leaving her family, and "…my family was my support system, completely, so I needed to find a new support system."

It is also important to be mindful of the fact that most of the first-generation students interviewed for this study made their transition to college life, either as an incoming freshman or transfer students, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The implications of Covid -19 are widespread on college campuses. For this cohort of students, the result of Covid-19 often meant that it was a

bit more of a struggle to find the resources they needed. For many of the students, the Welcome Week or other activities fostering social connections were altered as they transitioned to college life. For others, developing personal relationships with faculty was more difficult as many, if not most, classes were flipped to on-line, and finding academic supports was perhaps more of a struggle than in a normal year that was pre-Covid. Some of these students discussed that it seemed as though they were now going through a second transition to college as classes go back face to face. As a result, they are now able to better access services and supports and build those personal relationships and social connections they have been seeking, and that, in turn, is helping them to better identify a sense of institutional fit with the University. For George, who struggles with social anxiety, having online classes his first year and having virtual contact with faculty, staff, and classmates made his transition to college a little bit easier and smoother, and now that classes are transitioning back to face to face, the initial virtual start to college has increased his comfort level with peers, staff, and faculty:

> Having everything start online made me feel more comfortable emailing professors with questions, and with getting help with tutoring and testing, and now that I'm actually in class I feel like I'm going to be okay face to face. I do feel like I have the academic and social supports I need now like faculty relationships and tutoring.

**Major Program of Academic Study**

The institution having a student's academic major program was one of the most elemental factors in college choice for this group of first-generation students, and it resonated as they spoke about their definition of institutional fit. Being a first-generation student, several of the students remarked that they did not know anyone in their family that went to college. As a

result of not having someone in close in their family who had previously attended a college, the students did not really know what to look for in terms of features they wanted their school to have, but they did know what they wanted to major in. The institution having their academic program of interest was a selling point. In speaking about the meaning of institutional fit, being in the right academic program of study provided a sense of connection to the University.

George, a sophomore at the University, said that he had no idea where he wanted to go, but he did have an idea about what he wanted to major in. George wanted to enroll as a Psychology major with a minor in Spanish. He chose MRU based on a visit to the website where he saw that they offered the major that he was interested in and several related class offerings he was looking for. Now he feels that "…if the college has the resources and programs and classes that you need then it's a good fit." Annie's thoughts about institutional fit closely aligned with George's in that having a good institutional fit is being at college for the right reason. "I feel like a good institutional fit would be knowing that you are here for the right reason…that there is a major program here that you want and fit in with." Ella also stated that fit is "… about being at a school that has a major program that aligns with your passion for what you want to do." Katie, a sophomore, echoed Ellie's thoughts about fit in that, "…if you aren't doing well academically in your major, there has to be some sort of disconnect with the institution."

The academic major program also plays an important role in relationship building with faculty and with other students. Jacob specifically brought up the role that clubs in his major play in helping to create that social connection and build relationships with faculty and other students.

> When I met with my major club, some of the instructors from my major were there and they made it kind of fun. It was kind of a spirit lifter, and it gave me a lot of hope that this was the right place for me.

Jacob also spoke about finding friends in the major and how important they have been in his finding fit at the University.

> I think finding new friends and especially people in your major help make the transition easier because you know that you're not the only one going through the same classes. You know that these guys are going through the same thing as you are. I've heard this from other students too, so it must be a pretty common experience…. These are kids that you are going to see for the rest of your college career if you stay in your major. I've made three friends now that are in my major, and we meet in the mornings for our classes because we have three classes together this semester. We meet in the mornings before classes, go over things and then we go to class together.

John echoed Jacob's thoughts about connecting with other students in his degree program and having shared experiences and how that helped him feel like he fit in, not only in his major, but at the University as well. "It is always cool meeting people within my degree, just to know that they are kind of going through the same things and being able to compare experiences helps." John also said, " having a good connection with the academic advisor in my major helps me to stay on track," and staying on track has, according to John, validated his choice to stay at MRU and persist to graduation.

Annie, a transfer student and sophomore in the Exercise Science major at MRU, also spoke about institutional fit in terms of having found the right academic major program. Annie

originally chose a school that was “just not the right fit for her.” Her first choice of school was a last-minute decision after feeling pressure from her parents, and the school she chose did not have the academic program she was looking for, and she found the faculty “rude” and not helpful. Annie’s main reason for transferring to this University was for the program, but what she has found within her major program here as changed her outlook on college “120%.” According to Annie, “the teachers in my major have made a big impact and are super helpful...and fit is being here for the right reason and having the right program where you fit in.” George echoed Annie’s thoughts about faculty being kind and helpful. George, who suffers from social anxiety, has been able to start building relationships through emails with his professors, for the most part due to Covid and starting his college career with on-line classes. Starting his college career online has, in some cases, enabled him to become comfortable enough to ask professors for help face to face. Despite his anxiety about getting to know his professors, he has found faculty in his major to be very helpful and responsive to him.

Linda also spoke highly of relationships with faculty in her academic major and how important it is in helping a student feel like they have a good fit at the University and in their chosen program of study.

> I have different learning needs, and I have had professors that are willing to adapt and help me find the resources I need to do well in my classes, and I love my professors for this. Professors at MRU are more willing to go in depth for students. It helps a lot. It helped me realize that there are schools out there that want their students to succeed. It seems like they want you to graduate with the most knowledge you can gain. It made me want to stay.

Elizabeth has also had positive relationships with faculty in her department that have made her feel a sense of fit with the MRU. Elizabeth talked about how if she has questions, even if those questions have nothing to do with her major, the faculty and staff within her major department are more than willing to help her find the right people to answer her questions. “I have a good fit. I’ve been able to utilize the resources available to me through my major, and the people in my major department are so helpful.” For Brooklyn, having relationships with the people who are teaching her in her major are important to her feeling a fit with the University. “If I didn’t have any close relationships with the professors in my major, or even in my other classes, I would be more likely to transfer.”

**Comfort, Safety, and Security**

Almost every student in the cohort I interviewed was looking for a campus that made them feel “comfortable.” For some students that meant they liked the size of the campus, usually not too big and not too small. For others, it meant close to home or close to family or close enough where they could go home on the weekends if they wanted to. Still others talked about being comfortable with school and the surrounding community. This sense of comfort, safety, and security that they were looking for during their college choice process transferred over into their definition of what institutional fit meant to them.

Abby, a hometown girl who has lived on campus beginning with her freshman year, said being at MRU was her first choice because she could be close to home. “MRU was my first choice because I was close to home, and I could still ask my parents things if I needed to, or if I needed help from them, they were still close enough.” For Linda, being at MRU was the furthest she had ever been from home which made her transition to college tough, but she had family

nearby in a community about 20 minutes away, "…so I have a little bit of home." For Kate, her choice was between MRU and another school, further away and in another state, that offered her a substantial scholarship, but she chose MRU. "It just came down to I don't want to be that far away from home." Kate also referred to the "feel of the school."

> It was the feel of the school. If I felt like I could potentially see myself being there for an extended period of time, then I had a good fit. MRU had a homey, comforting feeling that I liked because I hadn't been away from home before. It gave me a suburbish vibe, like home.

For some of the cohort, the fit felt "comfortable" because of the size of the campus. Linda stated,

> The smaller campus is a huge thing for me and that's because of the anxiety level and previous trauma in my life. I like the security of a smaller campus where everything is kind of close knit and I can see everything.

Linda also felt comfortable on the MRU campus because "…it's really not a party school. It's a dry campus and not overly crazy like some campuses I've seen…it's a safer opportunity to do things and meet people." Elizabeth liked the small feel of the campus. "I liked how the campus was laid out and how they described it as 'smedium' where it's not too big and it's not too small, where everyone knows everything about you all the time." John, who is from a small town and grew up on a farm, said he liked MRU and felt a good fit because it was comfortable and felt like home.

> I liked MRU because it was small, it felt like a small town, like where I was from. So I just kind of felt comfortable here. I liked how it felt being on campus, it felt good, and

> I enjoyed it. I think institutional fit is when you feel like you just belong at a university …like you are supposed to be there…it's just feeling comfortable on campus.

When Hannah spoke about institutional fit, she also referred to being comfortable with the size of the campus. "I feel comfortable here. The transition was hard, but I like the campus. It's small enough where I feel safe, and it's easy to get out and walk around campus and know where I am going. It's safe." Hannah also talked about the size in terms of being able to have relationships with faculty and staff. "I like the size too because it's not too terribly huge, so the student/teacher relationship is possible and that is like my number one thing." Ella echoed Hannah's thoughts about the learning environment in that classroom sizes and class sizes were important to her, as was the size of the town.

> Classroom size and class size was something I looked at as was the size of Mississippi River community. I feel like I fit here, it was a large transition from my little town of one gas station and one grocery store, but I feel comfortable here.

George, who struggles with social anxiety, also felt MRU was the perfect size for him. "I feel like it's not too big of a college, but it's not too small for me either… I feel like I have a pretty good fit."

***Campus and Community Environment/Amenities***

This cohort of first-generation students felt that institutional fit was tied to how they fit with campus environment and their surroundings on campus and in the community. For some of the students it was the aesthetics of the campus that drew them in. Hannah, although she admits she came to Mississippi River University mainly because she already had a social support system here with a group of friends from home, also felt like the campus environment and community

were "…just really nice looking. It made me feel like I wanted to stay here. I found a job off campus and am meeting new people, and the people are so nice, and you feel like they genuinely care." Even for Abby, a hometown girl, the campus environment was a draw. She chose to live on campus her freshman year, even when she could have lived at home. "I just love how pretty the campus is; it's just a very pretty place. All of my roommates I lived with were even like, this is the prettiest campus I've visited."

