Unveiling Sense of Belonging of Lower-Income, First-Generation College Students

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Unveiling Sense of Belonging of Lower-Income, First-Generation College Students

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

College of Education and Social Work

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Doctor of Education

By

Devan K. Zgleszewski

April 2023

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Dedication

For my village.

For my daughter, Briggs D, You put a smile on my face every day. I am a better person because of you.

For my husband, Zach. Thank you for always supporting and encouraging me. I am beyond blessed to have you as my person.

For my mom. Thank you for being my rock and best friend. I would be lost without you.

For my guardian angel, daddy-o. Completing this degree without you was not in the plan, but things don’t always go according to plan. You keep me laughing every day, even without your physical presence.

I love you, all, with every piece of my being.
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Abstract

This qualitative study explored lower-income, first-generation college students’ sense of belonging to their university setting. This research defined first-generation as neither parent nor guardian graduating from college (Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2021). Lower-income students were identified with family incomes less than $52,200 (Walrack & Segal, 2023). Eight students at various stages of their college careers with an array of student involvement and diverse backgrounds participated in individual interview sessions to engage in dialogue about their college experiences, family dynamics, and the impacts of their socioeconomic status when entering the university system.

When looking sense of belonging, this research explored students’ connectedness to their peers, the faculty and staff, and the university. When analyzing student narratives, Dr. Terrel Strayhorn’s (2008, 2011) work with sense of belonging, Dr. Laura Perna’s (2005, 2006) work evaluating lower-income, first-generation college students, and Dr. Ricardo Stanton Salazar’s (1997, 2011) social capital framework was considered. Upon transcription, six themes emerged as constant and relevant. These themes include employment, support networks, caretaker responsibilities, family expectations, financial disparities, and ethnic, racial, and cultural identities.

Students in this study reported a struggle when finding their sense of belonging. Factors students attributed to the lack of connections included employment, living situations, financial burdens, and the inability to engage with others from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This study will dive deeper into these themes and explore details about these findings.

Keywords: lower-income, first-generation, sense of belonging
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Chapter 1

In the United States, each year, approximately 3.7 million young adults earn their high school diplomas (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Students that have been in the daily routine of attending school, participating in co-curricular activities, working part-time jobs, and surrounding themselves in the same social circles are suddenly asked to make an important decision. What is their next move? Do they travel abroad? Do they go into the workforce? Do they take a gap year to do some soul-searching? Or, like 19.4 million other secondary students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), do they plan to attend college? The decision to obtain higher education is hard for many students and families to come to terms with. Media portrayal of college is infamous for showing university life as an easy-going social experiment. Unless students know what the college experience is like from family or friends, they may have no idea what the process looks like to become a college student from enrollment to graduation. There is more to the university experience than meets the eye. Higher education gives students a sense of purpose in a setting immersed in coursework and planned activities. Colleges provide them with the skills to become responsible citizens, the confidence to make moves that will impact society, the tools to problem solve, and an understanding of cultural differences, among others (Chan, 2016; Dungy, 2012; Levine, 2014).

Colleges were formed to educate individuals and provide them with resources, cognitive skills, knowledge, ethical responsibilities, and transformation opportunities (Chan, 2016; Dungy, 2012). Students use their time at college to form habits, often based on values and character (Dungy, 2012). It is often assumed that the sole benefit of attending college is the potential to earn a higher salary. However, job field congruence, satisfaction in the workforce, and dreams of future success are also essential factors that lead individuals to pursue college degrees (Lopez,
Civic education at the university level has proven to make individuals better employees (Levine, 2014). As expected, those with college degrees often earn higher wages than those without, making about $32,000 in additional earnings annually (Abel & Deitz, 2014; Trostel, 2015). Although earning livable wages might be enough to attend college, there are more benefits than higher salaries. College attainment also gives individuals better access to health care, retirement plans, job security, and occupational prestige (Trostel, 2015). It brings people together and allows for more relationships and collaborations with individuals from all walks of life (Levine, 2014).

Universities also provide the space for students to build relationships with others. By attending college, students can meet others who can help with their upward mobility, career advancement, and future success by sharing ideas and holding each other accountable (Lopez, 2018; Levine, 2014). College campuses are populated with intellectuals, educators, and researchers willing to serve as mentors and support systems for students (Lopez, 2018). Through these relationships and unique experiences on campus, students attending college are exposed to social and individual benefits that inevitably aid in their future achievements. Social benefits include a greater appreciation for diversity, an increased desire to serve communities, and a heightened commitment to civic engagement. Individual benefits include greater employment rates, higher tendencies to pursue terminal degrees, the skill set to deliberate and bring people together, and the contextual knowledge to support their families through higher educational pursuits (Chan, 2016; Levine, 2017).

Although higher education comes with many benefits, these benefits are not without challenges along the way. For lower-income students requiring federal assistance, their challenges begin from the start (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Barriers in the application and enrollment
process lead to information constraints about the financial aid application and misinformation about the cost of college (Lee et al., 2021). The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a complex application that proves difficult for many to complete, especially those needing it the most, including lower-income students who are the first in their families to attend college (Lee et al., 2021; Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Difficulty interpreting the FAFSA can lead to students missing opportunities to receive unsubsidized aid, Pell grants, and work-study opportunities. Lee et al. (2021) found that while FAFSA applications are rising, application completion remains low in lower-income, first-generation students needing financial aid the most.

First-generation students are a significant marginalized population that has steadily increased its presence on college campuses in recent years (Ramos, 2019; Garriott et al., 2015; Stebleton et al., 2014). Although the United States has one of the highest college attendance rates, there are significant gaps in access and success, particularly among lower-income, first-generation students (Lopez, 2018). First-generation students are those whose parents did not graduate from college (Ramos, 2019). Students who are the first in their families to attend college often come to campus with the deficit of not having intergenerational knowledge about academic success in the university setting and are likely to experience a lack of support from their families (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). When families support their students during the transition to college, students show more robust emotional well-being. They are more likely to develop positive relationships and friendships in the university setting. When students do not have support systems, they are less likely to persist (Ramos et al., 2017). Relationships with parents, administrators, advisors, and peers each play a crucial role in the socialization process of
students that can help shape students’ educational aspirations and sense of belonging (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Sense of belonging includes feelings of identification, connectedness, and acceptance within the institutional community and culture (Strayhorn et al., 2015). A sense of belonging can be defined as a need or desire to connect through formal or informal interactions (Stebleton et al., 2014). On college campuses, a sense of belonging can be identified as a student’s psychological sense of membership in their study institution (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021). It is often associated with better grades, higher retention rates, stronger satisfaction with college decisions, and an easier transition to college life (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Students with a lower sense of belonging express having difficulties fitting in with their peers and report feeling socially isolated, alienated, unsupported, and unwelcomed (Strayhorn, 2008). These feelings are exacerbated even more for lower-income, first-generation college students who often struggle to find peers who understand their backgrounds, share similar experiences, and make them feel accepted as a part of the community (Azmitia et al., 2018, Stebleton et al., 2014).

Lower-income, first-generation college students tend to have a lesser sense of belonging and lower college satisfaction than their continuing-generation peers (Stebleton et al., 2014). First-generation student’s sense of belonging can be enhanced by having more access to individuals who share common experiences, more opportunities to engage in learning relevant to their communities, volunteer roles that will allow them to give back to their communities, and campus support of others by validating their backgrounds (Museus & Chang, 2021). Despite challenges in belonging, some first-generation college students feel connected to their campus due to resources or moments in their experience that made them feel welcomed and included (Azmitia et al., 2018). First-generation students with a strong sense of belonging tend to have
more confidence in their academic success, more motivation to excel in their studies, better academic adjustment, and higher achievement inside and outside of the classroom (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021).

I conducted a qualitative research study to explore better the relationship between lower-income, first-generation college students and their sense of belonging to the university they are enrolled in. The goal of this study was to allow lower-income, first-generation students’ voices to be heard as it relates to their sense of belonging to the university. The remainder of this chapter details the purpose of the study, the rationale of the study, the problem statement, the research questions, the rationale for methods, the significance of the study, the researcher’s positionality, and brief definitions of important terms.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of lower-income, first-generation college students and their sense of belonging to the university. Although first-generation college students come from all different socioeconomic backgrounds and financial situations, the lower-income population was selected because first-generation college students are overrepresented in lower-income communities and experience more educational stratification than those from middle-class or affluent families (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). This research uses the findings to improve the experiences of lower-income, first-generation college students on campus.

Being the first in the family to attend college can be emotionally taxing for students as this experience tends to foster conflicting identities, one where the student tries to please their families and home communities and another that seeks to conform to a new social setting (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Success for lower-income, first-generation students is often
challenging due to economic disadvantages and difficulties building social connections with those from different backgrounds (Ramos et al., 2017). First-generation students often characterize themselves as inhabiting intersecting identities of oppression dependent on their race and social class (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Martinez and Williams (2021) found that students who did not feel they belonged attributed that feeling to more than one of their intersecting identities. In the case of this study, the two identities being examined are lower-income and first-generation status.

First-generation students often share how their underrepresentation and the absence of specific resources for their population can lead to isolation and a decreased sense of belonging to the campus community (Museus & Chang, 2021). A strong sense of belonging can help students persist in college, even if not highly engaged in their academic communities, and feel included and accepted at the university (Beard, 2021). Sense of belonging increases for students as they engage in formal clubs and organizations and informal activities such as rallies, athletic events, and festivals. All these contribute to building a sense of togetherness with peers (Beard, 2021). Azmitia et al. (2018) found in their work with first-generation college students that the most common sources of belonging came from their peer groups, residential communities, academic majors, student organizations, and volunteer programs. Students found comfort in these settings and linked their place in these groups to their values and beliefs, comparing their connections to those of a family (Azmitia et al., 2018). Strayhorn et al. (2015) described that increasing students’ confidence in transitioning to college successfully also contributes significantly to an enhanced sense of belonging. Confidence can be increased by holding more conversations and meetings with first-generation students about their ability to succeed and providing them with
positive role models or examples of other first-generation students who have succeeded in college (Strayhorn et al., 2015).

To fulfill the purpose of this study, it is essential to understand why this research matters and how it can be used to impact the lower-income, first-generation student experience. In the next section, the rationale for this study will be uncovered as I delve further into the design of this qualitative research study.

Rationale for Study

There are two primary reasons why research on lower-income, first-generation students is essential. First, there is an increase of lower-income, first-generation students on college campuses who struggle to connect to the campus with intersecting identities. Second, the lack of knowledge and support they have from family about university systems and processes.

Stated differently, one reason research on lower-income, first-generation students is essential is that they account for a large portion of the population of college students. First-generation students account for approximately 45% of students enrolled at public or private four-year colleges and universities in the United States (Soria & Roberts, 2021). Of that group, 49.2% of lower-income, first-generation students earn a bachelor’s degree within five years compared to 66.1% of their continuing-generation peers from lower-income backgrounds and compared to 80.9% of continuing-generation peers from upper-income backgrounds (Soria & Roberts, 2021). And among these first-generation students, approximately half come from lower-income backgrounds (Lecy, 2021), where their parent’s annual income is less than $52,200 (Soria & Roberts, 2021). First-generation students from lower-income backgrounds often experience barriers upon college entrance, including feelings of alienation and difficulty establishing mentors and finding support resources as they struggle to navigate college culture (Lecy, 2021).
A second reason lower-income, first-generation student research is crucial is the lack of familial resources they receive as they pursue upward mobility for themselves and their families (Miller, 2007). First-generation students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families are less likely to feel they belong on campus than peers from more affluent families (Roska et al., 2021). While these students seek to build campus relationships and connect with their peers, they often face obstacles, including a lack of familial support, as they change their beliefs and values based on influences learned in college (Miller, 2007). Socioeconomically disadvantaged parents often leave decisions about college to their students, primarily due to their lack of knowledge surrounding higher education and their perception that it is the university’s responsibility to help facilitate their student’s success (Roska et al., 2021). Parental contribution to student success is not just information and knowledge-based. Offering emotional and psychological support can be just as vital to the student as they adapt to an unfamiliar environment (Roska et al., 2021). When students do not receive this type of support, it can hinder their ability to build a sense of belonging to the campus community, as parental validation is positively correlated with students’ engagement with peers and faculty and their sense of belonging (Roska et al., 2021). This research study explores the relationship and impact of lower-income, first-generation students’ sense of belonging. It helps find ways educators can combat the barriers, and other struggles these students face.

Students from lower-income backgrounds often struggle with understanding university procedures, but their troubles do not stop there (Goward, 2018). For example, capital and access to resources differ between students who have financial stability and lower-income, first-generation students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Although they may not have a family understanding of college systems, students coming from financially independent households
acquire forms of social capital, including appropriate social networks that serve as valuable tools when navigating college procedures (Perna & Titus, 2005). Social capital is gained through relationships, social networks, and memberships. Class and access to different forms of capital must be considered when universities create retention strategies and support mechanisms for first-generation students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Students do not always have an option about which college to attend, if any, as college access and choice are stratified by income (Perna, 2006). In addition, college affordability does not favor lower-income families, as tuition has consistently increased faster than traditional family income (Perna, 2006). Unlike their middle- and upper-class peers, first-generation students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to seek institutions that are lower in cost and prestige (Perna, 2006). These students are more likely to enroll in community colleges or universities near their families, even if offered full scholarships at top-notch universities with more majors and research opportunities (Azmitia et al., 2018). These unique characteristics highlight the issue of lumping all first-generation students in the same category regardless of family income.

First-generation status is temporary, as it relates to the student’s experience in college; however, a student’s status as lower-income stays with them forever (Goward, 2018). Social class emerges when students are their most authentic selves (Goward, 2018). Being a first-generation college student and not understanding college systems is very different than students having that struggle, plus not knowing whether they would eat at night or if their rent would be paid (Goward, 2018). Growing up lower-income shapes students’ actions and how they interact with others their entire lives (Goward, 2018). Lower-income status is often associated with shame and resentment for the financial struggles experienced (Goward, 2018). This study
identified lower-income students as students whose family income was less than $52,200 (Walrack & Segal, 2023). For decades, lower-income students remained silent about their academic financial burdens (Goward, 2018). In my study, I wanted to provide space for students who came from lower-income families and were brave enough to embrace that identity to talk about their experiences.

**Problem Statement**

Although first-generation research and support are important and should be acknowledged, it should also be recognized that for much of the research on this population, students are assumed to come from similar financial backgrounds (Goward, 2018). However, this is not accurate. Even though they identify as first-generation, students within this broad population may come from very different financial backgrounds and experiences, which in turn may affect their experiences on campus and their success in terms of academic achievement, persistence, and timely graduation (Goward, 2018).

There is an overarching problem with labeling all first-generation students as also lower-income students. Firstly, the claim is inaccurate (Goward, 2018). For example, the children of Beyoncé and Jay-Z will be considered first-generation college students if they decide to attend college. Goward (2018) identified that although plenty of research finds an overlap between lower-income and first-generation status, it is important to identify the difference between those labels. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified that nearly 30% of students in college identify as first-generation college students. Of those first-generation students, 27% graduate within four years, and 50% graduate within six years (Goward, 2018). Lower-income, first-generation students have even lower persistence to graduation rates, with only 14.5% graduating within eight years (Goward, 2018). Despite the discrepancies between the
graduation rates of first-generation and lower-income, first-generation students, campuses continue to create programming and resources targeting first-generation students of all economic backgrounds (Goward, 2018). By doing this, we ignore social class, lived experiences, and the opportunity to increase the graduation rates of our most vulnerable and marginalized students (Goward, 2018).

**Research Questions**

To address the problem, the following research questions will be used to guide this study:

1. In what ways do lower-income, first-generation students characterize their sense of belonging?
2. What factors increase or decrease the sense of belonging for lower-income, first-generation undergraduate students?

In the first question, I want to understand how lower-income, first-generation students describe their sense of belonging to the university. To uncover more about the student’s experiences, we will discuss their connectedness to their peers, faculty and staff, and the university. Since this study will focus on lower-income students, I also want to look at their social identities and how they think they connect to their sense of belonging.