For some of the students, like Ella and Elizabeth, it was also important not just to like the aesthetics of the campus, but to feel welcomed in the community and to have opportunities to get out and be active on campus and in the community. Ella, who never toured the campus, described that she immediately felt comfortable and welcomed, not only on campus but in the community as well.

> It's easy to get out in the community, and it's a really nice community, and they welcome the students…. It's about how you fit in or adapt to the environment and surroundings. Specifically, the outdoor recreation was important to me. It's nice to see all that. Mississippi River has things like kayaking and the hiking trails, and they are all close to campus.

Much like Ella, Elizabeth fell in love with the campus, and she also talked about how easy it was to get out and about on campus and in the community. For her, this was important because she describes herself as independent and outgoing, and it was important for her to be on a campus and in a community where she felt comfortable going out and exploring, especially coming to campus for the first time during Covid:

> I actually accepted coming to MRU before I toured campus, but I fell in love with it as soon as I came. Aside from having the academic resources I need, the campus feels comfortable, and I love all of the amenities on campus and in Mississippi River. They have so many opportunities for outdoor activities in Mississippi River like hiking and biking, and there is a rock climbing all year around. All of the outdoor activities, that was a big thing for me. I also just like how the campus was laid out. It's inviting and outdoorsy. Not too big, and not too small, and easy to get around, and the community is so welcoming of college students.

**Having Friends/Sense of Belonging/Inclusive**

For many college students, including first-generation students, leaving home to go to college for the first time means finding new friends and a new support system. What I found in my interviews of first-generation students is that this is also one of the most difficult things about transitioning to college. Linda talked about faculty and staff at Mississippi River University and how they work to create a sense of inclusiveness and belonging in the classroom.

> They do a great job creating a very welcoming and inclusive environment, especially in the classroom where the teachers, at least the teachers I've had, especially in my major, have been willing to adjust and help me learn in a way that works for me.

Annie reiterated that faculty and staff at MRU have a big impact on making students not only feel comfortable, but they make students feel like they belong, and they matter. "I have one teacher right now that tells us all the time that we matter. It's little things like this that make students feel like they belong here and fit in here." Jacob also talked about finding institutional fit in terms of diversity and inclusiveness specifically in the classroom:

> So when I think of MRU, I think of diversity. I think they are really big on diversity here. I feel like they try to have a diverse student body and professors, and for me in terms of having a good institutional fit, it means being able to be myself and speak my opinion without having bad consequences, I think being able to speak my mind is awesome…We have diverse clubs, and diversity in the classrooms that helps with different styles of learning. I really enjoy being on campus and in class here.

For Hannah, a very recent transfer to MRU, having friends already at MRU is one of the things she based her choice of school on.

> If I'm 100% honest, my friends are the ones who persuaded me to go here…. Leaving home was really hard, and so I knew that I needed to go somewhere that was familiar and where I had friends. That was really important. I also had a friend in my major here who I have known since elementary school, and she's a year ahead of me, so I knew that if I needed help with anything I could ask her. Connecting with people has not been easy, but my good friends that were already here have helped me do that. Fit to me is having friends and a support system, and it has made a huge impact. I can't picture myself going anywhere else. This transition was hard enough for me, and if I didn't have my friends here, I don't honestly think I would have followed through with coming to school here.

While Hannah's experience might have been a little different from others in terms of already having a group of friends at MRU, making new friends was still important to her finding fit at MRU, as it was to most of the other students I interviewed. John spoke about the importance of connecting with people in his classes, especially in his major, and being able to work together which has led to friendships.

> Being able to connect with people in my classes and meet friends has impacted how I'm doing in my classes in a positive way, and is helping me become who I am, and it's just things like that that make you fit as you're learning at college.

Ella also described institutional fit as being able to build a "support group" for yourself.

> I feel like it's how you fit into an institution…. it's having opportunities to create social groups and surround yourself with people that are similar and have a passion for what you are doing. It's nice to get to know people that are in the same major. It's also nice to get to know other students who are first-generation and to encourage each other and to feel like and know that we can do it and get through it with the right support and people.

Brooklyn also needed to find a support group for herself. Unlike Hannah, Brooklyn came to MRU alone.

> I came to college by myself, none of my friends from high school came to school here, so I wanted to make sure that I wasn't going to be alone. My RA was most helpful in helping me meet most of the friends I have now. I remember feeling really intimidated when I got here, but having friends from the residence hall and classmates as friends and support is really helpful, and makes you feel like you fit in.

George, who identifies as transgender, was another student who found being in a residence hall very helpful in finding fit at MRU. For George, the gender - inclusive housing was important because he was able to identify with and find a group of friends with very similar interests. "I think having the gender - inclusive housing really helped in that all of my friends, we all have very similar interests, and we are all kind of the same." George also mentioned that inclusiveness

was critical to him feeling a sense of institutional fit. His sense of feeling welcomed on campus had a lot to do with the fact that MRU had gender - inclusive housing and a Full Spectrum organization which is a Gender and Sexuality Alliance, which aims to create an environment of diversity, equality and acceptance for all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. As George stated:

> I really didn't know where I wanted to go or really what features to look for other than my major program, but the gender inclusive housing was a selling point for me. Because of gender inclusive housing and clubs like Full Spectrum, the kind of people I fit in with are here, and I feel like I have a pretty good fit.

Ella stated that, "Having a support team of friends is the best thing you could have." For Ella, her family was her support system completely, so meeting new friends at school was her way of developing a new support system. "It's scary at first, but then you find people just like you that fit your personality, and it makes you feel like you belong here."

**Conclusion**

This group of first-generation students appeared to be academically driven which had a strong influence on the meaning of institutional fit to them. Repeatedly, these students echoed how important finding the right academic program was to their fit with the MRU, and how finding solidarity with students in their major program of study helped them both academically and socially find fit. Also key to finding a good institutional fit was the students' relationship with faculty, particularly advisors and faculty in their majors. Through these relationships the students seemed to be able to find a sense of comfort and security in seeking assistance and

feeling comfortable in the classroom with their peers, to the end that they also found themselves being more engaged in the classroom.

Having a good institutional fit also meant that they had the academic resources and supports they needed to be successful at MRU. All of these first-generation students in this cohort planned to persist to graduation at MRU and having the necessary academic supports to get them to graduation made them feel as though they had found the right institution for them. About 60% of these students accessed tutoring and testing services through either Access Services, a student resource center on campus, and/or TRIO. Having access to resources such as these, along with developing meaningful relationships with faculty and staff at MRU made these first-generation students feel as though they mattered and had found a good fit with the institution they had chosen.

Finding a place that was comfortable, safe, and inclusive was also instrumental in the meaning of institutional fit for these students. For some of them that meant being in a community and on a campus that welcoming, inclusive, and diverse, while for others that meant being able to express themselves on campus and in the classroom without fear of reprisal. Yet, for some of the students it was simply being on a campus that had a homey feel, that was easy to find your way around, and put simply, was aesthetically pleasing. Perhaps most importantly, for this cohort of students, having a good institutional fit meant that they had been able to build a support network for themselves on campus because the campus was comfortable, safe, and inclusive. All of these students, including the ones that were fairly new to campus, had been able to find their people, a group of people that they were similar to or identified with. These students found their support networks through clubs and organizations, on-campus housing, or through their major

program of study. Regardless of the source of support, having a feeling like someone cares about you, that you matter, or that you belong is a great source of comfort and strength for these students, and instrumental in them finding a sense of institutional fit at MRU.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study is to better understand what the concept of institutional fit means to first-generation college students so that higher education institutions can be better informed about the services and programs necessary to help first-generation students be more successful in their higher education endeavors. The research question that guided this study is: What constitutes the essence of good institutional fit for first-generation students attending a small, midwestern institution of higher education?

Student-institution fit is often defined as "the congruence between students' needs and university's environment" (Gilbreath et al., 2011, p. 50). In other words, it refers to the compatibility between what a student wants to have in a university and the characteristics of the institution. Although it is difficult to define exactly what the characteristics or attributes are for an increasingly diverse student population, the amount of time, effort, and money that is spent on a college education makes it imperative that students choose an institution that is a good fit for them (Gilbreath et al., 2011). It is clear from my interviews that developing a sense of institutional fit starts when a student is making a college choice and continues throughout their transition into the college setting.

There were four main themes or commonalities that resonated throughout the interviews as this group of students deciphered what having good institutional fit meant to them. For this group of students, institutional fit means having the resources they need to succeed. Having academic resources was important to the students in their choice of college, as well as in their transition to college life. Academic supports were also the most identified need they had for resources necessary to persist to graduation. Having the financial resources to help them so that

they can concentrate on their education defined fit for at least three of the students. Another common theme in defining institutional fit for this group of first-generation students was having their major program of study and faculty in their major who were friendly, knowledgeable, and responsive. Having an environment that is comfortable, safe, and inclusive was also necessary for fit, as was being in an environment where they could make connections and surround themselves with people/friends who were going through similar things or had similar interests.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss in further detail the four themes that described good institutional fit for the students I interviewed and revisit the literature pertaining to first-generation students and institutional fit. I will also identify and discuss the limitations of my research, implications for theory and practice in higher education, and potential areas for further research regarding first-generation students and the importance of institutional fit for institutions of higher education.