In the second question, I seek to learn more about what factors increase or decrease the students in the study’s sense of belonging to the university. In this, I will explore their college struggles, the most significant triumphs and achievements they have experienced, and the support systems they have utilized while on campus (personnel and departmental). To connect their experiences to their social class, I will also explore how they think their socio-economic status has impacted their education thus far and if it served as a barrier to their sense of belonging.
Rationale for Methods

A qualitative study was utilized to learn about the experiences of lower-income, first-generation college students and their sense of belonging to the university. The qualitative method employed was a basic qualitative constructive research study to explore a concrete understanding of the students and their situations in the real world. Marshall and Rossman (2016) define qualitative research as research focusing on an emergent context in the natural setting. This research style connects to this study as the research focuses on themes and student experiences. A qualitative approach helped amplify student voices through storytelling and narratives that allowed the opportunity for students to self-reflect on their experiences individually and as members of a small group. This qualitative research study includes eight in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews. Insights from this study can inform the creation and improvement of programs and support resources designed to help students that may not feel a connection to the university, their peers, and their faculty and staff, all ultimately aiding in their persistence to graduation.

This research aimed to allow lower-income, first-generation students’ voices to be heard and recorded as they related to their sense of belonging to the university. This qualitative study allowed for the student’s point of view to be understood. In interviews, students were prompted to answer questions in their own words to understand this population and how universities can better serve this group of marginalized students. Qualitative research allowed students to interpret questions and elaborate on their experiences to explain what they found impactful and how their experiences have contributed to their sense of belonging.
Significance of Study

Popular research in the field of lower-income, first-generation students focused on the retention and persistence of these students since their college completion rates are significantly lower than their continuing-generation peers (Carpenter & Peña, 2017). This study is critical because it focuses on specific student experiences of lower-income first-generation students. This study focuses on this population’s sense of belonging to the university and how their social class may have impacted that.

It is vital to help lower-income, first-generation students persist as the university curriculum creates lifelong learners and helps form competencies related to communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and social and interpersonal relations (Chan, 2016). By finding support systems to help this marginalized population of students graduate from college, universities are not only enhancing these students’ own social and cultural capital, but they are also improving chances for the community to grow by providing increased tax contributions, reducing crime, increasing civic engagement, and raising involvement in communities (Trostel, 2015). Bringing more college graduates into communities, specifically those of lower-income status, will leave a lasting impact that can shape family, friends, and neighbors’ views of education and upward mobility.

Often, studies look at first-generation students and their lack of academic preparation, inadequate familial support, difficulties achieving their future career goals, and struggles with academic rigor (Verdin et al., 2018). Although academics and persistence to graduation are critical factors in student success, a sense of belonging is also a high indicator of those who will ultimately persist toward graduation (Stebleton et al., 2014). Family income is an essential factor
that influences a student’s likelihood of applying and graduating from college, despite their high school academic success, ability, and achievements (Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

When researching first-generation students and their sense of belonging to the university, studies published frequently discuss students within their first few years at college trying to establish where they fit into their campus through onboarding experiences offered by the university (Schwartz et al., 2017). This study looks at the sense of belonging of first-year students and those in their second, third, and fourth years. This research study explores the sense of belonging connected to their academic major, peers, faculty, staff, and campus community and focuses on social class as an important factor. This research includes all lower-income, first-generation students to identify their struggles regarding their sense of belonging to the campus community.

**Positionality**

Research is often created with passion and excitement about a topic or interest. In a research study, the research design should reflect the researcher’s identity, sense of voice, assumptions, sensitivities, and biases (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Still, these elements should be highlighted as a part of the researcher’s role, access, ethics, and entry, as well as upon data entry, management, and reporting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers’ life experiences often impact their research choices, how they reflect on events in their research, and why they chose an area of study (Bott, 2010). When researching and studying subjects different from yourself, it is crucial to consider your identity and how it influences your research process (Sheldon, 2017). This research must be transformative for the participants and the researcher, as they find themselves challenging, questioning, and problematizing their identities and personal experiences (Sheldon, 2017).
The choice to recruit lower-income, first-generation students came from my own experiences. As a lower-income, first-generation student myself, I had little access to financial resources during college. I worked multiple jobs to keep up with my classmates socially and fund the ongoing expenses that financial aid did not cover, such as books and room and board. I knew my struggles and understood that many students struggled more than I did. Fast forward five years post-graduation, as a budding professional in student affairs, I worked at a university where first-generation students were celebrated and recognized. The university created programming and efforts to assist and aid these students in achieving academic success and co-curricular excellence. To implement this, the university often asked faculty and staff volunteers to join committees and help with networking. I remember thinking about how I relate to these students and can understand their struggles. Surely, staff working on this initiative could also relate. Here is where I learned the difference between first-generation and lower-income first-generation. There was staff on the initiative which celebrated their first-generation student status but came from affluent families who owned construction businesses or had wealthy grandparents fund their college education. Although these helpful staff could relate to the first-generation student experience, they did not fully understand the lower-income student experience.

I was always curious why programming efforts on many campuses did not differentiate between middle- to upper-class and lower-income. When studies utilize the term “first-generation student” without highlighting the student’s socioeconomic backgrounds, there is a commingling of social classes that hides important distinctions that subpopulations of first-generation students may be managing and struggling with. My experiences as a lower-income student with little financial resources and support differed vastly from my first-generation peers, who came from families with more resources. My peers and I struggled to understand how
college worked and navigate different support systems. Still, our similarities stopped when I was navigating how to split grocery costs with my roommates, pay for gas to get back and forth to work, and find the time to work multiple jobs. In contrast, my middle- to high-income first-generation peers received financial support from their families.

Throughout my professional experience, I have worked with and connected with first-generation students nationwide. I have learned from students that the struggles they face are not just because they are first-generation but also because many are lower-income. At my institution of employment, I serve as the advisor of the first-generation student honor society and a member of the first-generation student support task force. At the national level, I served as the chair of the first-generation student network in the National Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education, otherwise known as NODA. Through these volunteer roles, most students I met expressed feelings of stress, inadequacy, and despair. They often felt they were not good enough to be at college. They shared with me that they typically felt like an imposter, pretending to know what was happening when they were confused and anxious. They worried about their lack of knowledge surrounding college policies and how to stay afloat without familial financial support. Due to this exposure, on top of my personal experience, I felt compelled to further study this population of students in hopes of finding ways to share their stories and build sustainable support resources.

Summary

Sense of belonging is frequently connected to other intersecting identities, such as lower-income and first-generation (Goward, 2018). Lower-income, first-generation students often find the transition to college more difficult because it breaks family tradition and the possibility of a change in their social class identity (Rubin & Wright, 2011). These students are more likely to
become academically frustrated and feel isolated, affecting their self-efficacy negatively and weakening their sense of belonging to the university (Jenkins et al., 2013). The lack of connection to professors and peers socially and academically contributes to lower-income, first-generation students having higher dropout rates. It makes them less likely to return to college (Wiggins, 2011). In this chapter, I discussed the purpose of the study, rationale of the study, problem statement, research questions, rationale for methods, significance of the study, and positionality. The next chapter will review relevant literature and discuss my theoretical framework.
Chapter 2

This chapter explores the literature regarding first-generation student identities and how forms of capital, lower-income financial backgrounds, and sense of belonging may impact their college experience. One central tension in this work is that lower-income students may identify as first-generation, but not all first-generation students identify as lower-income. Due to their lack of exposure to the college setting, lower-income, first-generation students are more likely to feel marginalized, unwelcomed, and unsupported during their transition to college than any other sub-population of first-generation students (Verdin et al., 2018). These students often lack the capital necessary to succeed in college. They are less likely than their continuing-generation classmates to build a sense of belonging to their peers and institution during their academic pursuits (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). In recent years, it has been more popular to see colleges and universities build programs and resources for this population. However, much of this work ignores differences among first-generation students’ socioeconomic statuses. When studies utilize the term “first-generation student” without highlighting the student’s family income, it is hard to determine what experiences that student comes to college with that may impact their college trajectory. Although there may be an overlap between first-generation middle- and upper-class students and lower-income, first-generation students, there are also significant differences (Goward, 2018).

This chapter begins with identifying those who qualify as first-generation college students. Next, I dive deeper into unique struggles faced by lower-income, first-generation students by exploring the lack of guidance and support, feelings of vulnerability about social class, and additional responsibilities that interfere with college schedules and coursework. Then,
I describe different types of capital and how these forms of capital impact student experiences. This chapter weaves together how this affects a student’s sense of belonging.

After reviewing the literature, the two theoretical frameworks to support these topics are identified. Bourdieu’s (1986) Social Capital Framework and Bandura’s (1991) Social Cognitive Theory are explained. These theoretical frameworks support the notion that first-generation students from lower-income backgrounds may struggle to establish a sense of belonging to the university. The social capital framework focuses on the benefits accompanying capital affluent individuals attain. Social cognitive theories focus on social factors that can impact student’s ability to build connections. I connect these theoretical frameworks to the research surrounding lower-income, first-generation students and their sense of belonging.

**Review of Literature**

**Identifying First-Generation Students**

Definitions of what it means to be a first-generation college student vary depending on who is considered a parent, how many parents did or did not attend college, and whether parents completed or started college. The type of college parents may or may not have received degrees from (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). While identifying terms to be used in this study, the term “first-generation student” proved more difficult than others to narrow down to a single definition. Definitions of who is defined as first-generation differ widely across research studies and universities (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Generalizing and comparing information and statistics about this group without a standardized definition becomes increasingly tricky (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). For example, when defining who is first-generation, it is seldom clear whether “parent” should include only biological parents or if it should also include stepparents, foster parents, or adoptive parents (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). There are also
inconsistencies about whether the parent’s degree needs to be from an institution within the United States or if an international degree contributes to the student’s first-generation status (Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2021).

Museus and Chang (2021) and Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) defined first-generation college students as those without parents who attended college. In other work, first-generation students are defined as those individuals for whom neither parent has completed any postsecondary education (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). This definition could include post-high school vocational education or technical schooling. Research also defines first-generation students as students from households where neither parent has obtained a four-year undergraduate degree (Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2021). These parents could have started their undergraduate training and then dropped out. They also could have received a two-year associate degree and stopped their postsecondary education at that stage. This is the definition I used in this study, as it is the same one used at the institution where this research was conducted.

Below is a table that describes standard first-generation definitions and the differences between terms.

**Table 1**

*Differing Definitions of First-Generation College Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>First-Generation Definition</th>
<th>Key Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2021</td>
<td>Neither parent has obtained a four-year undergraduate</td>
<td>Excludes parents with two-year degrees or technical school education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lohfink &amp; Paulsen, 2005</td>
<td>Neither parent has completed any postsecondary education</td>
<td>Includes two-year degrees or technical school education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museus &amp; Chang, 2021</td>
<td>No parent attended college</td>
<td>Degree attainment is not a factor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Programs at institutions explicitly created to support first-generation college students are designed to offer research opportunities, connect them to supportive networks, and provide access to resources (Azmitia et al., 2018). Suppose a student considers themselves as first-generation for a reason other than the definition provided at their institution. In that case, they will miss opportunities to build social connections and better understand the university (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). For example, students may have one parent who is a college graduate and one who is not. This renders them ineligible for first-generation student support based on the definition used in this study. Even so, that student may not have the connection or supportive relationship with the educated parent and may still need access to the college's resources to the identified first-generation student population. Furthermore, Toutkoushian and colleagues (2021) found that students with only one parent who completed college still faced challenges consistent with the difficulties experienced by a first-generation student with no parent that attended college. These students may be overlooked if they do not fit their institution’s definition of first-generation.

Defining first-generation consistently is crucial as it can inform who gets served and who is overlooked, which has implications for research, policies, practices, and resources (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). By not having a single definition, an understanding of where students are coming from and their relationships between parental education and their college outcomes are limited (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Not having a firm understanding and consistent definition of first-generation students leaves us with research that scholars and institutions cannot link together and with policies and practices uncertain of which students they serve (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020).
When first-generation students see someone like themselves succeeding in college, they are more likely to feel a connection to the university and persist to graduation (Verdin et al., 2018). Forming a sense of belonging on the college campus helps first-generation students foster a sense of identity within their community. They are likelier to succeed when they feel they belong (Verdin et al., 2018). This next section will cover sense of belonging and how it impacts the first-generation student experience.

Sense of Belonging

According to Terrell Lamont Strayhorn, a leading scholar whose publishing focuses primarily on student success and issues of equity in higher education, a sense of belonging consists of cognitive and affective elements. Students assess their role within the group (cognitive), which results in behaviors or outcomes (affective) (Strayhorn, 2008). Sense of belonging describes how a student feels connected or a part of their campus (Strayhorn, 2008). It includes feelings of a desire to be connected to peers through formal and informal interactions (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). Students often build their sense of belonging by attending meetings for campus activities, establishing meaningful relationships with professors or support staff, or joining a leadership team or organization (Strayhorn, 2012).

A sense of belonging to the university is a predictive outcome in college for higher grades, better retention, and the ability to persist to graduation (Gaudier-Diaz et al., 2019). Sense of belonging and student persistence is high indicators of those who will ultimately persist toward graduation (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). It is crucial to help first-generation college students find a sense of belonging to the university as students who feel connected establish a stronger sense of identity and develop coping skills necessary to succeed in the college setting (Verdin et al., 2018). Sense of belonging can be linked to mental health problems,
including levels of depression and stress among lower-income, first-generation students (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014).

First-generation students find the transition to college more difficult because it breaks family tradition and represents the possibility of a change in their social class identity (Rubin & Wright, 2011). These students are more likely to become academically frustrated and feel isolated, affecting their self-efficacy negatively and weakening their sense of belonging to the university (Jenkins et al., 2013). The lack of connections to faculty, staff, and peers socially and academically contributes to first-generation students having higher dropout rates and makes them less likely to return to college (Wiggins, 2011). Azmitia et al. (2018) found that first-generation college students’ sense of belonging scores was correlated directly with academic persistence. Their research found that first-generation college students who did persist to graduation held a sense of belonging to the community and found college completion essential to their identity. Students stated realizing they could do the work required to graduate and persisted in fulfilling their goals and setting an example for their families (Azmitia et al., 2018).

First-generation students from marginalized groups with intersecting identities often feel less of a sense of belonging to college than students coming from families with experience in collegiate settings (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). One marginalized group within the first-generation population is lower-income, first-generation students. The following section covers information surrounding lower-income, first-generation students, financial resources, and barriers this group faces.

**Lower-Income Students**

Only 36% of lower-income youth enroll in college (Azmitia et al., 2018). Of this group, some of the students may identify as first-generation, but not all first-generation students identify
as lower-income. Although there may be overlap, there are also significant differences between first-generation and first-generation students who identify as lower-income (Goward, 2018). First-generation students from middle- or high-income families are more likely to persist in college than those from lower-income households (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). This suggests that first-generation students are disadvantaged not only because of their familial educational attainment but also because of their family’s social class status (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Networking and socialization differ significantly between social classes (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Lower-income, first-generation students who seek guidance often approach individuals outside of their own culture and social class, and this may make students feel alienated and like cultural outsiders (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), while students from middle- to high-income families may have the ability to hide their first-generation student status and vulnerability. This distinction is vital because lower-income, first-generation students cannot utilize other aliases and hide behind financial stability. Their lack of institutional and practical knowledge of higher education, teamed with social and cultural alienation, may lead to a deeper lack of sense of belonging.

Lower-income, first-generation students who are the first in their families to attend college come to campus with the deficit of not having intergenerational knowledge about academic success in the university setting and support from their families about how to excel in college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). When parents support their students during their college transition, students show more robust emotional well-being. They are more likely to develop positive relationships and friendships with individuals they meet at the university (Ramos et al., 2017). Parent and family support are widely associated with a positive student experience and adjustment to college life. Students lacking these support systems are less likely to persist (Ramos et al., 2017).
With lower-income, first-generation students often feeling less engaged and less connected to campus, the role of their parents in facilitating more positive experiences is crucial (Roska et al., 2021). Although parents from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are often seen as unable or unwilling to help, recent findings by Roska, Deutschlander, and Whitley (2021) contradict this notion. Their research found that parents can provide students with the validation needed to aid their student’s social and academic engagement and sense of belonging, even if the parents do not have institutional knowledge about college resources (Roska et al., 2021). When families are unfamiliar with how to support their students academically, they often attempt to promote academic success by instilling ways of behaving they believe it will increase their student’s chances of receiving support from professors and campus administrators (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). These behaviors include instilling conformity, optimism and trust in administrators (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). For example, parents may give students hope that after a bad grade that they will do better next time, that they will become used to their college setting even if it is unfamiliar at first, or encourage them to reach out to on-campus departments for resources when they are in need to assistance.