**Resources to Succeed**

First-generation students are often viewed by higher education as a problem to be solved (Ilett, 2019). In this light, first-generation students are often seen as lacking (Ilett, 2019). The group of students I interviewed for this research did not fit this typecast. Over half of the students I interviewed had completed AP coursework in high school or had had the opportunity to participate in college - level courses for credit while still in high school. They were all academically driven, and each student had taken advantage of some kind of tutoring resource on the campus of MRU, and 100% of these students, when asked, said that they planned to persist at MRU until graduation. It was not a surprise to me then that having the resources to succeed in

college was something that I heard over and over again in the interviews when I asked the students what having good institutional fit meant to them.

A majority of the first-generation students I interviewed stated that having institutional fit for them meant that they, the students, had the academic resources they needed to be successful. These students value their education, and the opportunity was not lost on them that they were the first in their families to receive a college education. The fact that they felt their education was a privilege was reflected in their drive to be successful academically and to utilize the academic resources provided by MRU in the pursuit of academic success. One of the students went so far as to say that if you are not doing well academically at the institution you have chosen then there must be a disconnect or lack of fit.

Several of the students chose MRU based on the school's academic resources. In the context of higher education, Lewin's Person-Environment fit framework indicates that when there is a fit between the individual and their environment, there is a perception of lower task difficulty which results in higher academic success (Lewin, 1951; Suhlmann et al., 2018). Students who experience Person-Environment fit typically experience a higher sense of well-being, engagement, motivation, and lower intent to drop out, all of which also relates to an achievement orientation in students. According to Suhlmann et al. (2018), there is evidence for positive effects of a Person-Environment fit on academic motivation. A variety of resources were mentioned by the MRU students in their interviews and included academic resources like TRIO and Access Services programs such as tutoring, testing assistance, and advising. Four of the eleven students interviewed utilized TRIO Student Support Services for tutoring and advising. Others mentioned having found peer support in their academic major clubs, organizations, and

study groups. Integrated programs like TRIO provide services like tutoring, mentoring, and intensive advising that are integrated in a way that first-generation students who participate in the program are exposed to multiple programs/structures of support (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Having academic resources like TRIO programs increases student-institution fit which ultimately increases students' well-being and academic motivation, which in turn decreases dropout intention (Suhlmann et al., 2018). Being able to access the resources to succeed, whether in structured programs like TRIO or through peer study groups in their academic major, was a main theme throughout the interviews with these first-generation students. This group of students came across as being self-aware in their need for academic resources to help them succeed, and many of them indicated they had found fit because MRU had the academic resources and supports that they needed to be academically successful and persist to graduation.

Students also spoke of financial resources and the cost of college being part of finding a fit at their institution. Cost was mentioned as a feature that the MRU students were looking for when they applied to colleges and was a significant factor in their choice of college. The cost of attending college at MRU fit with the student's idea of what they could afford. The financial resources available for first-generation students were also integral in helping the MRU students find fit at the University, and at the time of my interviews, enabled them to be able to persist to graduation. Although for two of the students I interviewed, while cost was a good fit, finding financial resources was still a struggle. Both of these students were paying for college entirely on their own, but because of being identified as either a dependent on their parents' taxes or low-income, they were not able to access enough financial aid loans to cover all of their expenses and had to seek sources outside of traditional financial aid to be able to buy books or afford food.

These two students wished that there was more financial assistance for first-generation students who do not qualify for traditional financial aid but are paying for school on their own. According to Cabrera & LaNasa (2000), inadequate financial aid can interfere with students' academic and social integration which, in turn, has been shown to be related to persistence decisions (Pascarella et al., 2008). It also raises the question as to whether or not the parents and/or these first-generation students were made fully aware of all of the financial aid possibilities available to them. Regardless, it was clear from my interviews with this group of MRU first-generation students that these students, consistent with the literature on first-generation students, were cost-sensitive and that finding a college that they felt they could afford and that had adequate financial resources available to them was an important part of finding student-institution fit.

**Relevance of Institution to their Academic Major Program**

For all of these students, one of the major precursors to them attending MRU was the fact that MRU had an academic program that they wanted to major in and this created a sense of student-institution fit for them in many ways. While it is difficult to find a standard for institutional fit that works for all students, it is clear that a sense of institutional fit starts to appear as students make a college choice, and often that choice is related to an institution's academic offerings. Compared to students with parents who have a post-secondary education, first-generation students tend to be at a disadvantage in terms of what to expect when they arrive on campus (Padgett et al., 2012), so at least choosing and attending a college that has an academic program they desire to be a part of gives them a sense of security and comradery with the other students that have chosen the same academic program of study. This finding supports what other scholars have found, in that, for first-generation students, finding an institution that is

personally aligned with a student's academic and personal preferences, needs, and interests is critical to fit between the student and the institution and is associated with student satisfaction and their intent to persist (Bowman & Denson, 2013; Gilbreath et al., 2011).

In my experience as faculty at MRU, I have had the opportunity to observe students in my academic program, and it is clear to me that students also find a sense of belonging and mattering through their chosen academic major; this observation was echoed in the interviews of the MRU students as well. Several of the first-generation students I interviewed had based their decision to attend MRU on the fact that the institution had the academic program they were looking for. One student had transferred into MRU from another school that did not have her major and she expressed explicitly that the school from which she transferred was not a good fit for her because they did not have her academic program. It was difficult for her to get the academic advising she needed to find a major that she was interested in. Several of the students I interviewed had also become members of clubs and organizations related to their major. Through membership in these clubs and organizations, students developed relationships with faculty, staff, and other students in their academic major. Amazingly, 100% of the students I interviewed had found fit with the institution through their academic major and intended to persist in their programs and complete their degree at MRU. In agreement with Strayhorn (2019), I argue that this sense of mattering and belonging among first-generation students and the faculty and peers in their academic major programs creates a strong sense of community and leads to an easier transition and better fit and academic outcomes for first-generation students.

**Feeling Comfortable, Safe & Secure in their Campus Environment**

*Habitus* is another factor, according to the literature, that plays a pivotal role in college choice and student-institution fit. According to Cho (2008), *habitus* is crucial to the student's perception of fit between psychosocial needs and the capacity of the higher education institution to meet those needs. Although psychosocial factors tend not to be as critical as the academic and financial factors, I found that they are still important to a student's perception of student-institution fit and their choice to matriculate. I heard repeatedly in my interviews that these first-generation students instantly felt safe and secure on the MRU campus both in terms of being able to express their beliefs and in terms of just feeling safe and comfortable in both the academic and social settings on campus which supports Nora's (2004) finding that feeling safe, secure, and comfortable in a new setting has been shown to have greater relevance for student-institution fit than other factors such as institutional quality, location, diversity, or cost.

For the first-generation students in my study, I contend that being comfortable, safe, and secure was contextual. For several of the students it meant being close to home and the security of having parents who are within a couple hours driving distance. For some other students, it meant being in an environment where it felt safe and comfortable to do things on campus like going out and meeting new people or even walking across campus by yourself. For still others, comfort and security was about being in classrooms that valued diversity and where they felt safe to speak up, express their opinions, and even make mistakes. The MRU students I interviewed all had a sense of being comfortable, safe, and secure in the campus and classroom environments at MRU, and most of them had felt this way about campus as soon as they toured it. I heard from a majority of the students that I interviewed that, when they toured campus or came on campus for

early registration or even virtual registration, everyone, including faculty, staff, and other students, smiled, welcomed them, and made them feel at home, and that this was something they factored into their decision to choose MRU. This sense of being welcomed and feeling comfortable and safe was something that also made them feel like they were a fit with MRU once they got on campus. In accordance with Nora (2004), whatever social expectations students have, those students who consider social expectations when making their college choices are more likely to be satisfied with their situation on campus and their overall decision to matriculate. While the literature speaks to the fact that students have difficulty sustaining academic engagement on a campus where they do not feel personally valued or welcomed (Strayhorn, 2019), this was not the case for the first-generation students I interviewed. The students' experiences and interactions at MRU made them feel valued and welcomed, and they were engaging on campus and in the classroom

Furthering the idea of being on a campus and in a community environment that is welcoming and engaging, several of the students I interviewed noted that they felt welcomed by the community in which MRU resides. The Mississippi River University community is home to two four-year institutions and a community college and is very welcoming to college students. Students from MRU are encouraged to engage with the community and to call the Mississippi community home. MRU students engage with the community in multiple ways which include classroom/community collaborations, employment, and recreation.

The Mississippi River University community is in a fairly small community of approximately 25,000 people, and the location of the community allows for year-round recreation including hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking, paddleboarding, bicycling, cross-

country skiing, rock climbing, and ice wall climbing, and has a strong arts community as well. Students are encouraged and welcomed to take part in all of these activities. The MRU campus itself is in a great location and walking distance to many of these amenities, so that students can take part regardless of whether or not they have a vehicle on campus. The group of first-generation students that I interviewed for this study, for the most part, was very recreation-minded, and one of the things that drew them to campus was the aesthetics of the campus itself, and the opportunities for recreation close to campus. The students appreciated the fact that they could easily go out and explore the recreational opportunities, and they felt safe doing so. Students also mentioned that through employment or recreational opportunities that they had been able to build social networks as well, speaking to the willingness of the community to welcome college students and the community's encouragement of students to be engaged in the community.