**Financial Resources for Lower-Income, First-Generation Students.** Lower-income, first-generation students often have lower academic preparedness, less support to attend or complete college, and less knowledge about financial aid, resources, grants, and scholarships (Engle, 2007). When selecting a college, lower-income, first-generation students often consider costs, financial aid, and proximity to family while also looking for a college that they can finish in a short period and continue to work while enrolled (Engle, 2007). Social integration and low levels of academic engagement are linked to the financial struggles faced by lower-income, first-generation students as they spend more time working and less time connecting with professors
and classmates (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Lower-income, first-generation students are not the only ones disadvantaged in college due to busy work schedules. Parents of lower-income, first-generation students are less likely to support their students by attending college fairs and visits. They are less likely to take advantage of support resources due to demanding work schedules and competing priorities (Engle, 2007).

Many lower-income, first-generation students utilize the Federal Pell Grant to reduce financial barriers to college attainment (Perna, 2015). Initially, the Federal Pell Grant was created to fully fund the cost of attending community college students needing financial assistance (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). The grant intended to support students by eliminating the need to take out student loans (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). However, the Federal Pell Grant has not kept pace with rising tuition while its tuition, fees, and room and board coverage have decreased over the past ten years. On average, the Federal Pell Grant barely covers 60% of the cost of community college for lower-income students (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Lower-income, first-generation students face negative implications by college tuition increases and crucial grant aid decreases, impacting their retention and success rates. While lower-income, first-generation students continue to face challenges to college access through financial difficulties, upper-income families have been increasing their investments in their college readiness, only further widening the achievement gap between lower-income, first-generation, and continuing-generation students (Perna, 2015).

**Barriers Faced by Lower-Income, First-Generation Students.** Differences between continuing-generation and lower-income first-generation students do not start in college. Challenges present themselves to lower-income, first-generation college students at the beginning of their college journey. Many high schools serving lower-income, first-generation
students are not prepared with counselors willing and able to support their students to pursue higher education. Many districts face budget shortfalls and cuts to counseling staff (Perna, 2015). Available counseling staff does not consider helping students plan for college as a main priority as they are tasked with personal needs counseling, high school class scheduling, and standardized testing requirements (Perna, 2015). Even though information about the college process can be found online, lower-income, first-generation students and families must determine which resources are most relevant given their current financial resources, goals, and academic plans (Perna, 2015). In addition, virtual resources may not be available to all students and families as access to technology may be limited. Lower-income, first-generation students are more likely to lack access to the Internet, which is needed not only to apply to college but to complete financial aid applications (Engle, 2007).

**Forms of Capital**

Different types of capital come into the equation frequently when discussing barriers presented to students from lower-income backgrounds. Capital can be looked at as something that would benefit its owner. Students with access to capital are less likely to experience barriers when transitioning to college. Although helpful in student success, capital can be difficult for lower-income, first-generation college students to build and accumulate. College systems are designed to reward students with skills and dispositions while penalizing students who lack certain abilities (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Students who continue accumulating disadvantages throughout their educational journey are more likely to encounter barriers to accessing essential resources. Furthermore, students without access to capital often face classist prejudice from their advantaged classmates (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Taking a deeper dive, the next section will
uncover different forms of capital, specifically social capital and cultural capital, and how this affects the lower-income, first-generation student experience.

According to Bourdieu, capital exists as accumulated labor that enables individuals to appropriate social energy as living labor (Bourdieu, 1986). In latent terms, capital makes society something other than a game of chance (Bourdieu, 1986). In a game of chance, someone’s social status can change instantly. Capital takes time to accumulate and makes it so not everything is equally possible or impossible. The structure and distribution of various types of capital depend on the social world's state and how we govern and determine success (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social and cultural capital are two types of capital to consider when working with student populations. Social capital resources are linked to networks, relationships, or group memberships (Bourdieu, 1986). The network of relationships comes from a strategic investment in time where feelings of gratitude, respect, and friendship are achieved. The amount of social capital someone possesses depends on the size of their connections and networks utilized for economic, cultural, or symbolic cultural advancement (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital stems from the accumulated products of past labor, incomes, and profits. In higher education, cultural capital can be defined as the scholastic capital transformed through education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Cultural capital can be acquired unconsciously, depending on the society and social class. This type of capital is often not passed down from generation to generation and dies with its owner (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social and cultural capital theories assume students’ decisions to attend college are determined by their system of values and beliefs that shape their individual and familial views. Their interpretation of higher education's benefits shows that educational attainment is not universal and differs across social classes (Perna, 2005). When social and cultural capital is
ignored, students often miss out on resources and receive inferior social services, have less of an understanding of on-campus housing segregation, attend poorer quality schools, and receive blocked opportunities in the job market due to class discrimination (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The following section will discuss social capital and important relationships that impact first-generation student success. Understanding social capital and social relationships is important when understanding first-generation students, as the lens of social capital is frequently used to uncover the first-generation student experience (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Additionally, a relationship in which students often find solitude and support lies within their connections with institutional agents, which is reviewed below.

**Social Capital and Relationships**

Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) described social capital as the social relationships from which a person can obtain institutional support, guidance, and job advancement (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Social capital serves as potential or actual resources that make a student a group member (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Social capital relationships can be assessed by determining whether a network provides support, the quality of resources offered, and the degree to which the support is geared toward the individual (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

For a college student, social capital typically stems from two types of relationships: the relationship between the student and their parent and the relationship between the student’s parent and the college (Perna & Titus, 2005). When parents discuss college goals throughout the student’s life, that student holds a certain type of social capital that someone who does not frequently hear that narrative does not have (Gardner & Holley, 2011). When parents converse with their students about their studies or what is happening at college, that student is more likely
to persist (Perna & Titus, 2005). Additionally, the more involved the parent is with the institution through events, volunteer opportunities, or outreach, the more likely the student will become involved in university offerings (Perna & Titus, 2005). The following section will address institutional agents and how they provide access to social capital as they guide students through their college experience.

**Institutional Agents.** Social capital helps students access other forms of capital, such as human or cultural, as well as institutional agents and support systems (Perna & Titus, 2005). Social capital can also be formed through relationships with institutional agents. Institutional agents can be described as individuals who have the ability and commitment to provide institutional resources and opportunities for students (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Students with more capital may have more confidence and the ability to find institutional agents to support them through their journey. These agents can be found in professors, staff, administrators, or paraprofessional supervisors (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Relationships with institutional agents help students feel encouraged and validated regarding their ability and competence to succeed in college (Lecy, 2021). Peers can also serve as institutional agents, as students with friends who attend college are likelier to attend college themselves (Perna, 2006).

Lower-income, first-generation students may use first-generation peers with more financial resources as institutional agents to help them grow in their economic and political position in society (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Institutional agents provide resources and opportunities to help students succeed and grow at the university (Perna & Titus, 2005). In addition to institutional agents, institutional support can help students regardless of their household income or educational status. Institutional support can be defined as the key forms of social support that work to help students become active participants within the institutional
community (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This support encourages students to participate in college resources and activities and take control over their future and success (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Although students can build their social capital by finding and utilizing institutional agents they may not have been familiar with, cultural capital is not as simple to acquire. Institutional agents are essential to address and understand as these are key players in providing contextual knowledge about university processes and social capital to first-generation students. The following section covers the concept of cultural capital amongst lower-income, first-generation college students and its impact on student success.

**Cultural Capital**

Lower-income, first-generation students do not acquire cultural capital passed down from their families, contributing to their lack of awareness of the importance of standardized test scores and academic preparedness (Atherton, 2014). One’s cultural capital often determines one’s position in a social setting and success in a cultural field (Bourdieu, 1985). The college system caters to privileged students known to have knowledge about traditional policies, norms, and cultures of institutional processes that lower-income, first-generation students may not be familiar with due to their lack of cultural capital (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Lower-income, first-generation students often struggle with navigating the middle-class rules of higher education, including finding an internship, selecting a major, and creating a resume (Stephens et al., 2014). These students may also hesitate to foster relationships with faculty due to their lack of cultural capital or self-confidence in the college environment (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). By lacking the cultural capital needed to succeed, lower-income, first-generation students often find themselves feeling frustrated and isolated from their college experience (Atherton, 2014).
To help understand further, Tara Yosso, a leading researcher in critical race theory, created the community cultural wealth model to show how marginalized students nurture culture through different forms of capital (Yosso, 2005). The community cultural wealth model serves as an assortment of knowledge, resources, skills, and abilities communities of color utilize to resist oppression (Yosso, 2005).

**Community Cultural Wealth Model**

The six types of capital within the community cultural wealth model include aspirational, linguistical, familial, social, navigational, and resistant (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital refers to maintaining hopes and dreams for the future (Yosso, 2005). Linguistical capital refers to the skills attained through communication and experiences in multiple languages (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital refers to knowledge in the family that carries a sense of community (Yosso, 2005). Social capital refers to networks and community resources (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital refers to skills in working through social environments (Yosso, 2005). Lastly, resistant capital refers to knowledge learned through inequality (Yosso, 2005).

The community cultural wealth model is an important framework when understanding first-generation students. This framework provides a solid means to cross-examine data regarding what first-generation students bring to the university and how their capital can be utilized to help them succeed (O’Shea, 2016). The community cultural wealth model highlights that although lower-income, first-generation students lack the initial cultural capital consistent with success in the university setting, it is important to help these students understand their capital (Yosso, 2005). For example, even though a continuing-generation student may have an advantage of technological and academic support from their families over a lower-income, first-generation student, the first-generation student is more likely to be bilingual and, therefore, more
marketable for a position in which they have experience translating for their families (Yosso, 2005). The community cultural wealth model serves as an assortment of knowledge, resources, skills, and abilities communities of color utilize to resist oppression (Yosso, 2005). Through the community cultural wealth model, practitioners can help students understand their aspirational, linguistical, familial, social, navigational, and resistant cultural capital to succeed in the university setting (Yosso, 2005).

The following section will highlight two studies in which Yosso’s community cultural wealth model was implemented to explore the lives of first-generation students further.

**Community Cultural Wealth Model in Action.** Sarah O’Shea, Director of the National Center for Student Equity in Higher Education, draws upon Yosso’s community cultural wealth model, highlighting the need to adapt diverse theoretical lenses to reimagine approaches to retaining and supporting diverse students (O’Shea, 2016). O’Shea utilizes experiential knowledge to displace White middle-class culture as the standard with all other cultures compared to this norm. O’Shea conducted a study with in-depth interviews of first-generation students at a large campus in a geographical area with poorer educational outcomes and high levels of unemployment. Through these interviews, it was found that family had a powerful influence on first-generation student learners. The research concluded that the student focus should be less on how students can change or alter their circumstances and more on how we integrate these students into the higher education setting. It is helpful for universities to understand the large amounts of capital students are arriving with, regardless of race or educational background, and work effectively with what learners already have instead of focusing on their weaknesses (O’Shea, 2016). First-generation students would benefit from
policies and practices shifting away from the sameness expected from all new students (O’Shea, 2016).

Researchers Susan Dumais and Aaryn Ward (2010) also used the community cultural wealth model to contribute to studying capital among first-generation college students. Dumais and Ward analyzed the effects of cultural capital on enrollment and GPA and whether it had a more significant impact on non-first-generation students than their first-generation peers (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Students whose parents went to college have more skills passed down during socialization, making them feel like college is where they belong. In contrast, first-generation students without this exposure lack the natural feel for college (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Many first-generation students face challenges beyond courses and campus life, including learning a new culture and vocabulary (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Analyzing data collected from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988-2000 and the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study, including 24,599 8th graders in 1988 and 12,114 individuals in 2000, Dumais and Ward concluded that family cultural capital, cultural classes, and parental assistance are significant factors in graduation rates, putting first-generation students at an automatic disadvantage. First-generation status serves more as a barrier for initial college entrance than it does for grade point average (Dumais & Ward, 2010). After including all cultural capital variables, first-generation status was negatively associated with the odds of college enrollment. Still, it did not influence the grade point average, showing that once a first-generation student is acclimated, that identity does not impede their educational success (Dumais & Ward, 2010).

The community cultural wealth model was effectively used to understand capital within the context of these studies. To further explore connections and critical research, the next section will address two theoretical frameworks essential to understanding lower-income, first-
generation college students and their sense of belonging to the university. In this next section, the social capital framework and social cognitive career theory are outlined to create a better understanding of how these theoretical frameworks informed this research study.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Theories look at interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions about phenomena and build relationships among variables to explain and predict systematic views of the world (Strayhorn, 2008). Using the social capital framework and social cognitive career theory grounded my work and helped articulate the needs of lower-income, first-generation college students.

**Social Capital Framework**

When outlining this study of lower-income, first-generation students and their sense of belonging to the university, the social capital framework lays the foundation for examining lower-income, first-generation college students. Building upon Bourdieu’s work on capital previously mentioned in this chapter, Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (1997), a leading sociologist of education, produced the social capital framework. This framework helps researchers understand social networks and socialization of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The social capital framework is a specific framework that utilizes the concept of social capital to focus on the support, degree, and quality of social relationships within a student’s social network (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In this framework, social capital is valuable as it identifies properties of the social structure students use to achieve their goals (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Social relationships and networks are governed by social structures that students depend on for resources and support (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The social capital framework focuses on how problematic social divisions contribute to lower-income students’ lack of resources, while middle-class families,
schools, and communities take these resources for granted (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This framework is critical in this type of research as it carefully articulates the complexities of socialization and relationships, including support systems' essential roles in helping empower underserved students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). One notable problematic divide is the social and interpersonal networks available to affluent students that lower-income students lack access to (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Another problem is the systematic processes used by institutions that operate under the umbrella that all students are coming to college with the same backgrounds, resources, and access (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), putting those who have familial knowledge about university systems and relationships with individuals who understand college processes at an advantage. Stanton-Salazar (2011) explained, “In spite of the elusive quality that characterizes the concept of social capital in much of the literature, the present framework defines social capital as consisting of resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network or associations.” (p. 1067).

Although the premise of the social capital framework aligns closely with my area of research, it is not without shortcomings. A weakness of the social capital framework is that it lacks an emphasis on community capital, which can positively impact students (Beard, 2021). Aside from the nuclear family and close friends, communities and relationships students build with individuals in their neighborhood, schools, or churches serve as powerful forms of social capital (Beard, 2021), which this framework ignores the importance of. Additionally, Bourdieu’s definition of social capital fails to address systemic biases and oppression affecting lower-income students' social capital-building (Beard, 2021). The social-capital building is not easy to
accomplish as a lower-income, first-generation student experiencing oppression through other identities. Bourdieu’s definition does not consider these struggles.

Despite these limitations, the social capital framework clarifies the relationship between lower-income, first-generation students and their sense of belonging. It highlights the importance of relationship building, strong campus connections, and external support as crucial indicators for success for lower-income students. Student success depends upon their unobstructed opportunities to build bonds with critical social and institutional personnel on the college campus and their sense of belonging to the campus society (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This becomes more difficult for lower-income, first-generation students who struggle to find trusting relationships with individuals outside of their immediate family (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This framework guides my research as I uncover the relationships lower-income, first-generation students are (or are not) building and how those bonds impact their sense of belonging to their college campus.

**Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Another theoretical framework used as a building block for my study surrounding the sense of belonging of lower-income, first-generation college students is the social cognitive career theory. The social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was developed by Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett from principles found in Albert Bandura’s (1991) social cognitive theory (Lent et al., 2002). According to Bandura, social cognitive theories examine how self-influence motivates and regulates human behavior (Bandura, 1991). These self-influences, including self-reaction, self-efficacy, and self-monitoring, are all affected by social factors (Bandura, 1991). Self-reaction includes a person’s ability to regulate their course of action, self-efficacy includes people’s beliefs about their ability to control their actions that affect
their lives, and self-monitoring includes the ability to pay attention to one’s actions in a social setting (Bandura, 1991).