**Having a Support Network and Sense of Belonging**

Relationships and social supports and resources were also integral to the meaning of institutional fit for this group of students. A sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus and/or a sense of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about (Strayhorn, 2019). Social supports and resources that helped students to feel a sense of connection to the University were the Welcome Week activities and the first semester Orientation class, OR 100. Residence Hall Assistants (RAs) were integral in getting them involved and engaged socially as well. Students also spoke about different types of counselors and staff on campus that made them feel like "they had a million people caring about them" and

"that they mattered." Providing these types of social connections/supports seemed important, particularly for the first-generation students who struggled socially.

The first year of college is critical for first-generation students as they need to find ways to effectively adapt to campus culture, establish a personal identity, develop academic skills, balance freedom, and cope with new time demands, all while mastering a new social setting (Ward, 2012). According to Terenzini et al. (1994) and Ward (2012), some of these issues can be mitigated through strategies like pre-enrollment visits to campus and student orientation programs, similar to MRU's Welcome Week and mandatory Orientation 100 course that all new freshmen must take. Institutional support structures that enhance sense of belonging include social-identity based student organizations and community building within residence halls (Means & Pyne, 2017). These types of institutional support structures make students feel like they matter which is critical to sense of belonging on campus (Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). The support networks built through these types of courses and/or events require interaction and involvement with the campus community in ways that connect students to their institution and subsequently creates institutional fit (Bean, 2005; Ward, 2012).

Campus relationships matter. Institutional staff and faculty serve as a powerful influence and source of support for first-generation students, and in turn, first-generation students' success at college (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Having validation and recognition in the classroom for doing well was part of creating a good fit for this MRU group of students. In college, supportive interactions with faculty in and out of the classroom contribute to students' retention, academic success, and general well-being and are an important contributor to academic and social capital, (Ishtani, 2016; Padgett et al., 2012; Schwartz et al., 2018; Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

According to the literature, first-generation students are less likely to initiate contact with faculty (Schwartz et al., 2018). For most of the first-generation students I interviewed, this was not the case. The students I interviewed from MRU went out of their way to make connections with faculty and peers in their classes and seemed to have a self-awareness about the need to make these types of connections. The MRU students pushed themselves to make connections to faculty, staff, and peers. My group of first-generation students seemed to know that having those connections with faculty, staff, and classroom peers could make them more successful in their pursuit of their degree. I cannot be sure how they came to know these connections would help them be successful in college, but many in this group of first-generation students I interviewed described close relationships with teachers and counselors in high school and had had successful high school careers, so it is my feeling that they carried this belief through to college. Several of the students I interviewed remarked that they felt more engaged, they started to like college more, and they were excited to go to class and be more involved in the classroom. The classroom connections that these first-generation students spoke about resonates with Pascarella et al.'s, (2008) thoughts that first-generation students who persisted in college appeared to be resilient enough that the disadvantages they may have in cultural and social capital do not necessarily turn into disadvantages in cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes in the higher education setting. The literature also speaks to the fact that institutional agents and educational institutions can transmit cultural capital in the form of help-seeking and specialized knowledge that can positively impact first-generation student outcomes (Lareau, 2015; Richards, 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Students seek environments that are in line with their own *habitus*, or expectations, attitudes, and values, and this was reflected in the student interviews as well. For

many first-generation students transitioning to college supportive interactions with faculty in and out of the classroom contribute to students' retention, academic success, and general well-being (Schwartz et al., 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Tinto, 1993).

According to Strayhorn (2019), if campus environments are broad and diverse in their norms and values, then it is easier to facilitate a students' sense of belonging in that environment. The students at MRU were able to develop and feel strong connections to not only faculty, but also to their peers interacting with them both in and outside of the classroom. For first-generation students, social and peer network engagement has been shown to be beneficial academically, as well as socially (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Strayhorn (2019) goes on to state that a sense of belonging among faculty and peers and a strong sense of community on campus generally leads to an easier transition and better fit for first-generation students. The students at MRU also found a sense of belonging through social identity-based activities and organizations on campus. One student felt that they had found their fit based on inclusive housing practices and an organization based on his social identity. He felt like he had found his people and place on the MRU campus. Other students I interviewed spoke about clubs and organizations related to their academic majors and how finding a group of peers in their major who were going through the same types of activities/struggles that they were helped them to find a sense of belonging and a true support network that made them feel like they had a good institutional fit. Social-identity based student organizations and centers on campus are particularly important for first-generation students (Freeman et al., 2007; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007: Means & Pyne, 2017). For first-generation students, like the group of MRU students I interviewed, who participate in social-identity based programs, the institutional support structures made them feel as though they

mattered and have been found to be a critical component of sense of belonging, and in turn institutional fit (Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). According to Bowman and Denson (2014), student-fit is associated with lower social isolation, and indirectly and positively related to college satisfaction and intent to persist which is also consistent with what I learned from the MRU first-generation students who participated in this study.

## Implications for Policy and Practice in Higher Education

For the first-generation students who participated in this study finding institutional fit meant that the expectations they had around the college experience based on what was important to them when they chose the college were closely aligned with the reality of the experiences they had as they transitioned into college life. Institutions of higher education need to better understand what those expectations are for first-generation students, and more importantly devise ways in which they can meet and maybe even exceed those expectations so that first-generations students are successful in finding institutional fit and persisting to graduation. The following sections describe the cross-cutting implications for policy and practice in higher education based on the findings of my interviews with the first-generation students from MRU.

### *Comprehensive Support Programs*

The first-generation students I interviewed spoke highly of the academic resources that were available to them at MRU, particularly TRIO and Access Services. These are services that have proven valuable to this group of first-generation students and have made the transition to college a positive experience for them. Holcombe and Kezar (2020) identify a body of evaluations that demonstrate the efficacy of integrated programs like TRIO Student Support Services. These types of programs include interventions like bridge programs, tutoring, cohort

models, mentoring, intensive advising, enrichment activities, and are connected and integrated in a way that participating students have exposures to multiple pathways of support (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Integrated programs are effective because they create a unified community of support for students, faculty, and staff. In addition to higher retention and graduation rates, first-generation students who participated in integrated programs, like TRIO, a federally funded outreach program for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, also experienced higher levels of academic and social integration (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Having a unified community of support leverages structural changes to campus policies and practices to promote individual changes to faculty and staff knowledge, beliefs, actions, and relationships around first-generation students. These structural and individual changes on campus bring people together across organizational boundaries, to pilot new ways of organizing courses, curriculum, and extracurricular activities that support first-generation students (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020).

Additionally, this type of holistic community support on campus is effective because it connects academic and student affairs in a way that creates changes in policies and structures to better support first-generation students (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Creating comprehensive programs that offer courses and supports in a coordinated and complimentary fashion that are aligned with organizational goals, institutions can better support students as they move through their educational journey (Bailey et al., 2015; Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). These types of support and comprehensive programs were very effective for the students I interviewed from MRU. Programs like TRIO and Access Services at MRU provided students with additional academic supports and guidance as they transitioned into college life which was invaluable for the students utilizing the services. In my interviews with the MRU students, there were a few concerns raised

about the TRIO program as one student had been placed on a waiting list her first year on campus, and another student was still trying to figure out how to access services through TRIO. I think it behooves us as a university to try and figure out a way to make first-generations students more aware of services like TRIO and how to access them. As well, we need to make sure that our institutions have the capacity to serve all the students that come to us requesting academic services like TRIO, especially in a time where budgets are tight at post-secondary institutions.

In the literature, there are several examples of these types of comprehensive programs being utilized and evaluated in terms of the outcomes for first-generation students. The Connected Scholars Program and the Gateway Program are examples of integrated, holistic interventions for first-generation students (Richards, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018). These integrated interventions focus on cultivating the skills and attitudes needed to forge connections with college instructors, staff, and mentors who can help advance students' academic goals (Richards, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018). Participants in these types of programs found them to be valuable in that it increased the value that students placed on social capital, and helped them to develop their knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy in pursing these important connections once they entered postsecondary education (Richards, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018).

Florida Atlantic University (FAU) has created a new Office of First-Generation Student Success. This office oversees an emerging-scholars program whose goal is to have selected first-generation students graduate debt free without missing out on high-impact practices like study abroad programs (Piper, 2018). The program provides students with books and academic support with the long-term goals of improving retention and graduation rates among first-generation students. The Florida Atlantic program also aims to create student organizations to foster a sense

of belonging because first-generation status is often an invisible identity and to get first-generation students connected to staff and faculty to build their network on campus (Piper, 2018). It is FAU's hope that having a dedicated office that supports first-generation students from acceptance to graduation will have an impact on the infrastructure at the university that evens the playing field for first-generation students and raises the consciousness about first-generation students campus wide (Piper, 2018).

At MRU, specifically, it is imperative to find ways to better inform faculty and staff about comprehensive programs that serve first-generation students, like our TRIO program. We need to do a better job educating all faculty and staff working with students about the type of academic and social supports and resources available for first-generation students. I taught at MRU for close to three years before I knew what TRIO was, who they served, and what services they provided. The only way I found out about them was because someone from TRIO came to a department meeting to inform our faculty and administrative staff about TRIO. As faculty are often academic advisors for students, it would be helpful and beneficial not only to the faculty but to the students as well, if faculty were made aware of these types of services for first-generation students during a comprehensive orientation process before they step into the classroom and/or are charged with advising students. Taking a holistic approach to serving first-generation students is an opportunity to coordinate an environment within the university that is oriented toward the needs and success of first-generation students (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020). Higher education institutions need to intentionally expose first-generation students to resources available to them on campus as those resources can be critical to encouraging both academic and social acclimation (Ward, 2012). Having workshops during Welcome Week, as suggested by one

of the students, would be a space where first-generation students could gather as a group and learn about academic, financial, and social resources on campus. It would also give them the opportunity to create a support network of students who might be experiencing similar events/feelings in their transition to college life.

### *Financial Resources*

On another level, ability to pay shapes not only whether and where first-generation students go to college, but also how they interact with and transition to the college environment. Cabrera & La Nasa (2000) found that for low-income first-generation students, inadequate financial aid can interfere with students' academic and social integration which, in turn, has been shown to be related to persistence decisions (Pascarella et al., 2008). First-generation students' families tend to be highly debt-averse, and as a result, colleges should consider expanding their non-loan financial packages, and first-generation students and their parents need to be made fully aware of all the financial aid possibilities available to them including types of aid, the application processes, and deadlines (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Somers et al., 2004). College cost and having the financial resources to complete their college career was one of the themes that I heard from first-generation students at MRU.

The 2010 federal policy to increase baccalaureate attainment increased Pell Grant funding and competitive state grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Hurtado et al., 2012). This increase in Pell Grant funding and competitive state grants was viewed as a response to the trend in higher education of increased tuition, which directly impacts the affordability of college for all students, but especially for marginalized groups of students (Hurtado et al., 2012). Even with the financial assistance provided by federal and state grants, the burden of paying for

college is felt disproportionately by students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Heller, 2001; Hurtado et al., 2012), and state aid tends to be awarded disproportionately to White upper-class students (Hurtado et al., 2012; St. John et al., 2007). These inequitable effects of state and federal aid policy raise concerns about the pursuit of equity in retention and academic outcomes (Hurtado et al., 2012).

As a growing number of states are devoting resources to merit-based financial aid programs, state funding for merit-based programs has increased at a faster rate than state funding for need-based programs (Hurtado et al., 2012). Need-based programs award financial aid to the most economically disadvantaged students, such as is the case for many first-generation students, unlike merit-based programs that award financial aid to students who meet a specified threshold of academic achievement (Hurtado et al., 2012; Perna & Titus, 2004). As a result, more lower income students are having to rely on loans instead of grants, and an increase in reliance on higher education loans in the first year has been shown to have significant negative effects on degree completion of low-income students, many of whom are first-generation students (Hurtado et al., 2012; Kim, 2007).

Despite earnest efforts to expand postsecondary access and promote student success for marginalized groups, like first-generation students, federal and state policies around financial aid have not always benefited these groups in terms of access and funding (Hurtado et al., 2012). In my interviews I learned that some of the first-generation students at MRU struggled to make ends meet financially for one reason or another. One student did not have enough financial aid to cover books, and another lacked enough money to buy groceries. Campuses need to be aware of the financial struggles of first-generation students and their families. MRU has been creative in

trying to find ways to help students who struggle financially: the campus has a food pantry to assist students who may be food insecure and offers medical insurance and medical services on-site for students who might not have access to medical services otherwise. While MRU works to ease the financial struggles of its own students much of what can be done to truly make a difference needs to be done in terms of policy change at the state and federal levels.

Unfortunately, programs that aid first-generation students are often unpublicized or inaccessible to students (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Jacob, one of the first-generation students I interviewed, also mentioned it would be helpful for the University to have workshops targeted at first-generation students during the Welcome Week activities on campus. In this type of a workshop, the institution could inform first-generation students about resources like TRIO, and even assist the students with getting signed up for services, and all types of services/resources including financial resources, not just academic resources. Based on my interviews with this small group of first-generation students, the more comprehensively we can address their academic, social, and financial needs, and the simpler we can make the process for the students, the more likely they are to see their college expectations realized, and as a result find institutional fit and a desire to persist.

***Academic/Faculty Engagement***

Pascarella et al. (2008) point out that first-generation students derive significantly greater educational benefits from engagement in academic or classroom activities than their non-first-generation peers. The educational outcomes first-generation students can derive from academic engagement leads to the acquisition of cultural capital during college and include critical thinking, writing skills, openness to diversity, and an internal locus of control for academic

success (Pascarella et al., 2008). The importance of academics to the group of first-generation students I interviewed was obvious, as almost everyone in the group had done PSEO or college - level course work or had taken AP classes at their high school. It did not surprise me then that finding a college and choosing a college that had an academic program of interest to them was important in their choice of college and in finding institutional fit.

The first-generation students I interviewed had built quality relationships with faculty and peers in their academic major classes. There were stories about developing study groups and meeting before and after class to go through the material they were learning. The increase in self-efficacy and engagement that first-generation students have as a result of their participation in developing faculty and peer relationships in their academic major, suggests that students are more likely to experience better academic outcomes leading them to persist in their studies and be retained after their first year of college (Conefrey, 2018). These relationships assist in mitigating gaps in their academic preparedness and improve their engagement and sense of belonging (Conefrey, 2018; Eynon & Gambino, 2016; Kuh, 2008). It is imperative that in higher education, and at MRU, more specifically, we look at ways we can assist faculty and staff in our academic major programs to facilitate this increase in self-efficacy and engagement that participants reported experiencing. Institutions of higher education need to move away from the deficit-based model that is often assumed when working with first-generation students where the problem lies with the student rather than the institution/system. Instead, faculty and staff need to adopt an asset-based orientation towards first-generation students. This places the responsibility for change on the institution, rather than the student. According to Samuel Pendakur (2016), one way you can work with faculty and staff is to train them to become empowerment agents for

marginalized students, like first-generation students. It is important to support and train faculty to advise, mentor, and serve as advocates for first-generation students; universities can also implement programs that connect students to key figures and resources so that first-generation students can build their own networks of support (Pendakur, 2016). Faculty and staff can create/develop their office as a safe space for students and create curricular/co-curricular spaces where first-generation students can comfortably share their experiences (Pendakur, 2016). Institutions can also support faculty and staff by encouraging them to actively seek first-generation and other marginalized students to mentor. This type of mentorship can also encourage development of long-term commitments to first-generation student academic success that acknowledges and builds on the strengths and assets of first-generation students.

The group of students in my study also spoke of finding fit in their major through the clubs and organizations associated with their academic area of interest. This is something that MRU does well. In my department alone, each major has its own club. These clubs offer students hands-on learning experiences, camaraderie outside of the classroom, as well as the opportunities for service learning where students are able to find a connection between their personal values and their academics. Having opportunities like this linked to academics is a valuable way for institutions to create fit for first-generation students based on their academic program of interest. Students who find a connection between their personal values and their academics based on their experiences find greater meaning in the education and became more motivated to succeed and finish college (Yeh, 2010). Hoffman et al. (2002) also found students who took advantage of opportunities, like clubs and organizations, were more likely to perceive higher levels of peer support, faculty support and comfort, classroom comfort, and empathetic faculty understanding,

as well as lower levels of isolation. As institutions of higher education, we need to cease looking at first-generation students from a deficit perspective. First-generation students are students who take their academic goals seriously, so as institutions of higher learning, we need to be providing a quality academic experience with opportunities for high-impact learning in an inclusive and diverse environment. Campus leaders should consider how to make engagement experiences more known and accessible to a wider range of students and encourage first-generation students to participate in these activities as they have been shown to have a positive impact (Ribera et al., 2017).

According to Nora (2004), it is college programs that focus on establishing personal and social connections, acceptance, belonging, and comfort for first-generation students that facilitates fit, satisfaction, and reenrollment. Based on the student statements in this study, faculty and staff relationships are one of the most important pieces to a first-generation student's building a sense of belonging and a support network. Encouraging engagement with faculty and staff, advising and mentoring by faculty and peers are all important ways institutions of higher education can assist first-generation students. This is a particular area of importance and improvement for MRU. Being a fairly new faculty member myself, the information I received about student resources and supports was very piecemeal and incomplete. I acknowledge that as a new faculty member, it is also my responsibility to learn about the student resources at my university, but at the time I was feeling very overwhelmed in my preparations to begin teaching. Teaching being my priority at the time, and not fully realizing the impact and/or the importance my knowledge of student resources could have on my students both in and outside of the classroom, educating myself about student resources was not an area of concern. However, in

hindsight, I do think the onus lies with any university system to ensure that their faculty, staff, and administrators are well versed in the academic and social resources that are available to first-generation students, as well as any other students who might need them.

As my years of teaching have gone on, I have come to realize the importance of faculty/student relationships and mentoring. After interviewing this group of first-generation students I truly have a better understanding of the impact that faculty and staff in a university setting have on their students, especially students, like first-generation students, who come into the higher education system needing things like access to resources, mentorship, and relationships with faculty and staff to succeed. When students form meaningful relationships with others connected to the institution, like faculty, they are more likely to persist and graduate (Davidson & Wilson, 2013). Access to mentors and helpful instructors are important. It is also important for college and universities to have system-level plans and resources in place to connect first-generation students to supportive people on campus, whether that is faculty or staff (Garriott et al., 2015). Students in this study reiterated the supportive role that faculty and staff in programs like TRIO and Access Services play once students are on campus; these were the people who made them feel like they mattered, belonged, and fit on campus. Institution staff and faculty are able to impart aspirational, intellectual, emotional, and navigational capital that in turn impacts the students' academic achievement and the quality of their campus experience. Research by McCallen & Johnson (2020) alluded to the role of faculty as being the most significant source of social capital in relationship to participating first-generation students' perception of their college success. Similarly in my research, the first-generation students discussed how faculty not only conveyed encouragement and provided access to resources, but

they also helped to facilitate access to academic support and a sense of institutional fit. First-generation students need to have access to faculty and support persons on campus, so it is vital that higher education highlights, acknowledges, and incentivizes the necessity of student-faculty/staff relationships in their policies and practices, so that faculty understand the true impact of their relationships with their students.