Utilizing Bandura’s work, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002) formulated social cognitive theories guided by the three principal variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent et al., 2002). These building blocks represent major characteristics by which individuals express personal agency (Lent et al., 2002). According to SCCT, background characteristics, including family income or parent education attainment, influence a student’s learning experiences which in turn influence that student’s perceptions about their ability to complete relevant tasks (self-efficacy) or what might happen if they did complete a task (outcome expectation) (Gibbons et al., 2019). SCCT formulates around a strong relationship between goals, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations in the self-regulation of an individual’s behavior (Lent et al., 2002). In this theory, self-efficacy and outcome expectations affect someone’s personal goals, which influence the development of self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2002).

SCCT serves as a helpful theory when working with lower-income, first-generation college students while seeking to understand academic persistence and achievement (Gibbons et al., 2019). SCCT has accurately predicted choices and opportunities for lower-income, first-generation students by highlighting barriers and supports (Gibbons et al., 2019). Barriers and supports directly affect goals and persistence of educational pursuits and indirect effects through self-efficacy (Gibbons et al., 2019). The SCCT model suggests that self-efficacy predicts outcome expectations that will predict goal intentions for student involvement (Garriott et al., 2017). In lower-income, first-generation college students, self-efficacy predicts college outcome expectations (Garriott et al., 2017).
First-Generation Student Approaches to Social Capital and Social Cognitive Theories

Theoretical frameworks grounded in concepts of institutional support, relationships, and social capital provide more insight into the complex connections needed for advancement and the social inequality found in colleges (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). When working with lower-income, first-generation students facing environmental deficits (Garriott et al., 2015), finding theoretical frameworks encompassing the whole student and their experience is essential to the planning process. The central themes of relationship building and the degree and quality of mutually beneficial connections in the social capital framework connect directly with my work with lower-income, first-generation students and their sense of belonging. Connections and support contribute to the overall adjustment to college, social and academic development, academic excellence, emotional well-being, commitment to goals, persistence, and sense of belonging (Roska et al., 2021). Social cognitive theories aid in this work by focusing on the adjustments, barriers, support systems, and self-efficacy lower-income, first-generation students face and how these factors may contribute to their sense of belonging to campus or lack thereof. Social capital framework that aids in college persistence is only possible if the student gains the skills and self-efficacy needed to build productive relationships (Beard, 2021). These two frameworks provide contextual understanding for this growing population of students when looking into other characteristics of their identity, such as their household income, and how that impacts their sense of belonging to the university.
**Summary**

Lower-income status and sense of belonging affect the ability to perform as a college student, especially if that student is first-generation (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Lower-income, first-generation students struggle between independence and interdependence as they try to support their families while balancing the need to be independent in exploring their collegiate experience and academic pursuits (Orbe, 2008). Students from lower-income backgrounds find that their social class differences in their personal life also have an impact on their college experience as these students find themselves less likely to develop bonds and build a sense of belonging to the university (Rubin & Wright, 2011) due to their prior obligations from family commitments (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). This chapter explored the connections between different forms of capital acquired by lower-income, first-generation students and the important relationships they come to college with and build during their time at the university. The next chapter delves into how this research study was conducted.
Chapter 3

Qualitative research contributes to education studies by understanding students’ perspectives and adding the researcher’s understanding of their experiences to a topic of study. This helps shape educational curriculum and social standards in schools and universities (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Qualitative designs can offer science-based evidence to guide policies and practices (Brantlinger et al., 2005). These studies often take a narrative approach that is easy to understand and engaging for the reader, who can, in turn, review the study’s findings and translate them into practice (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Qualitative researchers enter the participants’ world as they deep dive into their backgrounds and upbringings. Through building participant relationships, qualitative researchers learn about the research topic and immerse themselves in participant realities (Whitley & Massey, 2018). The overwhelming power of narratives leaves researchers with a sense of responsibility to share participants’ stories in an authentic way (Whitley & Massey, 2018). As researchers come into the setting in a position of power, the communities being studied are often patronized or pathologized (Whitley & Massey, 2018). Qualitative researchers, more than any other researchers, work to ensure their power, privilege, and beliefs do not take away from the participants’ narratives and vulnerable stories that deserve to be heard in their authentic form (Whitley & Massey, 2018).

The success of qualitative research depends primarily on the interpersonal skills of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Building trust, maintaining relationships, and honoring the sensitivity of the study are crucial when conducting qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For this to work effectively, it is essential for the researcher to understand the politics of the human organization and have done ample research on how to communicate best
and relate to the study participants. In quantitative studies, researchers do not have to focus as much on relationship-building as they collect numeric data. For a qualitative study, if the researcher does not build rapport with the research participants, they may come to a very different conclusion of the findings than someone whom participants found relatable and trustworthy.

This study approached research through the qualitative lens instead of quantitative methods to highlight and understand students' personal stories and narratives instead of generalizations. This qualitative study selected a basic qualitative constructive research study approach to interview lower-income, first-generation college students to learn more about their sense of belonging to the university. Lower-income, first-generation college students tend to have a weaker sense of belonging than their continuing-generation peers (Stebleton et al., 2014). The stronger a student’s understanding of belonging to the university, the greater the chances of that student persisting to graduation (Stebleton et al., 2014).

This chapter will explain how qualitative research was utilized for this study to share student experiences. It will cover qualitative methods, study details, and data analytics. The first section of this chapter will describe students eligible for this research and why specific criteria were identified that would make students a good fit for this research.

**Case Selection**

There were specific criteria for students to be considered for selection in this research study. First, students needed to have self-identified as first-generation in their orientation registration. The research institution defines the term “first-generation” used in this study as a student for whom no parent or guardian completed their bachelor’s degree ([WC First], n.d.). Since 2018, students at the selected institution have been asked if they identified as first-
generation on their new student orientation registration. The institution requires all new students to register for orientation before their first semester. Graduate students were not eligible, as they did not complete an orientation registration and therefore did not have the opportunity to self-identify as first-generation. At the institution under consideration, orientation is not mandatory for adult leaders (any student over 24 and starting college for the first time) and transfer students. Thus, the research will not include adult learners and transfer students as part of this study.

Additional Selection Criteria

Although the mass population of first-generation students was contacted, not all students were eligible for selection. Additional criteria required that individuals also must be enrolled in classes full-time, be 18 years of age or older, and come from lower-income backgrounds. Students were asked to self-identify if they considered themselves lower-income students. This self-identification method captured all students who believed their families to be lower-income. Lower-income was identified as students whose family income was less than $52,200 (Walrack & Segal, 2023).

The following section addresses detailed descriptions of the selected research institution and explains why this institution was a good fit for this research.

Description of the Setting

This study was conducted at a university where approximately 30% of the student body comprises first-generation college students ([WC First], n.d.). Each fall, the university welcomes over 1,000 first-generation college students and aims to build programs and resources to retain these students and help them persist to graduation. The study site is a comprehensive public institution with over 118 undergraduate programs across six colleges and one school. The university is in the Mid-Atlantic, with a total enrollment of over 14,000 undergraduate students.
Annual undergraduate in-state tuition costs students around $7,700, not including fees and room and board. The institution employs about 700 full-time and 300 part-time faculty, contributing to the undergraduate student-to-faculty ratio of 19 students per professor ([Office of the President], n.d.).

To foster students’ sense of belonging, the university offers opportunities for engagement within over 300 student clubs and organizations in which over 4,300 students participate as members or hold leadership positions. Clubs and organizations are divided into dancing, sports, academic and professional, service, social equity, and others ([Office of the President], n.d.). In addition, this public institution has over 24 varsity sports programs, 16 fraternities, and 18 sororities. Through these programs and offerings, students are offered transformative learning opportunities that teach them the skills needed to become global citizens through intentional programming and interpersonal interactions ([Student Leadership and Involvement], n.d.).

The number of first-generation students at this institution, proximity to the researcher, and the opportunities for extra-curricular engagement made this site a good option to research a sense of belonging amongst lower-income first-generation students.

**Participants**

The students in this research study had varying cultural experiences and diverse backgrounds. Forty-six students completed the participant eligibility questionnaire and expressed interest in participating in the research study. However, not all these participants were eligible. Some of these students did not meet the study’s definition of first-generation or came from affluent families and were unable to identify as lower-income. Among the eligible students, twelve students met the criteria and were invited to participate in interviews. Of the twelve students, eight responded and set up interview meeting times. When asked to participate,
students were also asked to identify demographics about themselves, including their race and ethnicity, gender expression, grade point average (G.P.A.), and a list of co-curricular activities. The goal was to select students from varying cultural backgrounds, intersecting identities, and different school involvement opportunities to ensure that students in the study were representative of the entire student body. Students were also asked about their housing status. For those not living in the residence halls, off-campus was defined as within five miles of campus, and commuter was defined as over five miles away from campus. For those living in the residence halls, public-private partnerships referred to the more expensive, suite-style residences. Public-private partnerships are popular amongst growing universities seeking state-of-the-art housing options to meet the needs and demands of their students (Sanseviro, 2010). Since many state institutions are not permitted to use state funds for non-academic buildings, private funding helps them meet the needs of the students, but not without a cost (Sanseviro, 2010). The other option for on-campus housing is university-owned housing, the less expensive, community-style residences. To provide anonymity to the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant confidentiality.

**Table 2**

Demographics of Study Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Class Year</th>
<th>Employment Location</th>
<th>Housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>On Campus</td>
<td>Off-Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic or Latina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>On Campus</td>
<td>Off-Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latina</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>On Campus</td>
<td>Commuter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
For this qualitative research, all undergraduate students identified as first-generation on their orientation registration were contacted through their university email accounts. The Director of New Student Programs granted access to these orientation registrations. Students received an initial email inviting them to participate in the study in October, followed by two subsequent emails reminding them about the opportunity to partake in the research. To recruit more eligible students, research participants were also selected through snow ball sampling methods. Emails to recruit recommended students were sent in November. Students received a small incentive for participating in the research study. The incentive included a $15 voucher for a t-shirt at the campus store.

Individual interviews began towards the end of the Fall 2022 academic semester. Discussions took place over three weeks. Participants in the interviews committed to approximately one to one and a half hours, including the review of informed consent and questions they had before their meeting. Data from the individual interviews was transcribed throughout the winter after the individual interviews concluded.
Table 3

Research Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 25 through November 3, 2022</td>
<td>Contact of potential participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review participants and identify those who qualify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 4 through November 7, 2022</td>
<td>Final participants are contacted and selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 7 through November 21, 2022</td>
<td>Individual interviews are conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 21, 2022, through February 22, 2023</td>
<td>Data transcription and analyzing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the list of eligible participants, eight individuals were selected for semi-structured individual interviews. Interview questions focused on central themes surrounding students’ connection to the campus and their intersecting identities. Questions were centered around the variables of academic major, peers, faculty, staff, and campus community. Interviews took place electronically via Zoom™ and were recorded with closed captioning for transcription. Individual interviews consisted of 11 questions, with room for more questions if the conversation allowed. Interviews lasted between 35 to 55 minutes.

After transcripts were created and cleaned up, they were shared with the participants to ensure member checking took place and that students were comfortable with their statements and what was recorded from their interviews. The data was maintained on a password-protected computer and a secure server. Signed original electronic consent forms remained on the password-protected computer of the primary investigator in a locked office. Interview recordings were deleted and emptied from the computer’s recycling bin of the primary investigator after the data transcription was taken. All identifying information was removed in the final research results, pseudonyms were used, and individual confidentiality was always maintained.
Description of the Materials

To conduct this study, primary tools include Zoom™, Qualtrics™, and Temi™. The Zoom™ video meeting platform was used to hold one on one individual interviews. These interviews were recorded and were easily accessible to the researcher to view for coding and note-taking purposes. The research used the university’s Zoom™ license to ensure all participants had access to the platform and were familiar with its functions. Qualtrics™ was used to collect participation inquiries, demographic data, and informed consent forms. Qualtrics™ is a surveying and form collection platform owned by the study site. Students were also familiar with this platform and aware of its functions and capabilities. To conduct most of the transcribing, the transcription platform Temi™ was used to speed up the process.

Researcher’s Bias

As a researcher, it is important to uncover personal biases that may impact the study results. The following section covers these biases and how to confront these to make an equitable research study.

Qualitative research brings to light how a researcher sees the world and how their dispositions influence their role as a researcher (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Researchers’ life experiences impact their research choices as they recall events in their own lives that made them interested in an area of study, commitments, and identities (Bott, 2010). A researcher’s ethnic, race, and class background help them make sense of society, and their experiences become crucial in their sense of self (Bott, 2010). A researcher’s goal is to ensure their positionality does not predetermine the findings or bias in their study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Research is often created with passion and excitement about a topic or interest. In a research study, the design should reflect the researcher’s identity and sense of voice and their
assumptions, sensitivities, and biases (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Still, these elements should be highlighted as a part of the researcher’s role, access, ethics, and entry, as well as upon data entry, management, and reporting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers’ life experiences often impact their research choices, how they reflect on events in their research, and why they chose an area of study (Bott, 2010). When researching and studying subjects different from yourself, it is crucial to consider your identity and how it influences your research process (Sheldon, 2017). This research must be transformative for the participants and the researcher, as they find themselves challenging, questioning, and problematizing their identity and personal experiences (Sheldon, 2017).

My positionality greatly impacted my research. As I conversed with low-income, first-generation students, I needed to compartmentalize my experience from their experience. I used my understanding to relate to these students' experiences but not overshadow what they have gone through. As a White woman, I also needed to understand the impact my race would have on the research process. Most of the participants were minority students. Although we may have had similar experiences on paper, our collegiate and at-home experiences vastly differed simply because of my privilege as a White student. I needed to fully understand my biases and dispositions before beginning my research and sharing my positionality with the students I met.

**Instrumentation**

Qualitative researchers often view themselves as the instrument in their research and use theoretical frameworks to help decide on designs and techniques that aid in delving into research questions and problem-solving (Brantlinger et al., 2005). To portray each student’s story, interviews were selected to guide the research. To conduct these interviews, Zoom™, Qualtrics™, and Temi™ were the three key instruments.
Students who have identified as first-generation through their orientation registration and those recommended as potential participants through snowball sampling received a copy of the participant eligibility questionnaire through Qualtrics™. Qualtrics™ is data collection software purchased and operated through the university where the study occurred. As a student and a professional staff member, I had access to and years of experience with this software system. Students received emails about their interest in the study, and if they expressed interest, they were asked to complete the Qualtrics™ form to be considered for the next steps. In Qualtrics™, students were asked about their eligibility requirements and were asked to provide both informed consent and brief demographic information. If students met the criteria and agreed to the procedures, they were contacted by the primary investigator to schedule interviews for participation. There were no technical errors, but if any occurred within Qualtrics™, those would have been addressed with the university information services and technology department.

When utilizing Zoom™, participants and the researcher were asked to use their university Zoom™ account through their single sign-on with their university credentials. After each interview, data was sifted through and complied with by reviewing the recordings and transcripts provided through the video meeting and recording platform. All discussions took place virtually, and students were allowed to choose a comfortable location that worked best for them. Students could turn their cameras on or off and use any preferred virtual background.

After completing three interview transcriptions without software, to speed up the research process and provide students with the opportunity to member check, Temi™ was used for additional support. Temi™ is a transcription software where an audio file is submitted, and the researcher receives a written interview transcript within minutes. Files within Temi™ are securely stored and transmitted using the highest level of security and encryption available.
The online and university-owned platforms, Zoom™, Qualtrics™, and Temi™, were essential to this research study. Organizing materials, selecting participants, holding interviews, and analyzing data for individual interviews would have been difficult without these three platforms. The following section will explore the structure of the discussions and how meetings were organized.

**Interviews**

Interviews were scheduled with students who met the selection criteria, agreed to participate, and remained in communication with the researcher. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom™. These interview recordings were kept confidential, and the investigator and Faculty Advisor were the only researchers who had access to the recordings. The interviews were scheduled for an hour and a half with the ability to go over or under in time, depending on the content of the conversation. Interview questions were pre-determined, but as the conversation flowed, additional and clarifying questions arose in each scenario. Through Zoom™, the interviews were recorded and transcribed with the support of closed captioning and Temi™. The Zoom™ interviews took place through the research institution’s single sign-on Zoom™ account purchased and operated through the University Zoom™.

During the interviews, the following questions were addressed:

1. Let’s start with some introductions. Tell me a little bit about yourself:
   a. Major, hometown
2. How much time do you spend on campus? What do you do during your time on campus?
3. How would you describe your connectedness to your peers?
4. How would you describe your connectedness to faculty and staff?
5. How would you describe your connectedness to the university as a whole?

6. What are some of the biggest struggles you’ve faced during your time at the university? Can you tell me a specific story? Who helped you figure this out?

7. On the other end, what were some of your biggest triumphs? Can you tell me the details of a specific story? Who were your supporters in this accomplishment?

8. Next, we will do a small activity. Make a list on a word document of your most pertinent social identities (ex: gender, sexuality, race, etc.). After thinking of those identities, are there some identities that enhance your sense of belonging? Are there some which make it harder to feel connected to campus? How and why?

9. You are in this study because you self-identified as lower-income. What does that mean for you? How do you think that impacts your sense of belonging at college?

10. When did you first notice that your lower-income status affected your student experience on campus?

11. This study is primarily about sense of belonging for first-generation students and the impact of socio-economic status. Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic that I just missed?

The following section will cover generalizability and how these research findings can help other students from different universities and backgrounds.

**Generalizability**

Qualitative research takes place in the natural world, utilizes methods that honor the humanity of participants in the study, is evolving and emergent, and is fundamentally interpretative (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In studies taking place in education, qualitative
research often involves students, faculty, and staff as participants while looking at their experiences and stories to write the research narrative. Qualitative studies often fill gaps when quantitative research makes recommendations with little consideration for how their findings came about and without understanding or addressing the humanity of the participants behind the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Historically, quantitative researchers have argued that qualitative methods often lack the validity to build professionally credible knowledge (Bailey et al., 1999). They say that generalizations about a population cannot be inferred based on a small number of participants, and the representativeness is insufficient to evaluate a problem (Bailey et al., 1999). However, qualitative research is not meant to generalize study participants. Instead, it intends to produce evidence based on individuals' experiences (Brantlinger et al., 2005). This study’s goal was to help bring attention to the experiences of select lower-income, first-generation students and their sense of belonging to the university at a Mid-Atlantic public institution. With other students’ experiences coming to light, lower-income, first-generation students that did not participate may feel comfortable sharing their stories down the road, contributing to more research. In addition, campus administrators can use the stories of these individuals to build programs and support resources to help with the growing population of students and foster a sense of belonging to the institution.

A limitation of this study was the inability to generalize based on participant responses. Since this study was a small sample of students, the student feedback and experiences could not be generalized for the entire population. Instead, the data from the participants could be used as a steppingstone to share their narratives and tell their stories about how they categorize their sense of belonging.
Validity and Reliability

Qualitative studies are often discredited by researchers who prefer statistical data found in quantitative data. Many educational goals, such as The No Child Left Behind Act, call for scientifically based research with replicable results (Cho & Trent, 2006). Another example lies within the U.S. Department of Education’s strategic plan that explicitly supports studies backed by qualified science and addresses causal questions (Cho & Trent, 2006). Many educators will interpret these goals and plans as support for quantitative numerical data instead of the qualitative narrative.

Validity can depend on the study and looks different in each research inquiry (Cho & Trent, 2006). Qualitative researchers have countered these arguments with two approaches known as the transactional approach and transformational validity (Cho & Trent, 2006). The transactional approach focuses on active interaction between the participant and the researcher utilizing member checking, bracketing, and triangulation (Cho & Trent, 2006). If the participant agrees with what the researcher has offered as a result of their study, they prove that the results are valid. Transformational validity questions the notion of validity in research (Cho & Trent, 2006). This rejection of validity views works as valid only if that work achieves an eventual idea (Cho & Trent, 2006).

This study's threats to reliability included researcher error, environmental changes, and participant changes. Humans conduct research studies and, therefore, are subject to avoidable humor errors (Norris, 1997). Researchers are fallible and easily make mistakes and get things wrong (Norris 1997). In this qualitative study, mistakes were possible through misinterpreting someone’s response or making assumptions based on a participant’s feedback. With the Covid-19 pandemic underway and ever-changing methods of course instruction and cocurricular
engagement evolving, environmental changes posed a threat to reliability. While I was measuring a sense of belonging to the university, learning lessons from the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no guarantee that students would physically be at the university able to foster relationships that help form a sense of belonging. Lastly, participant changes were possible, as they always are with qualitative studies. With a small sample, the hope was that the participants selected for the interviews could follow through with their interviewing schedule and remain within the timeframe needed for the research study. Luckily, in this study, environmental and participant changes were not present. However, there could have been a researcher error that has not yet been found.

**Procedures**

To conduct this study:

1. Data was gathered from first-generation students' contact information from the Office of New Student Program’s orientation records, with permission granted by the Director of New Student Programs.

2. An email was sent to those first-generation students with the participant eligibility questionnaire and an advertisement for a small incentive to gather potential research participants.

3. An email was also sent to students recommended as potential participants through snowball sampling.

   a. The participant eligibility questionnaire began with a brief description of what to expect in the participant eligibility questionnaire and who was conducting the research.
b. Then, students were directed to answer questions that would verify or dismiss students based on minimum requirements.

i. Students were asked about their enrollment status, their parent’s educational attainment, their age, and if they self-identified as lower-income students.

ii. If students met all three criteria, they were directed to informed consent.

4. If they consented, they were asked for their name, email address, phone number, preferred contact method, class year, race/ethnicity, gender expression, G.P.A., and list of extracurricular activities. This data helped ensure that not all selected participants had similar backgrounds.

The participant eligibility questionnaire took students around five minutes to complete. After candidates were selected, they were notified and scheduled for individual interviews. Out of the 46 responses, 12 students were eligible, of which eight followed through to the interview stage. Participants met during their interview time slot via Zoom™ to hold a conversation with me, as the researcher, and discuss their sense of belonging to the university. Then, data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to look for patterns and themes surrounding the sense of belonging of this population.

Analysis and Coding Procedures

To analyze the data, I began to memo initial thoughts immediately following the interviews. After each interview, I wrote down reactions and any observations I might not have encountered during a written transcript. For example, facial expressions, long pauses, and gestures when discussing certain topics. During the memo process, I looked to develop initial
codes and themes and explored commonalities between participations. The emerging themes included employment, support networks, caretaker responsibilities, family expectations, financial disparities, and ethnic, racial, and cultural identities.

The next phase was transcribing data word for word by reviewing the Zoom™ recordings. On Zoom™, there is a transcript feature. I utilized this feature as a reference point but also conducted my transcribing as the transcript did not pick up all details and nuances needed to transcribe the data correctly. After a few of the Zoom™ transcriptions took place, I utilized the transcription software Temi™ to save time and ensure interviews were transcribed within the needed window. After the transcripts were typed, I reviewed them for accuracy by listening to the recordings again while reading the written transcript. Each transcript was organized by date and participant so I could quickly identify the transcripts needed. To validate the transcriptions, I engaged in member checking. During member checking, I shared the verbatim typed transcripts with the participants to ensure that the information I typed was indeed what they shared with me and that they were comfortable with my research findings.

**Coding**

The final step in my data analysis was coding the qualitative interviews. Coding facilitated the organization and analysis of the interviews and was systematically documented in a way that would hold up when seeking peer review of the research data. When coding, after data had been transcribed and member checked, the information was transcribed from raw data into useable words as the unit of analysis. To code, I utilized inductive coding. Inductive coding approaches are used to find themes or categories from raw data (Thomas, 2003). Through inductive coding, the goal is to create frameworks that summarize key themes (Thomas, 2003). This allowed codes to be developed as I read through the qualitative work. I uncovered ideas and
themes that emerged as the data was reviewed and analyzed after in-depth interviews. After the inductive coding process was concluded, I utilized deductive coding to uncover if the themes that emerged aligned with previous research conducted by Strayhorn (2008, 2012), Perna (2005, 2006), and Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011). Instead of finding themes emergent from participant discussions, deductive coding analyses the data through the lens of the theoretical frameworks (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). During this process, I looked at findings from these scholars and then reviewed my research to see what emerged as similar and diverged as different. After coding, I looked for convergences between the inductive and deductive findings.

When coding, I found it easiest to color-code my findings. I reviewed the transcripts and labeled any mention of employment as green, support networks as pink, caretaker responsibilities as blue, family expectations as red, financial disparities as purple, and ethnic, racial, and cultural remarks as yellow. For deductive coding, I created a word document to review the finding. The first section of the document was dedicated to Strayhorn (2008, 2012) and his focus on the sense of belonging. The middle sections of the document were dedicated to Perna (2005, 2006) and her emphasis on lower-income, first-generation college students. The last section of the document was devoted to Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011) and his work with the social capital framework. In each section, I first listed the convergent findings. In the convergent results, I highlighted areas where my research aligned with the data from these three scholars. Then, I detailed the divergent findings. During this portion of the research process, I highlighted notable differences between my research and these scholars and how our participants shared different experiences. Once all coding had been collected, I analyzed the data to create a qualitative research study outlining the work and lived experiences of these lower-income, first-generation students in hopes of
presenting the data to upper-level administrators to propose programs and support services aimed at achieving strong lower-income, first-generation student’s sense of belonging to campus.

**Informed Consent and Protection of Human Subjects**

To proceed in the research process, participants must complete the informed consent in the participant eligibility questionnaire. Informed consent covered the purpose of the study, time commitment, expressing no use of medical treatments, explaining minimal potential risks, explaining there are no direct benefits, how privacy will always be protected, incentives, primary contacts, and additional campus resources. Students were asked to review the informed consent when completing the participant eligibility questionnaire. After students reviewed the details of the study and informed consent, they were asked if they consented to the study based on the explanation of the research process. If students agreed, they were taken to the next part of the participant eligibility questionnaire. If students did not consent, their participation ended there. If students were selected for the study, they were sent the informed consent to review and sign prior to their meeting. Finally, at the beginning of each interview, I read through the informed consent with the student and provided time for them to ask any questions they may have.

While qualitative interview research generally presents minimal risks, there was a chance that students might have been uncomfortable answering some of the questions. Participation remained voluntary. Students could opt out or not answer any questions they did not wish to answer and exit the interview at any time. The consent form directed them to speak to the primary investigators should they experience distress. To minimize the chances of peer pressure and coercion, the value of the incentives was intentionally kept low.

Risks that could have occurred during this study include loss of confidentiality, loss of privacy, loss of academic time, loss of free time, discomfort with the content of questions, and
mild anxiety when answering questions. Measures to lessen the potential risks include storing consents, data, and all other materials in a locked location, removing all identifying data from documents, and locking the list of names and code numbers on password-protected computers. Additionally, participants were reminded they could stop at any time, they could speak with the primary investigator at any time, and they were provided with lists of helping resources.

If a student did become upset or uncomfortable, I planned to intervene and take appropriate actions immediately. Depending on the situation and the comfort level of the student, I intended to do the following: stop asking questions and do a mental health check to see if the student would like to continue, offer contact information for student support services (i.e., counseling center, women’s center, LGBTQIA+ services, wellness center, Title IX, multicultural center, etc.), or provide the student the opportunity to remove themselves from the study. None of these occurred during the interviews, and there was no need for intervention methods to be utilized.

Limitations

Although qualitative methods were selected, some challenges come along with this type of work. As a limitation, self-reflexivity remains a concern in qualitative research methodology (Bott, 2010). There is a need in methodological approaches for researchers to stay open in conversations with their participants to preserve their experiences and build nurturing relationships with their subjects (Bott, 2010). If researchers concentrate on how their interests can affect the research process, the research unfolds as a narrative structure instead of an individual scholar’s interpretation (Bott, 2010). Researchers must constantly locate and relocate within their study and remain conversant with the participants, research practice, and methodologies (Bott, 2010).
Summary

This chapter explained this research’s methodological approach and detailed how the study would take place and how it would be analyzed. In addition, researcher biases and threats to validity, reliability, and limitations were addressed.
Chapter 4

This chapter details the findings of this qualitative study exploring a sense of belonging to the university of lower-income, first-generation college students. More specifically, this study examines students’ connectedness to their peers, faculty and staff, and the university as a whole and if their lower-income, first-generation student status contributes to or hinders their sense of belonging. In this chapter, I present the six themes from the participant interviews. These themes include employment, support networks, caretaker responsibilities, family expectations, financial disparities, and ethnic and cultural identities.

Findings

In this section, I will dive into the themes of employment, support networks, caretaker responsibilities, family expectations, financial disparities, and ethnic and cultural identities. These themes emerged throughout the interviews. During my time with the participants, as I noticed repetition, the themes below surfaced as common amongst this group.

Theme One: Employment

The first theme particularly relevant to these students was their employment status. Each of the eight interviewees talked about their experiences managing a part-time job while navigating their demanding coursework in college. Five of the students worked on campus, and three of the students worked off campus. While noting that their employment status was primarily to offset the costs of their education and to pay for the day-to-day expenses of being a college student, many participants found community amongst their on-campus employment as an unexpected bonus.

Francesca was employed on campus in the Healthy Living Department, working with students on bettering their social, physical, and mental well-being. She noted that her on-campus
position helped foster connections with peers she would not have met otherwise and attributed her role in the office as a key factor to her college success. Francesca stated, “Honestly, one of the main things that kept me connected to campus was working for the campus.” She explained that she would have considered transferring to a university closer to home if she had not found her place within the Healthy Living Department. Francesca felt more connected to the students she worked with than she did to her classmates. She was comfortable confiding in her coworkers about her financial struggles and questions about campus. She felt a home away from home and community amongst her colleagues she would not have found otherwise.

Olivia shared similar sentiments when discussing her on-campus co-workers. She explained that her on-campus job working with affinity groups helped with her communication skills and her ability to open up to others. When she started her position, Olivia shared it was the first time anyone had asked her how hard it was to be a commuter student. She felt her coworkers had seen her like no one else had in her college career. When discussing that defining moment, she shared, “I don’t think anybody else had asked me that before. It made me feel more understood.” This was important to take notice of. Amongst the classmates, professors, and staff that Olivia has interacted with at the institution, her coworkers were peeling away layers and understanding her in ways no one else has attempted to.

When talking about her paraprofessional position on campus, Theresa shared the comfort she was afforded once she built a community within her workplace. Theresa’s on-campus job was in a central location and had a lot of student traffic. Once she started working on campus, she noticed making more and more connections. Eventually, she felt she knew someone everywhere she went. Even though she was a commuter student, Theresa’s on-campus job (in which she worked ten hours a week) made it feel like she lived on campus. When asked what she
meant by that, she shared that it was “just nice to know people’s faces, names, and all that. It took a while, but I got there.”

To offset college expenses, Violet worked two jobs on campus. Both positions saw high volumes of students and exposed Violet to many different students. When talking about a day in the life of Violet, she explained she is either in class, at work, or in her room. She described herself as introverted and found it hard to connect with others. However, when talking about her on-campus positions, she shared, “my connectedness to campus has gotten a lot better now that I am working two different (on-campus) jobs. I talk to more people than I would have previously.”

Lastly, Emma also shared that she worked two jobs at the university. Between the two positions, Emma worked upwards of 15 hours a week during the academic year and about 40 hours a week over the summer. Emma explained how her on-campus employment positions kept her busy, and she liked the proximity to where she lived. Emma was able to walk to work and not worry about transportation or parking. When discussing employment and the connections she had made, Emma explained that she mostly knew everyone she worked with through her on-campus involvement. Her other experiences led her to the paraprofessional role, which is a reverse sequence than her fellow research participants who first worked and then found their sense of belonging amongst colleagues and peers.

Less interested in finding a job that would expose them to student connections, Xavier and Whitney worked off-campus in roles that paid higher hourly wages. Xavier was very motivated by the financial benefits of work. When discussing working obligations, Xavier talked about their work through a different lens. Xavier talked more than any other student about making money during college and finding a job post-graduation that would lead to a financially stable future. Xavier worked in the insurance field, and when asked why they pursued
employment in this field, they responded, “Insurance makes you a lot of money.” Whitney worked off-campus every other day at a local grocery store. She explained that she would work more hours if her class load allowed. When talking about her experiences working and attending class, Whitney explained that she did just that: she worked and went to class. Unlike those who worked on campus, Whitney did not share a connectedness with her coworkers at the grocery store.