The first-generation students in this study also highlighted the importance of having faculty and staff who are diverse and allow learning to happen in identity conscious and diverse ways. The way students perceive their institution's faculty and staff is likely to shape their engagement and comfort level in activities that impact learning, achievement, and retention. Institutional agents are the people who have the capacity to directly and indirectly transmit institutional knowledge and resources to students (Hurtado et al., 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). I also think that given the diversity of first-generation students, and the growing diversity of college students in general, that it is imperative to have faculty that understand the importance of creating safe and diverse environments for learning. First-generation students come to higher education from very different backgrounds with very different funds of knowledge. It is necessary that faculty recognize these differences and use curricula and pedagogy in the classroom that reflect the multitude of strengths and experiences that these students bring with them to our institutions and into our classrooms. Engaging first-generation students in ways that reach them and are culturally sensitive and diverse, empowers these students in a way that is supportive and constructive and facilitates learning. Hiring faculty that represent our diverse student bodies is also critical so that students can see themselves in our classrooms and feel empowered and engaged. Ultimately the staff and faculty have the capacity to become vital

institutional agents in a student's navigation of their college experience and their ultimate success at the institution. It is essential for first-generation students to form meaningful relationships early on with their faculty, advisors, administrative staff, and student affairs professionals. These relationships serve as the foundation for a student's sense of belonging and fit, and not only provide support to students from diverse backgrounds to engage in challenging and rewarding opportunities on campus but also promote higher rates of retention and student success (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh, 2005; Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2008).

Colleges need to focus on the availability of various support networks for diverse groups of first-generation students as they adjust to college. Access to mentors, supportive friends, family members, as well as faculty can be important to first-generation students' sense of belonging and success as indicated by the first-generation students I interviewed. Having system-level resources to connect first-generation students with supportive people on campus can be critical to the students' being able to navigate the challenges of post-secondary education. Colleges need to be intentional in their hiring and funding practices to ensure that marginalized groups of students, like first-generation students, have access to mentors, faculty, support staff, and clubs and organizations that they can identify with.

***Campus Environment***

This group of students from MRU brought to the forefront the effort that MRU was putting into diversity on campus and how they felt comfortable enough to be themselves on campus and in the classroom without fear of reprisal. Students spoke of diversity in learning techniques in the classroom and how faculty, administration, and their peers were welcoming of

diversity, and the college's efforts to create spaces for diverse groups of students. I interpreted that creating a comfortable environment means that post-secondary institutions need to provide an environment for students that is safe and secure for engagement and learning to take place. First-generation students should be challenged in the college environment as a means to grow and develop, and the university should offer supportive relationships and spaces to help them negotiate the challenge (Demetriou et al., 2017). For students in this study, having a campus climate that welcomed diversity on campus, in general, and in the classrooms, meant that they felt comfortable, secure, and supported expressing themselves and this translated into student-institution fit for several of the MRU students I interviewed.

Providing first-generation students with the opportunity to learn in a safe, diverse, and culturally sensitive environment is integral in helping them manage and improve their transition to college life, and in turn, to find institutional fit. Higher education needs to pay attention to the increasing diversity in its students. When first-generation students come to our campuses, they come with their own social identities. Those social identities can be based on things like parental education level, socioeconomic status, gender, race, ethnicity, or disability. A diverse learning environment that welcomes all students should involve a diverse curriculum and diverse social opportunities that encourages interaction with peers and faculty. When students are exposed to diversity in their learning environment, they are more likely to engage in important interaction with their faculty and their peers and are more likely to develop the perspective that their institution fosters a positive climate for diversity and their own social identity (Hurtado et al., 2012; Mayhew et al., 2006).

Even though this particular group of first-generation students was similar in ways, there were still differences in terms of familial income levels and values and beliefs. It is important that higher education recognizes the distinct and growing needs of first-generation students and their intersectionality of multiple identities. In recognizing this diversity, institutions of higher education need to continue developing programs that are geared to improving the retention and academic success of first-generation students. More generally, given the diversity of the cohort of college student identities today, it is important for campuses to maximize a sense of belonging among diverse groups of students and to consider which communities are most important to different groups. Campuses need to determine how they can ensure that their campus environments engage these cultural identities in a meaningful way.

This type of cultural inclusivity is also particularly important for marginalized groups of students, like first-generation students, who may struggle to find that cultural connection and sense of belonging and fit once they arrive on campus. The core of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model of Success emphasizes that college students' access to culturally engaging environments is positively correlated with individual influences like academic self-efficacy and intent to persist (Museus et al., 2017). When students struggle to find cultural connection and fit on campus, postsecondary educators and administrators can use the tenets of Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) to structure spaces, curricula, policies, and programs that are relevant and respond to the social identities of all students regardless of racial or college generation identity (Museus et al., 2018). Museus et al. (2018) also highlight the need for congruence between a student's precollege and campus culture, concluding that there is a need for college educators to prioritize providing students with

culturally familiar spaces or spaces to connect them with people who share their background and understand them. Cultural inclusivity can be seen as important for all college students and should be considered a critical piece for discussions about cultivating conditions for all students, not just first-generations students, to thrive in college. In support of Means & Pye's (2017) conclusions about inclusion, sense of belonging, and institutional fit, the first-generation students in this study highlighted the need for colleges and universities to pay attention to the role of belonging and fit. Student affairs and academic affairs also need to consider how to integrate equity and social justice into their curriculums and strategic plans in order to develop programs, services, and policies that enhance a sense of fit for all students but that also specifically target underrepresented groups, like first-generation students.

***Community Engagement***

MRU has the advantage of being in a beautiful location, often referred to as Bluff Country. It is also located on a river, and is adjacent to many state parks, streams, and lakes which makes it not only a beautiful location, but ideal for those who love year-around outdoor recreation. Several of the MRU students I interviewed found this outdoor environment and opportunity for community engagement to be important as they integrated into their college experience.

Perhaps, more importantly for the first-generation students, MRU has integrated itself into the community in many different ways that are advantageous not only to first-generation students, but to the University and to the Mississippi River community itself. Community engagement and service-learning go hand in hand at MRU, and I believe this is one of the reasons that students feel so welcomed in the community. Not only is service-learning a high-

impact practice for first-generation college students, but it is also a value-added initiative for the community, just speaking from my own experience as faculty in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, where nursing, exercise science, social work, and public health students and faculty provide an interprofessional and free, weekly, community clinic for the Mississippi River community. The students get hand-on, invaluable service-learning experiences and the underserved, uninsured, underinsured, and sometimes homeless have a place to go for minor medical issues and referrals for other services.

My students also partner with community organizations to plan public health programming in the community and to write grants for area public health entities, schools, and other non-profit organizations in Mississippi River and surrounding communities. As well, there are many organizations in the Mississippi community that accept MRU students for practicum hours and internships, which also can encourage MRU students to stay in the community even after graduation. Service learning can facilitate growth for first-generation students in four areas of academics: psychosocial development, personal and spiritual development, and sociocultural/sociopolitical development (Yeh, 2010). Learning from service to the community has the potential to help first-generation students find a connection between their personal values and academics; when this happens, the students find greater meaning in their education and are motivated to succeed and finish college (Yeh, 2010). Through service - learning initiatives MRU is able to build long-lasting relationships and trust between students and community, while also building self-efficacy and cultural capital in first-generation students that can help improve their engagement and sense of belonging in the community both on and off campus (Confrey, 2018; Eynon & Gambino, 2016; Kuh, 2008).

Additionally, MRU has been able to build beneficial and sustainable partnerships in the community through policy and practice which benefits the students and the community in many ways. MRU works with city officials, including law enforcement and parks and recreation to keep students active but safe in the community. Many organizations offer arts and recreational opportunities for students at discounted rates throughout the school year and through the summer which many students take advantage of. MRU also has events on campus to which they invite the public to be a part of as well. Leadership at MRU has partnered with law enforcement in Mississippi River to create safe and legal ways for college students to be college students while having minimal impact on the community that surrounds the campus and speaking from experience as a long-time Mississippi River community member, it has not always been that way. Recent past and current campus leadership have worked very hard to create a culture that encourages students to be responsible and respectful members of the Mississippi River community and have strengthened policies and sanctions around issues like underage drinking on campus, house parties, keg sales, and worked with community officials to provide free transportation to and from the bars to ensure the safety of the students and respect for the neighborhoods surrounding campus. Campus leadership has also worked with community organizations to provide food, housing, sexual assault/domestic violence, and mental health resources for students who may be low-income or in need for whatever reason.

Campus policies that create mutual trust and respect between higher education institutions and their surrounding communities make it easier for communities to welcome college students. In turn, having this sense of mutual trust and respect between institution and community, helps students, like first-generation students, to feel more at home, safe, and

welcomed in their communities, both on and off campus. Being a part of a university system that works to create mutually beneficial partnerships with the surrounding community has the added impact of creating a welcoming environment for students, which according to this group of first-generation students was important to them finding fit as they chose their college, and then also in choosing to stay at their college. For first-generation students, we need to move beyond access to higher education to foster communities, systems, and policies that create engaged learning and recreational environments on campus and in the broader surrounding community, that help these students succeed and persist.