Of the students who worked on-campus, more than half felt very connected or somewhat connected to their peers, either very connected or somewhat connected to their faculty and staff, and either very connected or somewhat connected to the university. These feelings of connectedness were tied to their sense of belonging. By building connections to their peers, faculty and staff, and university, they felt a stronger sense of belonging than students without those connections. The students who worked on campus shared feelings of community within their work environment and coworkers. They explained how working on campus was more than a job. It was a place for them to meet new people, learn new resources, and open themselves to new experiences. On-campus employment tied students’ social, extracurricular, and academic connections together.

The findings were vastly different for the two students who worked off campus. Both students felt disconnected from their peers and the university. When the two students who worked off campus were asked about faculty and staff connections, one felt not connected, and one felt somewhat connected. Those who worked off campus did not share the same connections to their coworkers and kept the work and school relationships separate. These findings highlight the importance of on-campus employment in building a sense of belonging amongst lower-income, first-generation students. When exploring the sense of belonging amongst lower-
income, first-generation college students, on-campus employment should be considered an essential factor.

**Theme Two: Support Networks**

In conversations with this group of lower-income, first-generation college students, support networks rose to the surface as a critical role in their sense of belonging. Aside from the support networks found during on-campus employment, many students received support from classmates. The term “classmates” was intentionally used instead of “friends” because these support networks discussed were explicitly in the classroom, and the relationships did not extend outside academic courses. The connections did not last from semester to semester. For example, Olivia perpetually found study groups in her classes and remained connected to those study groups for peer support throughout the length of any given course. Then, once the semester concluded, she found a new study group of her peers to lean on for support.

Emma shared a similar experience in that she liked to meet people in every class so she had someone to talk to if she had any questions. Theresa wanted to connect with upper-level students in her classes as they were seasoned and had more educational experiences. She shared that the connections she built with students further along on their educational journey made her feel more comfortable on campus. Theresa believed she bonded better with these older students because she had to grow up quickly due to family financial pressures and obligations. She felt she was more mature and wiser than other sophomore students.

In addition to classmates, another resource for students was faculty and staff. Francesca was in a smaller major and felt a sense of belonging to professors because the professors knew their students by name, recommended students to internships and scholarships, and kept in touch even when their courses ended. During her first semester, Whitney struggled with managing her
time and completing her coursework. Her first-year experience professor was described as a great resource to help her manage her stressors and connect her with on-campus resources. When Whitney ran into a financial issue with her housing and meal plan billing, she was thankful for her first-year experience professor. During that difficult time, her professor called Financial Aid on Whitney’s behalf and secured an extension while the billing was being processed. The actions and behaviors of these faculty and staff members reinforced a sense of belonging and community for these students. They helped these students and removed barriers that can serve as detrimental to lower-income, first-generation students.

Although some students connected with faculty and staff, others were not so fortunate. Violet shared that her professors only talked to overly extroverted and engaged students. She was uncomfortable putting herself out there and saw that the professors teaching her classes did not try to get to know their students unless their students made the initial outreach. When talking about her experience with one of her professors and her inability to connect with him, Violet said, “It’s okay. He scares me anyway.” Emma also revealed experiences with her professors that were less than helpful. In one of her major requirement courses, she shared her experience seeking her professor’s support during their assigned office hours. Due to conflicts with her work schedule, Emma went to his office hours with only 15 minutes left, and the professor would not meet with her as he stated that she should have come sooner. Emma did not feel supported or encouraged in that class, resulting in her needing to retake it the next semester. When retaking the course, she was thankful for a new professor with a more personable teaching style.

Interestingly, when asked directly how they would describe their sense of belonging to their peers, although Olivia, Whitney, and Theresa shared bonded experiences with their classmates, their answers varied. Olivia felt not connected, Theresa felt somewhat connected,
and Emma felt very connected. This finding can be explained, at least in part, by Theresa and Emma’s involvement in co-curricular organizations. They both were involved in student groups and served in leadership roles, whereas Olivia was not involved in campus organizations. When asked about their sense of belonging to the faculty, Violet and Emma aligned with their statements and did not feel connected, while Francesca reaffirmed that she felt connected. However, although Whitney had one good professor in her first-year experience course, she shared that she does not feel a sense of belonging with her faculty. She shared that she had an isolated experience and felt connected to that particular first-year faculty member but not faculty as a unit.

Aside from support systems and networks on campus, it is important also to share the networks back home students sought for advice and guidance. Whitney had a friend who was enrolled at another state school that helped her navigate college entrance exams, financial aid applications, and finding loans to cover tuition. Theresa remained in contact with her high school guidance counselor and would connect with him about potential internships and scholarship opportunities available to her past high school graduation. Violet often contacted her mom for support when she ran into any issues. Her mom was her biggest fan and would call offices or email faculty when Violet struggled to get the help she needed. Although these off-campus support systems may not appear directly related to an on-campus sense of belonging, these students described the encouragement and motivation of these off-campus support systems as providing them with the support they needed to persist.

Overall, this research indicated that the more involved in on-campus, co-curricular opportunities, the more connected the student felt to their peers. In addition, students who felt a stronger sense of belonging to their peers also felt a stronger sense of belonging to the university.
The research also suggests that the less approachable the faculty and staff appear, the less likely students feel a sense of belonging to their academic department. Students who found a sense of belonging with their faculty shared experiences with faculty who were described as helpful and engaging. Students who lacked a sense of belonging with their faculty explained their professors were unhelpful and unapproachable. This led to the finding that with lower-income, first-generation students, the lack of faculty belonging created fewer connections for students to their program and the university. Relationships are an important determining factor when exploring the sense of belonging amongst these populations.

**Theme Three: Caretaker Responsibilities**

The lower-income, first-generation students in this study shared a lot in common. One thing that stood out was that they all described themselves as a caretaker in some way for someone back home. For example, when asked why she chose to go to college, Whitney shared that she would be the sole provider for her brother, who was on the Autism spectrum when her mom was no longer around. Whitney helped her family financially provide for him. Whitney could also not attend college right away due to family medical obligations. Her grandmother was sick when she was initially admitted to the university. She delayed her admission for two years while she helped her mom care for her grandmother. She shared that her going to college, and her grandmother’s ailment would have been too much for her mom to worry about. Xavier also had a brother on the Autism spectrum and shared that they worked every day to send money back to their mom to help with medical expenses for their brother. They remembered moving around a lot as a child to find a school that would be a good fit for their brother and his needs. Francesca’s sister had her own medical issues, and she wanted to go to college to learn more about her diagnosis and enter the medical field to help those like her sister. These findings
highlight the importance of institutions in creating space and resources for those caring for others during the college experience. For example, flexible class schedules, student organization, institutional events happening during the day and not only in the evenings, or calls for emergency funds to provide financial assistance to student caretakers are some examples.

When discussing caretaker responsibilities, Olivia, Violet, and Theresa viewed their college success as steppingstones for their younger sibling’s collegiate achievements. Olivia wanted her three younger siblings to have the same experiences she was able to have. She wanted them to go to college and explained how she hoped she was setting a good example. Violet was excited to walk her brother through his admissions process and ensure he had sufficient funds to cover application fees. Additionally, Violet had worked and saved money for not only her college fund but also her siblings. Aside from saving for tuition, Violet also helped pay her family’s rent, water, and phone bills.

Theresa shared similar sentiments. When Theresa attended her orientation, she was the only person there with no additional family members in attendance. She felt isolated since her peers had their families, siblings, and support networks there to engage in the activities and learn more about the institution. Coming from a lower-income family, her parents could not afford to take the entire day off work. She did not realize she would be one of the only people at orientation without a support system. She wanted to make sure her sister did not feel the same way when it was time for her younger sibling to attend her orientation. Theresa shared the following:

I know when my sister had (her orientation), I didn't want her to have that feeling. So, when she had her orientation, my mom and I like stayed the night in the hotel. I was like, it's fine. Like it's just one night. I got her like an iPad <laugh> as a surprise. Um, because
she was going into the medical field, and she knew that everyone had an iPad. So, uh, like things like that I did that for her just so she felt like she wasn't, uh, excluded.

Attending college while caring for younger siblings and family members back home was a large part of these students’ experiences. Each student I met with talked about their familial background. It was clear that these students felt deeply connected to their connections and loved ones back home. Although all students shared some caretaker roles back home, four of the student’s caretaker roles included a financial obligation whereby they needed to care for their family members. Of the four students who supported their families financially, two did not feel connected to their peers, two only felt somewhat connected, two did not feel connected to their faculty and staff, and two felt somewhat connected. None of these four students felt very connected to peers, faculty, or staff. From these research findings, it could be inferred that the pressures of financially providing in a caretaker role to their families back home hinder areas of sense of belonging to the university.

**Theme Four: Family Expectations**

The participants in this study felt a strong push from their families to go to college. Attending college was an expectation, as the parents wanted their children to find more financial freedom than they could provide. The narrative was pushed that to be successful, their students must obtain a college education.

From the very start of her educational journey, dating back to kindergarten, Emma’s parents instilled college as the end goal. She shared, “My parents instilled it in my head. You are going to college.” Serena’s parents shared a similar message growing up that she needed a college degree to succeed. Xavier’s family was less direct and made it a choice. They shared that their family would say it was their choice if they wanted to attend college. Still, they explained
that they would likely be financially similar to their family without a college degree. Xavier’s main reason for going to college was to break the cycle of poverty within their family.

When thinking about college, Olivia had less of a choice and more of a pressure. Her mother could not go to college herself, and she instilled in children that they must go if they want to provide a better life for themselves. Olivia was not only the first in her immediate family to attend college but also the first in her extended family. Her family's expectations for her to succeed served as a motivator for Olivia. When classes got tough, or she felt overwhelmed, she remembered how proud her family was of her and found the strength to persevere.

Three students specifically mentioned their siblings as why they wanted to be the first in their family to complete college. Francesca’s family always wanted the best for her and her sister; to her parents, the best meant receiving a college degree. With her sister’s medical issues, obtaining her degree was especially important because she wanted to finish something her sister could not. For Violet, her sister dropping out of college was pivotal in her decision-making process. She always felt like she had few options after high school, and college seemed like a good idea. However, when her sister unenrolled in higher education, she knew she had to pursue a college degree to make up for her sister’s loss and make her parents proud.

Another student obtaining their college degree in honor of their sibling was Whitney, who shared, “I felt like it was all on me to go to college,” as she knew her brother would be unable to due to his Autism. She knew that not only did she need to go to college to set herself up for financial success to care for her brother down the road, but she felt pressure to achieve a college degree, something no one in her family had been able to do.

Once at college, the expectations and family pressures did not subside – especially for Theresa. Theresa’s parents instilled that college was required for her and her sister, but they did
not account for the time commitment necessary for good grades and high achievements. Theresa’s parents did not understand why she was always studying or on campus so late for her student organizations. With her father speaking English as a second language, Theresa was required to help him with his work while trying to manage her class, work, and co-curricular schedules. For example, Theresa always carried two phones on her. One for personal use and one for her dad’s work. Whether in class, in a meeting, or on shift at her on-campus job, she had to answer her dad’s phone when it rang. When asked about how she managed that responsibility, she shared:

   It can get a little tough because it's just one more thing on my plate. I kind of had to take priority on that because it is my family and at the end of the day, that's the money that's going to come back to like feed us and things like that.

   Even though these students came from families where they were the first to attend college, obtaining a higher education was regularly addressed in the household. These students knew no other options and looked forward to making their families proud. However, it seemed with this group that even though they experienced pressure to attend college, they were on the college journey solo. They had their supporters back home and networks on campus. Still, there was no mention of parent or supporter involvement in visiting the campus, attending sporting events with the students, or engaging in their academic pursuits. Most of the family conversations were centered around students supporting their families back home and making their families proud.

   Tying these family expectations back to the central theme of sense of belonging, I divided the students into two groups. The first group of four students shared that making their families proud was the deciding factor in pursuing higher education. The second group of four
students was those who shared breaking financial disparity cycles as deciding factors. Three of the four students who went to college to make their families proud felt very connected to the university. On the other hand, of the four students who went to college for a future of financial stability, two described not feeling connected to the university, and two described feeling only somewhat connected to the university. After speaking with the students and hearing their shared experiences, this research describes the strain financial stability and the hope for a wealthy future play in the overall college satisfaction and sense of belonging of lower-income, first-generation college students. Focusing on the future instead of the moment in college makes these students less likely to build community and find connectedness to their campus surroundings.

**Theme Five: Financial Disparities**

A large part of these students’ identities was their lower-income status. Although some questions prompted socioeconomic status discussions, their family income was discussed without prodding. When identifying themes, it was important to highlight the financial struggles and disparities these students shared. As mentioned, not all first-generation students identified as lower-income students. The lower-income population not only experienced first-generation student struggles but also faced additional barriers put in place by their socio-economic backgrounds.

Many of these students spent a lot of time before college researching ways to earn scholarships and grants and exploring financial aid opportunities to remove the pressure to assist with college tuition from their parent’s minds. For example, Francesca knew she would need financial aid as her parents had no college fund. She researched and applied for every scholarship she could find. When presented with the option to apply for a parent plus loan, Francesca shared that she would not utilize that source of financial aid. She felt strongly that she did not want her
family to go into financial debt because of her choice to go to college. She said, “I knew that it was up to me to get scholarships, get federal aid, or dropout because I wasn't going to ask my parents to help me.”

Emma shared similar experiences with not wanting to burden her family with financial debt because of her college tuition. She researched affordable college options that met her needs and secured a full scholarship that covered tuition and fees. In addition to the tuition debt, Emma did not want to burden her family with other expenses accompanying her college education. She shared:

My parents, they're so kind. They will always make sure that like I have money and everything, but because I know they don't have as much money, I don't want to rely on them whatsoever. That kind of makes me sometimes feel guilty because even when I do maybe need the money, I still will never go to my parents. It's like I will find a job, I will do whatever hustle because I just always feel so guilty. Even like they say to me “No, like, we’re supposed to support you.” And I'm like, “Yeah, true, but you're also paying your own bills with whatever money you have.” So, I think that's why like I do feel comfortable here because I've been able to support myself like with everything that I do and all the money that I spend.

Whitney shared that although she was grateful to have the experience of going to college, she felt “sad that I don’t have as many resources as other people.” She found it easier to connect with students in high school because they were from the same neighborhoods with similar experiences and family incomes. She shared it was less awkward when she talked to her high school friends about money because she knew all their families were struggling to pay bills and get by. The financial disparities and lack of community understanding regarding the pressures of
those economic stressors contribute to students’ feeling a lack of belonging once on the college campus.

**Food Insecurity.** One sub-theme that appeared when talking about the lower-income status that was a defining moment in some of my conversations was food insecurity. Half of the students I met with spoke about the lack of consistent access to food. Xavier shared food insecurity growing up and the financial struggles their family faced. They often jumped from home to home and “had to worry about where the next meal was coming from, the water turning off, and child protective services coming to the house.” When asked about one piece of advice Xavier would give a new incoming student, they said they would recommend students buy a meal plan to know they will have consistent meals.

As a commuter student, Olivia was unable to afford a meal plan. She shared, “most of the time, I just sit around in the library and wait until I get home to have something to eat, whether that is like going home at noon or going home at 6 p.m.” Theresa shared that she felt guilty when spending money on food because she did not have a lot of financial resources, and often convinced her friends to attend events on campus where food was given away for free so she did not have to worry about where her next meal was coming from. When asked about her lower-income status and what that meant to her, Serena shared, “My family is definitely low income, like not really knowing if there's going to be food in the fridge or not knowing if all of the bills are going to be able to be paid and stuff like that.”

**Housing Status.** Another sub-theme that appeared concerned which type of residence hall students lived in. The campus where this research took place described commuter students as those living five or more miles away, while off-campus students were identified as those living closer to five miles from campus. The university-owned residence halls were described as
halls managed by the university that were cheaper, older, and more worn. Students described the
public-private partnership residence halls as luxury living with suite-style living and in-room
bathrooms and amenities; these were considered at a significantly higher price point.

Half of the group participants were commuter students, and half lived on campus. Olivia
and Theresa were commuter students living further than five miles from campus. Although, as
Olivia shared, commuting was not as cheap as it sounded with the rising gas prices. She also
expressed remorse for her decision to commute because she believed that she would have made
more friends on campus if she had had the opportunity to live in the residence halls. All the
students living off-campus choose that option as a means of saving money.

Theresa also shared similar experiences as Olivia and mentioned that living on campus
would have saved her a lot of time driving back and forth. Theresa also shared that she would not
have spent as much time putting herself out there to meet people if she had had the chance to
meet a core group of friends in the residence halls. Emma and Francesca were off-campus
students and chose to live in an apartment off campus because of the cheaper rent and their
upperclassmen status. Emma and Francesca did not attribute their off-campus housing status as a
barrier to building their sense of connection. This was likely because they were both seniors who
found connections through other means.

Of those living on campus, half lived in university-owned residence halls, and half lived
in a public-private partnership residence hall. Xavier and Serena lived in the university-owned
residence halls, while Whitney and Violet lived in the public-private partnership halls. When
discussing their housing, Xavier described the public-private partnership residence halls as
“fancy dorms.” Even though the university-owned halls were older and smaller, Xavier liked
living there. They shared that they found students like themselves in these halls and felt they did
not have to hide who they were. Serena felt similarly. When Serena talked about the differences between the two types of on-campus housing, she shared:

Coming here, the (public-private partnership) versus the (university-owned) housing, a lot of like students who are living and (public-private partnership), like I have some friends that live in them and I've, you know, gone to their rooms and they're a lot more space if they're a lot bigger. They have their own bathrooms, and so they're a lot more desirable than maybe the (university-owned) housing. But at the same time, there's people who are not living on campus at all, who still must commute. So (university-owned) housing, to be honest, I feel more comfortable at (university-owned) housing than I would've probably in (public-private partnership) because I feel like everyone is in the same income bracket in (university-owned).

Whitney and Violet faced more struggles than Xavier and Serena fitting into their space in the public-private partnership residence halls. They both felt like the students they lived with did not understand their struggles and backgrounds as lower-income students. For example, When Whitney talked about the change of coming to college, she recalled being particularly embarrassed about her lack of resources back home. She shared an instance when her roommates were confused because she had not known how to run the dishwasher or use the dryer in their apartment. Whitney shared with me that at home, she only had one living room, one kitchen, no dryer, and no dishwasher. When thinking back to her roommate’s confusion, Whitney was overwhelmed by how different their home lives must have been.

Violet talked about a time when she thought she would be evicted from the public-private partnership hall for failure to come up with funds to pay the housing bill on time. She felt this would not have happened if she lived in the university-owned hall. She explained how her
roommates were aware of the situation because it was discussed with the leasing officers in the room. This left Violet feeling embarrassed and ashamed.

When considering sense of belonging of the group that lived on campus, three students did not feel connected to their peers, two did not feel connected to faculty, and two did not feel connected to the university. Of those living off campus, one student did not feel connected to their peers, one did not feel connected to faculty, and one did not feel connected to the university. When comparing sense of belonging between those who lived in university-owned halls versus public-private partnership halls, there did not appear to be a difference between their sense of belonging to their peers or the university.

Olivia stated feeling less connected to peers because of her commuter status, while Theresa shared that being a commuter made it hard to fit in with others. Although the commuter students living off campus thought their sense of belonging was hindered by living off campus, the data unveiled in this study showed otherwise. At the same time, the off-campus group had stronger connections to peers, faculty and staff, and the university.

Lower-income, first-generation students were not shy when discussing their family financial disparities. In discussions, the students took ownership of their financial struggles and explored ways to receive grant and scholarship support during their time at the institution. Colleges must provide financial resources and scholarship opportunities to the most vulnerable populations. In addition, food insecurities do not only exist at home but also on campus. Providing ways in which students do not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from will help lower-income, first-generation students focus more on their college goals and not hunger. Lastly, the housing options on campus were vastly different and built a sense of haves
and have-nots. Students shared inequities between the housing structures and explained feelings of isolation, depending on whether they could afford the more desirable option.

**Theme Six: Ethnic, Racial, and Cultural Identities**

Lastly, another important theme was these students’ connection to their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities. Of the group interviewed, three of the students identified as Black or African American, two identified as Multiracial or Biracial, two of the students identified as White or Caucasian, one of the students identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and one as Hispanic or Latina. Five of the eight students identified feelings of isolation or exclusion at some point at the university due to their ethnic, cultural, or other identity. Of the three students who did not feel isolated because of their ethnic or cultural identities, two were White, and one was Asian or Pacific Islander.

Violet and Emma identified as biracial. Violet found it hard to fit in at a Primarily White Institution (PWI) because she could not connect with just one of her races. She shared, “I'm not fully Black; I'm not fully White. I will never truly fit in with them.” When talking about her interactions with her roommates, she shared:

> I just got to kind of code-switch, if you will, when I'm talking to my different friends. If I talk to my roommate now compared to if I talked to my roommate from last year, I must change myself a little bit to fit in better.

From our conversations, Violet shared that she morphed how she talked and dressed based on who she met that day to fit in better and feel a sense of community. She shared how tiring that was and the toll it took on her sense of belonging. Her constant battle between her authentic self and code-switching to ensure affiliation with the greater campus culture lead her to identifying a low sense of belonging on campus. Emma shared similar experiences when looking to connect at
the university’s multicultural center. She felt she could not commit to their services because she was not seen as belonging to the center. She shared:

I consider myself like a Black individual but with that it has been very hard because a lot of people say, “You're Hispanic, you're not Black.” And I'm like, okay. So that's a fun time. Or they'll say you act too White to be around Hispanics or you act too Hispanic to be around whites. So, that's an interesting thing and I still been trying to navigate. I remember my first year here. We have the multicultural center, and I remember it was so packed freshman year. I remember I knew it was a place for like diversity. But I felt as if I wasn't allowed. It was like I'm not the type of color like they want.

As a Latina woman, Olivia shared that her experiences differed from those of a “regular student.” When asked what she meant by “regular student,” she affirmed that she was referring to a White student. While at the university, she could not find many resources targeted at Latina/o students. When asked to explain, Olivia stated:

I think it is harder to connect on experiences as a like, my race being Hispanic. The differences are… there’s a lot of differences from, like, a regular, you know, students, that isn’t Hispanic…Um, you have like different um… there's different. Um… how do I word it? *pause* There isn't a lot of resources that I, that (the university) kind of has for, not that I know of at least, for like Hispanic students, or … or you know how they can get involved on campus or anything like that.

As a Black woman, Whitney felt that, generally, people were kind in her classes and at the institution. However, she had come across people who were not open-minded. She said: "You’re skeptical to open your mouth or ask the question because people don’t talk to everybody the same way.” When going into detail about that, she shared that she was referencing race. She
felt she could not connect with people of different races at the institution because she feared they were raised to think differently or have closed minds.

Contrary to those participants’ experiences, as a Black woman, Serena shared a different perspective. She came to the university from a diverse high school and expected to feel isolated because of her skin color. However, her experiences were different than what she preliminary believed:

Because the school is like a PWI, I didn't think I would feel as comfortable as I do. I feel like there's a lot of representation. I didn't think there would be as much diversity and there is. I've met a lot of people of color. I've met a lot of people from different backgrounds and from different areas. It honestly really surprised me., I'm more comfortable than I expected to be. I don't really feel like I'm in a PWI, necessarily.

Theresa identified as Asian or Pacific Islander and shared similar experiences to Serena in that she did not feel isolated on campus like others. Theresa was a practicing Muslim and had been practicing the faith her entire life. Her family prays together, and she is very involved in her mosque’s youth group programs. Theresa enjoys sharing college stories at this youth group and likes helping the younger members explore their higher education options. As not only a first-generation college student but a first-generation American (both of her parents are from Pakistan), she loved that this campus had a Muslim Student Association and focused work on interfaith. As a student, she did not feel judged or misrepresented because of her religion.

Two students in the study who identified as White also identified as queer. Xavier described themselves as gender variant, and Francesca identified as bisexual. Both students described their university as welcoming to their queer identities and felt like they belonged. Xavier mentioned when they had a trans pride flag in their residence hall and received many
compliments about how their hallmates liked their flag or thought it was cool that they had that. Xavier has not visited services on campus for queer students yet, but shared that they were excited those services existed and looked forward to becoming involved one day. Francesca described herself as bisexual and shared that she always felt welcomed and a part of her community regardless of her sexuality. One of her favorite things at her university is the pride flag outside of the student union. She remembered seeing that flag on a campus visit and knew this campus would be a good space for her.

Through these conversations, it has been found that students’ ethnic and cultural identities were salient in their interactions and connections with the campus community. When asked to identify their connections, of the students who identified as a race other than White, four of them felt somewhat connected or very connected to their peers, three of them felt very connected or somewhat connected to their faculty and staff, and five of them felt very connected or somewhat connected to the university. Although these findings may suggest that race or ethnic backgrounds do not impact their sense of belonging, how the students highlighted their cultural experiences suggests that student ethnic and cultural identities serve as an alternative connection. Students feel more positive about the institution and connected to their peers because the university recognizes their differences, the opportunities to bring their faith to light on campus, or the engagement within student organization affinity groups.

**Final Insights**

Through this research, I built connections with lower-income, first-generation college students from various diverse backgrounds. Francesca, Emma, and Serena had the highest sense of belonging in the group. Francesca and Emma share similarities that they both were upperclassmen and have had more time to build their communities, they both worked on campus
and have built strong relationships with their coworkers, and they both lived off campus. Although Serena also felt a strong sense of belonging, she did not share these characteristics as she was a first-year college student, worked off campus, and lived in a university-owned residence hall. Serena found her sense of belonging through her university-owned residence hall experience and being comfortable with those she surrounded herself with.

Xavier, Violet, and Whitney had the lowest sense of belonging across the three categories. Xavier and Whitney were first-year students working off-campus but living on campus. Xavier lived in a university-owned residence hall, and Whitney lived in a public-private partnership residence hall. They shared similar experiences in that they worked many hours, often leaving little time for making friends or building a sense of belonging with the campus. Violet was a junior who worked and lived in a public-private partnership residence hall on campus. Although Violet worked on campus and did build some relationships with her coworkers, she worked so many hours between the two on-campus positions she looked at the roles as a paraprofessional position to make an income, not a space to meet friends.

When formulating interview questions, I centered the dialogue around students' sense of belonging to their peers, faculty, and the university. Based on their responses to the interview questions, students fell into the not connected, somewhat connected, or very connected categories. The below diagram describes where each student fell when describing their sense of belonging to those three areas.

**Table 4**

*Findings of Participant’s Sense of Belonging*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of Belonging</th>
<th>Not Connected</th>
<th>Somewhat Connected</th>
<th>Very Connected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Olivia, Whitney, Xavier</td>
<td>Theresa, Violet, Serena</td>
<td>Francesca, Emma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Whitney, Violet, Emma</td>
<td>Olivia, Theresa, Xavier</td>
<td>Francesca, Serena</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the conversations, students discussed six themes: employment, support networks, caretaker responsibilities, family expectations, financial disparities, and ethnic and cultural identities. I found that on-campus employment yields a higher sense of belonging than off-campus employment due to social connections and quick access to campus resources. Support networks included peers (sometimes friends, sometimes classmates), families, and faculty or staff. Lower-income, first-generation college students often take the role of caretaker for someone at home and have competing priorities that precede school, work, and other obligations. The families of these students instilled from an early age that college was not an option and was something that must be accomplished. By being lower-income students, these students selected their college based on affordability and took the impact of college debt seriously. Lastly, race and ethnic identities play a role when discussing sense of belonging at a PWI. Although these students represented a small part of the lower-income, first-generation student population, their narratives can be helpful in better understanding this group’s sense of belonging and help identify ways in which higher education professionals can aid in their onboarding and building of community.

**Chapter 5**

This qualitative study focused on the sense of belonging amongst lower-income, first-generation college students. More specifically, it looked at the student’s sense of belonging to their peers, faculty and staff, and the overall university. This chapter starts with a summary of the study, followed by a discussion surrounding the study’s research questions. After reviewing the research questions that framed this study, this chapter reconsiders the theoretical frameworks that guided this work. Next, this chapter touches upon research limitations. Lastly, after uncovering
the data and analyses, this chapter closes with recommendations for future studies and practice and how these recommendations can continue contributing to the success of lower-income, first-generation students.

**Summary of Study**

During this qualitative research, eight self-identified lower-income, first-generation college students were interviewed and asked questions about their sense of belonging. They were also asked how their socioeconomic status or social identities may impact their college experience. While the interviews took place, six themes emerged across all conversations, including employment, support networks, caretaker responsibilities, family expectations, financial disparities, and ethnic and cultural identities. In the next section, the research questions that guided this study are summarized to provide a greater understanding of the sense of belonging to college amongst this group.

**Research Question 1**

The first research question focused on how lower-income first-generation college students described their sense of belonging. It asked, in what ways do lower-income, first-generation students characterize their sense of belonging? To uncover this, student participants were asked questions looking to disclose how they describe their sense of belonging to their peers, faculty and staff, and the university. Additionally, students were asked to talk about their family dynamics, how their socioeconomic status may have impacted their college experience, and their experiences on campus embracing their most salient identities.

The participants in this study shared strong bonds with their families and supporters back home. Across the group, they also shared caretaker roles within their family, whether financially or physically. They had responsibilities at home with their families that took away their time or
energy on campus. When discussing financial strains, all students identified working on or off campus as a means to eliminate the burden of financial stress for themselves and their families and self-support themselves on campus. When asked about their salient identities, most students from marginalized ethnic or cultural backgrounds felt that the PWI research site made connecting with others from different cultural backgrounds hard.

It is beneficial to note two areas where this research question about how students characterized their sense of belonging came to light. Those two areas are included within the classroom and at their on-campus employer site. In the classroom, a few participants noted building connections with a new set of classmates each course they take. This allowed students to form study groups and discuss course materials, yielding a more comfortable academic experience. To characterize their sense of belonging within their on-campus employment sites, students who worked on campus shared meaningful stories about how their paraprofessional roles helped them find their closest friends and supporters, ultimately retaining them at the college campus.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question that guided this work asked, “What factors increase or decrease sense of belonging for lower-income, first-generation undergraduate students?” This research question was important when interviewing this group of students because aside from the demographics collected during the participant selection process, many more factors could be uncovered through open dialogue.

One thing that was brought up among the participants was their employment. When looking for participants, working while attending college was not considered. Students were not asked about their employment status on the participant eligibility questionnaire (see Appendix
D). Additionally, students were not asked specifically about their work during the interviews. However, each student brought up working, whether on or off campus, as something that impacted their college experience. Students initially sought out their jobs to collect an income to offset college costs and ease the financial burden college has placed on themselves and their families. However, for the students who worked on campus, there were unforeseen benefits of meeting and building relationships with students, increasing their sense of belonging, without needing to join an additional organization or engage with strangers to build community. Two students mentioned that they likely would have transferred to a different institution if they did not get on-campus paraprofessional positions.

Another factor that appears to increase or decrease sense of belonging for lower-income first-generation students is family expectations, more specifically, family expectations that the student attain a higher education. As mentioned in Chapter 4, there appeared to be two reasons that students were attending college. The first reason that emerged was students attending college to make their parents proud. The second reason that emerged was students attending college to break the poverty cycle within their families.

The students who went to college to make their families proud, as opposed to those who attended with hopes of breaking the poverty cycle, had a notably higher sense of belonging to the university than those who went to college to get themselves and their families out of impoverished environments. One reason could be that students making their families proud as a primary reason for attending college could do many things to make their supporters proud besides obtaining a college degree. They could join an organization, hold an on-campus job, participate in research, or engage in other activities leading to engaging conversations with their families. The more the student can do to add to their co-curricular transcript, the more their
families have to talk about with their own friends, coworkers, and other family members. For these students in this group, bragging rights for families was a large piece of their supporter’s pride.

A potential reason why students who attend college to break the cycle of poverty in their family may hold a lower sense of belonging could be their motives for being at college. In this study, the students talked about making money, paying their family’s bills, and avoiding unnecessary debt. With those demanding and stressful circumstances, there leaves little time for the stress of building connections and relationships across campus. These students saw college as a means to an end instead of an enjoyable journey with stops.