**Limitations**

Despite the efforts to create trustworthiness in my research, there are methodological limitations to this study. The group of students interviewed for this study was small (n = 11) and represented only one medium-size post-secondary institution. Despite my efforts to recruit a representative group of first-generation students through purposeful sampling, the group that was recruited was homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity as all the students I interviewed identified as non-Hispanic White individuals. I would like to note that at MRU approximately 83% of the student body identifies as non-Hispanic White, so it was not surprising that the group that was interviewed for this study was not representative of many of the intersecting identities considered in the research around first-generation students. While a small, homogenous sample, in terms of race and ethnicity may impact transferability in terms of my findings, I feel this sample was likely representative of the student population at MRU at the time my interviews were conducted. While my study population represented intersecting identities in some ways, such as low socioeconomic status, it made me wonder why the majority of our student

population at MRU is still White? Is it reflective of our admissions policies or recruitment practices, or is it because we struggle to successfully recruit as many diverse staff and faculty as we would like? Maybe it is reflective of the fact that the surrounding community is mainly White and there is not a sense of fit for students from racial and ethnically diverse backgrounds?

For the purpose of this study and analysis of findings, I did not consider intersecting identities. The sole criteria I used in my purposeful sampling was that the student be a first-generation student. I acknowledge that most first-generation students have intersecting identities, such as being low-income or having racial and ethnic identities that influence how they, as individuals, experience higher education. In conducting further research on the meaning of institutional fit for first-generation students I believe it would be beneficial to consider groups of first-generation students with intersecting identities related to race and ethnicity to further tease out the phenomenon of institutional fit and to make more targeted recommendations for practice on the part of post-secondary institutions.

Another consideration of this study that may have impacted the outcome of the interviews is that the students had very different experiences in terms of how they transitioned to campus life and classes due to Covid-19. Some transitioned into a campus life that was very different from the norm, especially those that started their freshman year in the Fall of 2020. Normal orientation activities did not take place; if they lived on campus, most of the Fall was spent isolated in their residence hall rooms with limited activities, and almost all classes were held completely online. Some of the students who started Fall of 2020 did not have the opportunity for campus visits which may have also impacted their expectations for coming to campus and how they would transition to college-life, as well as their ability to define or find

institutional fit. For the students who started as Freshman in the Fall of 2021, activities were limited but closer to normal. Classes were transitioning back face to face, and there was more opportunity for face-to-face interaction with peers, faculty, and staff. The experiences of students starting their post-secondary education in the Falls of 2020 and 2021 were much different than the experiences of the students interviewed who started their college careers prior to Covid-19, so it is important to acknowledge that how the group of students interviewed for this study describes institutional fit may be influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and how their initial transition period to post-secondary education was affected. Moving into a post-pandemic time in higher education and transitioning back to face-to-face classes also presents an interesting opportunity to further study the meaning of institutional for first-generation students to potentially identify differences between groups of first-generation students based on different college transition experiences like online vs. in-person or in times of pandemic vs. pre/post pandemic.

**Implications for Theory and Future Research Directions**

While this study identified academic and financial resources, academic majors, welcoming communities, sense of belonging, and safety and comfort on campus as being integral to good institutional fit for the group of students I interviewed, this was a small sample and homogenous in terms of racial and ethnic identities. Future research on student-institution fit should identify and research students with intersecting identities to further define the meaning of institutional fit for first-generation students. It could also be of benefit to interview a group of non-first-generation students who are otherwise similar to the students interviewed for this study to see if their definitions of institutional fit differ from the definitions of institutional fit provided

by first-generation students. Further research on student-institution fit with both students who have intersecting identities, such as low-income, gender, race, ethnicity, and first-generation, and non-first-generation students could serve to further define and develop the meaning of student-institution fit.

It could also be beneficial to look at student-institution fit at larger institutions of higher education. As an instructor at the institution where I conducted my research, I know that most instructors and staff value developing relationships with students that may be integral in their success at the institution. MRU is a considered a teaching university and does not have the focus on research like other larger universities, and so perhaps we are better able to focus on our teaching and the relationships we have with our students. My thoughts are that developing these types of relationships may not be possible, or at the very least more difficult to establish, at larger institutions with more students and where the focus may be on research. It might also be more difficult to access resources or to learn about where to access resources and programs like TRIO at larger universities. Comparing the meaning(s) of institutional fit for first-generation students at higher education institutions of varying sizes is also important in further defining the meaning of student-institution fit for first generation students.

Finding institutional fit depends on many things, including parental encouragement, financial consideration, and the student's education aspirations (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Parents' encouragement is a pivotal force in a students' decision to purse higher education (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Choy, 2001; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018), and in almost all cases in my research, the parents of the students I interviewed played an important role in supporting the students' decision to attend college even though they may have not been very

knowledgeable about it themselves. Further research should focus on how parents impact a first-generation student's college choice, expectations of college, transition to college, and eventually their decision to persist. This research could also help academia better understand the influence that parents have in helping their first-generation find a sense of student-institution fit in higher education.

Another area of interest in research on first-generation students and student-institution fit would be to more closely examine the role high school faculty and counselors play in facilitating matriculation to post-secondary institutions for first-generation students. I got the sense from the group of students I interviewed that their high schools played an important role in preparing them in various ways but not to the point where these students felt prepared to enter post-secondary education, mostly due to not knowing what to expect in their transition to college, both in the classroom and in campus life. Unfortunately for first-generation students, because their parents did not attend college or complete a college degree, they may not have a sense of what to expect from college life which can make transition to college life more difficult, as experienced by some of the students I interviewed. Further research on how high schools and post-secondary institutions can work together to create more realistic expectations and a more seamless transition to post-secondary education for first-generation students could benefit both the students and the post-secondary institutions where they enroll, and in turn potentially create better student-institution fit.

Ultimately, researchers need to focus on the types of programs and policies that truly impact first-generation students and their efforts to find institutional fit in higher education. I feel it would be beneficial to look at the successes first-generation students are having in higher

education instead of trending toward the deficits they have or the barriers they face. Building programs and supports for first-generation students in higher education takes resources and with today's declining enrollments and declining budgets, it is important to continue to research this increasingly diverse and growing population of first-generation students so that limited resources can be spent wisely and on programs that are effective, and retention of first-generation students can be achieved. In my study, 100% of the students I interviewed stated that they had found institutional fit, and 100% stated that they planned to persist to graduation at MRU, but would this be true in a larger study or at a different institution with different programs and/or policies? Does having institutional fit lead to retention or persistence to graduation for first-generation students? Building programs to close the gap between first-generation students and their peers is needed, but without direct input from first-generation students themselves, programs may not fully appreciate the impact that specific components of these programs have on a first-generation student and their intention to persist (Schelbe et al., 2019).

**Concluding Thoughts**

In the literature review, I discussed Perna's integrated conceptual model of college choice. This is a multi-layered model that show that an individual's college choice decision is shaped by four layers: (1) the individual's *habitus*; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006). This model highlights that the assessment of costs and benefits of college enrollment are shaped by not only the resources to pay for college, but also by the student's *habitus,* family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006). In examining the findings of my study, I would argue that this model represents not only

considerations of a first-generation student's college choice, but also considerations in how a first-generation student transitions and defines student-institution fit and ultimately decides to persist. All of the ways the MRU students in this study define student-institution fit can fit into at least one of the four layers that Perna describes in her model. College administrators can assist students in making the right choice as they can focus dollars on information highlighting the attractiveness and safety of their campus or on student support services among other things (Nora, 2004).

In general, policies that lower structural barriers for first-generation students are crucial in helping these students navigate the college experience from college choice to graduation and everything else that falls in-between. Student affairs, admissions, financial aid, counselors, service providers, and other administrators need to work together in creating a culture and environment that promotes institutional fit based on the social and academic identities of their students, inclusive of first-generation students. It is incumbent upon all higher education practitioners to be sensitive to potential misfit on their campus (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Institutions should work to identify the most pertinent aspects of misfit and to provide opportunities and resources for first-generation students to find fit and academic success.

Making a satisfactory college choice is considered essential to student satisfaction with their college experiences and their decision to reenroll and persist. I found this to be true with the students I interviewed. There are two times when institutional fit comes into play: the first time is when the high school graduate makes a college choice, and the second time is when the student makes their transition to college. These students chose to attend MRU based on what they felt was a good fit for them. The second time students have an expectation about

institutional fit is when they transition to college. If the first-generation students' expectations of fit in their college choice match up well with the reality of transition into college, there tends to be a sense of institutional fit. When I explored the themes of college choice, college transition, and institutional fit, they were closely aligned, particularly the themes between transition and fit.

I was delightfully surprised by the first-generation students at MRU. From the literature I think it is easy to become persuaded that first-generation students are a problem to be solved by higher education. This is not the case. The group of students I interviewed painted a very different picture of first-generation students. Did they have challenges to overcome in college choice and transition? Absolutely they did, but this group of students was bright, articulate, and understood the value of post-secondary education. They were motivated to make the experience at college the best it could be. They accessed resources, even though it was not always easy, and they developed relationships with faculty or sought help from peers, faculty, and staff when they needed to. While they may have had challenges like finances or social transitions, they persevered to have a positive transition to college life both academically and socially, and at a time when it was not easy for anyone, including students, faculty, and administration, in higher education.

From what I gathered through my interviews with the MRU students, this group of first-generation students likely had never really thought about the meaning of student-institution fit prior to me asking them; however, they were clear in their efforts to define institutional fit, and how it had impacted their lived experiences in higher education. Overall, the way they defined institutional fit was linked to academics. These first-generation students clearly had academics as a priority and being at a college that had their academic major and the academic resources to

help them be successful was an important component of fit for them. Finding a sense of belonging or a sense of mattering was also tied to the definition of institutional fit for this group of students. This sense of belonging was also tied to academics. Students spoke about finding a sense of belonging or a social network in their academic majors. Many had joined clubs or organizations related to their majors and had made friends or found a group of peers that were experiencing many of the same challenges in their studies while also having the similar professional interests. Another major finding from this study that related to defining institutional fit for first-generation students is that they experience fit when they feel they are on a campus that values diversity and where they can feel safe and secure both in a physical sense and in expressing themselves both in the general campus environment and in the classroom.

I feel that the fact that 100% of the first-generation students I spoke to from MRU planned to persist to graduation speaks volumes about what MRU is doing well for first-generation students in terms of assisting them in finding a good institutional fit. MRU has programs like TRIO and Access Services to assist students in finding academic and financial resources, as well as other counseling services. MRU has spaces where students feel safe and secure and welcomed to be who they are, and MRU has faculty, staff, and administrators that care about students and make them feel like they matter and belong at MRU. There is always room for improvement, and this is true for MRU as well. MRU needs to find ways to better communicate about student resources to its faculty and staff, especially to new faculty and staff. As well, MRU needs to make sure that incoming first-generation students know where and how to access the services they need to be successful. MRU needs to continue its efforts to be an inclusive and diverse institution of higher learning, and perhaps find a way to build camaraderie

on campus specifically for first-generation students, particularly for students that are new to campus. While there are truly challenges to first-generation students attending post-secondary education, the burden to achieve success should not be placed solely on the students themselves, but rather on the institution and institutional agents that play a serious role in sustaining structural barriers for groups of students, like first-generation students (Pendakur, 2016).

While clearly this study is limited in its scope, the way this small group of students from MRU defines student-institution fit has implications for how we think about and work with first-generation students and their families on our campus. First-generation students are assets to our campuses and classrooms, so it behooves higher education institutions to work with and for these students to ensure that they have the resources necessary to help them be successful in pursuit of their degree. Higher education needs to put aside the deficit approach to first-generation students and instead look at the strengths of these students and the successes they are having in the post-secondary environment. How can we build on their successes to create more diverse, inclusive, and empowering learning environments for first-generation students? First and foremost, this means making sure that the faculty, staff, and administrators on our campuses have the knowledge and means necessary to assist these students both in and outside of the classroom. It means having the financial and academic supports necessary to help them apply, enroll, and persist through graduation. It means making sure that first-generation students know about the resources available to them and how to access them once enrolled and on campus. It means being inclusive in our classrooms, in our housing, and in our clubs and organizations, and it means creating a campus environment that is safe, secure, and welcoming for all students.

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# Appendix A

## Interview guide: Semi-structured Interviews

**Research Questions:**

**$R_1$** - What constitutes the essence of good institutional fit for first-generation college students?

**$R_3$** _What can institutions of higher education do to create better institutional fit for first-generation students?

**Questions:**

1. Collect demographic data (demographic survey)
2. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
3. What was your journey like when you were applying to colleges?
4. What type of support did you get from your parents when you were applying to and choosing a college?
5. When you started looking at or applying to colleges what features of the colleges did you consider as important?
6. If/When you started visiting colleges what kinds of features were you looking for? What did you look for specifically that could persuade you to attend that college? Why were these particular features important to you?
7. Why did you choose this college?
8. Sometimes it's difficult to make the transition to college life, can you describe what experiences you had or things that the university did or had that helped you make that transition successfully this year/your freshman year?
9. Once you got here, did you feel like your high school years academically prepared you for college?

10. Do you feel like social supports/programs or academic supports/programs are most important when making the transitions to college? Which ones were most important in helping you specifically?
11. Do you plan to complete your degree at the university? If so, what types of resources do you need from the university to stay and be successful to degree completion?
12. In your own words can you define/describe, in terms of your relationship with the university, what does ‘good institutional fit’ mean?
13. How has having a good institutional fit contributed to your success at this university?

## Appendix B

## Recruitment Script

First of all, I would like to thank Professor Mettille and your lab instructors for letting me come into her HERS 204 classes to talk to all of you.

My name is Andrea Gierok or some of you might know me as Professor Gierok – I am an assistant professor in the HERS department and I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation about the meaning of institutional fit for first-generation students. For those of you that don't know what it means to be a first-generation student, it means that that neither of your parents graduated from college with a four year degree.

The reason I am here today is because I need to recruit at least 15 first-generation students to interview for my study, and I'm hoping that some you here today might be willing to volunteer. The only requirement to qualify for the study is that you are a first-generation student, meaning that neither of your parents attended or graduated from college and you are the first to attend college in your family. If you choose to volunteer for the study, I will conduct a short interview with you over Zoom or Face to Face depending on your preference or comfort level; the interviews will be approximately 60-90 minutes, and you will remain anonymous. I will ask you to fill out a short demographic survey prior to the interview, and then after the interview you will receive a $20 gift card to Caribou/Starbucks/Target depending on your preference. After the interview I will also ask you to look over the transcript of your interview and possibly the findings of my study to make sure I did not misinterpret or misunderstand anything you said during our interview. Also, if you are uncomfortable at any time during the interview it is your right to withdraw from the study, and I will stop the interview process immediately.

Your input/participation in this study is important to me and important to the research around first-generation students as I want to hear firsthand what it means for you to fit in here at this University, and what it is we can do here at the university to help you feel like this college is a good fit for you. Are there policies or practices that we need to strengthen or implement to create a better fit for first-generation students in higher education. Having your input is valuable to this research and to me not just as a researcher but also as a professor here.

I have just a short recruitment survey I would like you to fill out, and if you are a first-generation student and agree to participate in my study, I will contact you by the email you provide for me today.

## Appendix C

## Recruitment Survey

Name: _____

Email Address:_____

Major/Minor:_____

Please circle the appropriate response:

1. Are you a First-Generation student? Yes or No

2. Do you participate in the TRIO program? Yes or No

If yes, what kind of services do you participate in or get through the TRIO program? Circle all that apply.

- Academic advising
- Financial wellness
- Tutoring
- Social connections
- Workshops & events
- Student Leaders Club

3. If you are a first-generation student, may I contact you to be interviewed for this study? Yes or No

## Appendix D

## Demographic survey

Name: _____ Major/Minor: _____

Pseudonym of your choice: _____

Please circle the appropriate response:

4. What is your age?
    - 18 – 24 years old
    - 25-34 years old
    - 35-44 years old
    - 45 -54 years old
    - 55 and over

5. What is your gender?
    - Man
    - Woman
    - Trans
    - Genderqueer
    - Other or multiple (Please specify_____)
    - Prefer not to say

6. Are you a…?
    - Freshman
    - Sophomore
    - Junior (Please specify is this is your first year at WSU – Yes or No)
    - Senior
    - 5th Year Senior

7. What is your ethnicity? Please choose multiple ethnicities if applicable.
    - White
    - Hispanic or Latino
    - Black or African American
    - Native American or American Indian
    - Asian/Pacific Islander
    - Other

8. What is your family's household income?

- Below $10K
- $10K - $50K
- $50K - $100K
- $100K - $150K
- Over $150K

# Appendix E

## Letter of consent

**Consent Form – Interviews (individuals)**

You have been invited to take part in a research study about how first-generation students view institutional fit. This study will be conducted by Andrea Gierok, Assistant Professor of Public Health at Winona State University, and doctoral student at St. Cloud State University. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Rachel Friedensen, Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education at St. Cloud State University.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in a semi-structured interview about your experience as a first-generation student at Winona State University and what institutional fit means to you.
- You many also be asked to review your transcript of this interview to ensure that the information you provide has not been misinterpreted or misrepresented.

You interview will be audio-recorded. You may review these recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed.

Participation in this interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help to inform the University of how to better serve first-generation students in the future.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by assigning pseudonyms to you as well as obscuring specific identifying details associated with you prior to any publication. Interview audio recordings and transcripts will be stored on password-protected computers.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer for any reason or for no reason.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Andrea Gierok at 507-457-5201, algierok@winona.edu, or faculty advisor Dr. Rachel Friedensen at (320) 308-3116, refriedensen@stcloudstate.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the St. Cloud State Institutional Review Board Co-Chairs, Dr. Benjamin Witts, bnwitts@stcloudstate.edu, Dr. Michele Traub, mtraub@stcloudstate.edu or Institutional Review Board Administrator Jennifer Howland, jahowland@stcloudstate.edu.

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

**Agreement to participate in the interview with Andrea Gierok**

_____ _____

**Student Signature** **Date**

_____

**Student Name (Printed)**

# Appendix F

ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY
EDUCATION FOR LIFE.

## Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

**Name:** Andrea Gierok

**Email:** algierok@stcloudstate.edu

## IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: Expedited Review-1

**Project Title** The Meaning of Institutional Fit for First-Generation Students in Higher Education: Implications for Policy and Practice

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

-Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

**IRB Chair:**

Dr. Mili Mathew
Chair and Graduate Director
Assistant Professor
Communication Sciences and Disorders

**IRB Institutional Official:**

María-Claudia Tomany

Dr. Claudia Tomany
Associate Provost for Research
Dean of Graduate Studies

**OFFICE USE ONLY**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **SCSU IRB#:** 2060 - 2685 | **Type:** Expedited Review-1 | **Today's Date:** 12/17/2021 |
| **1st Year Approval Date:** 12/17/2021 | **2nd Year Approval Date:** | **3rd Year Approval Date:** |
| **1st Year Expiration Date:** 12/16/2022 | **2nd Year Expiration Date:** | **3rd Year Expiration Date:** |