This study suggests that while all students strive to earn a sustainable income, those who focus on living in the moment (that is, focus on attending college) and put their energy into building relationships in the present moment rather than focusing on the future income and the stress of breaking their family’s poverty cycle seemed to hold a higher sense of belonging to the university. This could be because students can flourish in their role as students rather than caretakers or financial support persons for their families. While being a student, their top priority could be engaging on campus and receiving academic accolades. When they can focus on these areas instead of what is happening back home, they can better build their sense of belonging.

**Application to the Theoretical Frameworks**

While addressing themes and commonalities amongst the group of participants, I considered Terrel Strayhorn’s (2008, 2012) notion of sense of belonging, Laura Perna’s (2005, 2006) work with lower-income, first-generation college students, and Ricardo Stanton-Salazar’s (1997, 2011) Social Capital Framework, and how these student’s experiences converge or diverge from the literature.
Strayhorn (2008) shared in his work that students with a low sense of belonging often find it challenging to fit in with their peers, experience feelings of loneliness and alienation, and describe feeling unwelcome on campus. Additionally, Stanton-Salazar (1997) shared that lower-income, first-generation students often struggle to build trust with those outside of their families. Some students in this study shared the same sentiments. They revealed that they had difficulty connecting with people on campus or their roommates due to the fear of them not understanding their upbringings. This aligns with my findings, specifically in the case of Violet and Xavier.

When talking to Violet about her interactions with her peers, she shared that she rarely goes out and meets new people on campus. Violet shared that she tried to attend on-campus events, but going to these events alone was intimidating. None of the events she tried to participate in were geared toward meeting new people. They were more tailored to having fun and finding safe alternatives to avoid alcohol consumption. Violet shared that when attending these events, she saw students in pockets of friends. There was no space for someone like her who was going to meet new people with the hope of befriending them.

Perna and Titus (2005) found that the more a student is involved with on-campus events, the more likely that student will be to build a sense of belonging. This held true of the students in this study who shared their stories of on-campus involvement through employment or student organizations. Those students who were involved on campus shared meetings with peers and built bonds with students they would not have met otherwise and found a home away from home within their selected communities. However, that was not the case for all students. Violet shared difficulty getting to the event itself and what to do once at the event since she did not already have a friend circle. Xavier had similar experiences in that they had a small, core group of friends, and they could not connect with others they were unfamiliar with. They found the people
they interacted with on campus rude and unwelcoming. When these two students shared their feelings surrounding their sense of belonging, both shared they did not feel connected to the university.

At the other end of the spectrum, Strayhorn (2012) explained that students with a high sense of belonging feel a part of a community. They build that community through campus organizations, relationships with faculty staff, and attending university events (Strayhorn, 2012). Emma and Theresa are examples of students with a high sense of belonging that they attributed to their connectedness to campus offerings. Both students were heavily involved in multiple student organizations, worked on campus, and held presidential leadership positions in their student groups. One of the reasons Emma selected this college to attend was because of the offerings for on-campus involvement. Theresa stated that her community was within her student organizations and often connected with her older peers, who helped her navigate being involved and completing her classwork. When asked about their sense of belonging, both shared they felt connected to the university.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) noted that students from lower-income, first-generation backgrounds are less inclined to connect with someone outside of their social class and come from continuing-generation families. This statement did not coincide with my findings amongst the group of student participants, specifically Serena, who found joy in building community with those who shared different experiences from her. Serena shared that she found it easy to connect with people she met and often found commonalities with those outside her socio-economic status because the campus was welcoming and inviting.

Strayhorn (2008) mentioned that joining organizations and attending on-campus events is an essential piece of connectedness for students. My findings assert that campus employment is
also a critical factor. Five students I met with worked on campus, and three worked off campus. Having a job on campus provided students with a heightened sense of belonging amongst their peers as they were put in situations where they had no other options but to engage with other students around them. Although the interactions were not intentional, all the students who worked on campus expressed gratitude for building relationships with their coworkers and feeling more connected to the campus because of those bonds.

Aside from student involvement on campus, Perna and Titus (2005) found the more that parents are involved in university endeavors, including reaching out to faculty and staff personally, volunteering on campus, and attending family events, the more likely it is that the student will also become involved in on-campus offerings. Additionally, they found that the more the parents are involved in the student’s studies and co-curricular activities, the more likely the student will find a sense of belonging and persistence (Perna & Titus, 2005). Although the students in this study talked in depth about the involvement of their parents and supporters before attending college, they did not discuss their involvement once on campus. Students did not share stories about their parents visiting for family weekend, attending football games, or supporting their co-curricular endeavors.

Perna (2006) found that the college choice for lower-income, first-generation college was often determined by cost rather than prestige. The data from this study also confirms this dynamic. As a group of lower-income students, this group described cost concerns when choosing their colleges. The institution that study participants attended had significantly lower tuition than private or semi-private institutions. All the participants were also in-state students, making their tuition lower than if they were to attend a school out of state. Overall, the findings of this study aligns with past research conducted by Strayhorn (2008, 2012), Perna (2005, 2006),
and Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011). The following section discusses research limitations and ways outside factors have impacted this study.

Lastly, when outlining this study, Stanton-Salazar’s (1997) Social Capital Framework laid the foundation for an examination of lower-income, first generation college students. According to the Social Capital Framework, a problem universities face is that they operate under the umbrella that all students are coming to college with the same backgrounds, resources, and access putting those who have family knowledge about university systems and relationships with individuals who understand college processes at an advantage (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Lower-income, first-generation students who lack access to social capital in the form of knowledgeable resources to help them uncover aid, find scholarships, and apply to colleges are at a clear disadvantage. In this study, this is seen in the responses from participants when asked about their connections to campus. With extra responsibilities, stressors, and financial disparities putting these lower-income, first-generation students under their own umbrella with specific resources tailor to their needs will benefit this population and work towards building a strong sense of belonging.

Limitations

As with many studies, this qualitative research unveiling sense of belonging amongst lower-income, first-generation college students is not without limitations. In the following sections, I discuss how participant demographics, Covid-19, self-identification methods, and definition barriers may have impacted the research findings.

Participant Demographics

In this diverse participant pool, their identities varied considering their race or ethnicity, class year, or housing status. However, when considering gender expression, seven identified as
women, and one identified themselves as gender variant or non-conforming. None of the participants identified their gender as a man. It would have been ideal to have more men participants as part of this study.

Students from all four years of undergraduate study were included in this research study. It was found in this study that some of those students who were further along in their educational journey had a stronger sense of belonging than those who were beginning. Those in their junior and senior year of college have had more time to build a sense of belonging amongst their peers, faculty and staff, and the university. This is a limitation because the findings could be generalized without understanding why or how students who are further along in college could have had more time to build social connections.

**Impact of Covid-19**

Related to the above, students who were seniors had very different experiences than those who were freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. This study’s senior participants started at the university in 2019, before the Covid-19 Global Pandemic. They established themselves on campus through more standard processes and experiences, such as attending large group gatherings, sharing spaces in residence halls, and onboarding events geared at student success and retention. However, the juniors in this study started their college careers remotely. Their onboarding processes and student involvement efforts were virtual for over a year, and they were forced to navigate finding a sense of belonging during a global pandemic through virtual methods. This study’s sophomore and first-year participants did not attend college fully virtually. However, they still experienced the aftermath of social distancing, stressors, and anxieties from going to large events and social gatherings due to the fear of virus exposure. A limitation of this study is the impact Covid-19 left on the campus community and the ability of students to foster
and build a sense of belonging. Although this limitation exists, it should be noted that none of the students in this study identified Covid-19 as having any role in their heightened or decreased sense of belonging to the college campus. Students representing each class year were included in this study because although they all had different onboarding experiences that Covid-19 could have potentially impacted, I felt it was important to get perspectives from those at various stages of their college career to see if class year in general, had any impacts, regardless of the effects of the pandemic.

**Definitions of Low-Income and First-Generation**

I used self-identification to determine whether students were eligible to participate in this study. In other words, I did not ask for documentation of family income. Instead, I allowed potential participants to self-identify whether they considered themselves lower-income or first-generation college students. While I did provide definitions (i.e., income ranges and a definition of “first-generation college student”), there were still limitations. For example, if students did not know their family income for certain but felt they come from a lower-income family, they may have identified as lower-income. On the contrary, if a student did not know their family’s income and did not ask, they could have removed themselves as a potential participant even if they did qualify.

“First-generation” in this study was defined as a student for whom no parent or guardian completed their bachelor’s degree. This aligned with the formal definition used by the institution of attendance. This definition eliminates an array of other students that may identify as first-generation but were not eligible because of the constraints of this particular definition. For example, this definition excludes students with one parent who has completed a degree or students who are not in communication with their parents. If the institutional definition was
broader, it might have included other students who identified as first-generation because of the lack of institutional knowledge passed down from their parents and other supports. There is a chance that a more robust understanding of this population of college students could be secured with a broader definition of terminology.

Implications for Future Research

This qualitative study sought to dive deeply into the lives of lower-income, first-generation college students’ sense of belonging to their peers, faculty and staff, and university. Based on the dialogues held with this group of students, there are a few things I would highlight as important things to consider when conducting future similar studies.

As previously mentioned, this study comprised students in all class years ranging from first-year students to seniors. A future longitudinal study revisiting sense of belonging amongst the now first-year students would be beneficial to the literature as it could gauge if their sense of belonging increased due to their time and exposure on campus or if it remained stagnant. It would be able to understand better if time on campus increases sense of belonging, amongst other factors.

In addition, future studies regarding the difference in sense of belonging amongst off-campus students who started their college career as residential students and those true commuter students who never lived on campus would be beneficial in better understanding what contributes to sense of belonging. In this study, a few students who identified as off-campus held a higher sense of belonging than those who lived on campus. However, those off-campus students had once lived on campus and only lived off due to their upperclassmen status. A research study exploring ways in which commuter students, those who never lived on campus, build, and maintain a sense of belonging compared to those students who live or once lived on
campus would be beneficial in better explaining how housing status impacts student’s connectedness to their peers, faculty and staff, and university setting.

**Implications for Practice**

While reflecting on the interviews with this group of lower-income, first-generation college students, three things became apparent as key implications for practice. The first is the importance of on-campus employment. The second is the emphasis on secured tuition funds. The third is the need for parental and family on-campus engagement.

As previously mentioned, lower-income, first-generation students within this study were more likely to feel a sense of belonging if they built meaningful relationships with their coworkers through on-campus employment opportunities. In practice, it would be necessary for higher education practitioners to intentionally market and advertise on-campus postings to lower-income, first-generation college students, offering them a space to build community while earning wages. Student employment should be seen as a high-impact practice as on-campus employment also offers protective factors. Not only are students earning wages, but they also meet supervisors who serve as mentors and guide students through their struggles and challenges on campus.

Although campus connections are a critical piece to the role of an on-campus employer, financial security is also of importance to this group of working students. Offering on-campus employment opportunities is not enough to help build a sense of belonging because, as the participants in this study described, wages on campus are often less than a student can earn in off-campus employment. Thus, wages on campus must be comparable to off-campus job opportunities. This will remove the decision for students to choose between a livable salary and on-campus employment. Many lower-income, first-generation students cannot afford to lose
valuable income in exchange for the opportunity to build community with their peers on campus. By offering on-campus positions with competitive wages, lower-income, first-generation students would have an easier decision when determining their source of income. They would be able to support themselves financially. They would also help build a sense of belonging through interactions and connections with on-campus peers, faculty, staff, and the larger campus community.

Secondly, another implication for practice has to do with securing tuition funds. As found within the theme of financial disparities, most of the lower-income, first-generation students in this study described spending countless hours searching for scholarships and grants to cover tuition and to avoid putting their families further into debt for their college degrees. In practice, universities could support students in finding these opportunities by identifying which students are lower-income, first-generation students and connecting them with scholarships on campus set aside specifically for students like themselves. Students can be identified as first-generation through the admissions process, and their lower-income status can be determined through the FAFSA form submitted with the Office of Financial Aid. For example, funds can be set aside for first-generation student scholarships within university foundations. However, these funds are not earmarked for lower-income students on a need basis. As we have learned, not all first-generation students identify as lower-income students (Goward, 2018). There are likely students receiving scholarships when they may not be in the most need. Lastly, partnering with the Office of Financial Aid again to utilize appropriate Federal Work Study allocations would not only provide students with financial support, but also the opportunity to work on campus. By identifying lower-income, first-generation students through admissions and financial aid, a
university would have access to the students in the most need. It could proactively reach out and deliberately connect students with critical resources for their financial needs.

Lastly, this group of lower-income, first-generation college students explained that although they had their family’s support in going to college, families often failed to become engaged with their college routines and with on-campus happenings. Parent or supporter involvement within the university leads to a better sense of belonging for their student (Perna & Titus, 2005). Working with parent and family relations university offices on lower-income, first-generation student parent and supporter resources would be beneficial to support these students and their families. Some examples could be inviting these families to first-generation student celebrations on campus (i.e., first-generation student celebration day, first-generation student honor society induction ceremonies, etc.), sharing dates for large-scale campus traditions or sporting events, and inviting these supporters to join or create a parent and family council. Additionally, as we learned though the student interviews, some students are uncomfortable attending campus events because they are nervous or afraid to attend them alone. Inviting their families to campus to attend an event with them may open the doors for them to meet new people, but with their comfortable support system by their side.

Assuming not all families of lower-income, first-generation students have the means to come to campus, it is important also to offer ways to support their students without their physical presence being necessary. This could be seen virtually and emotionally. This could look like providing virtual meetings with talking points on how they can support their student, newsletters highlighting things to look out for when their student is struggling, or resource guides they can use when their student comes to them with any questions. By integrating the family into the
student’s college experience, the student will, in turn, build their own sense of belonging and connections to campus.

**Chapter Summary**

In closing, this study of lower-income, first-generation college students' sense of belonging to the university is critical in understanding how students build community and the impact student’s socioeconomic status has on their college experience. This chapter provided a summary of the study, connections to the literature, a discussion of limitations, and future implications for how this literature can be added.
Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

To: Devan Zgleszewski
Col of Education & Social Work, Education Policy, Planning Adm

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2021-246 Sense of Belonging amongst First-Generation College Students

Dear Devan Zgleszewski:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Sense of Belonging amongst First-Generation College Students.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155
Appendix B

Recruitment Communications

Participant Eligibility Questionnaire Invitation

From: Devan Zgleszewski
Subject: Doctoral Candidate Research on First-Generation Students

Hey Golden Ram,

I hope this message finds you well! I am currently in my third year of the WCU doctoral program pursuing an EdD in Policy, Planning, and Administration in Higher Education. As a part of my research, I am looking to set up a few individual interviews with first-generation students.

During the interview, we will talk about your experiences as a first-generation student related to your socio-economic status, your connectedness to your peers and the university, and your overall sense of belonging at the University. The interview will take about 1.5 hours and will be recorded. Your identity and personal information will be kept private. I will record our conversation on Zoom, and this recording will help me transcribe your responses and find common themes amongst students’ experiences. The recording will be kept on my individual secure and locked computer and will be deleted after conclusion of the study.

If you are interested in participating in my interview study, please complete this brief form [Link] and review the below qualifications to see if you are eligible:

- Full time undergraduate student enrolled at WCU
- Neither parent nor guardian completed a bachelor's degree
- 18 years of age or older
- Identify as lower-income
- Willing to participate in this study by completing the Informed Consent process

This study has been approved by the WCU IRB-FY2021-246.

If you are eligible, I would love to set up a time to connect. Prior to making your decision, please review the consent form carefully. If you have any friends or peers that you also think would be interested, please feel free to send them my way!

Thank you! If you have any questions, please let me know. I am always happy to chat!

Devan K. Zgleszewski
Director, New Student Programs
West Chester University
Lawrence Center 202
610-436-3305
Participant Eligibility Questionnaire Reminder(s)

From: Devan Zgleszewski
Subject: First-Generation Students NEEDED - Research Participants

Looking to share your thoughts and experiences as a first-generation college student? Please complete this survey to learn more about my research and how YOU can participate!
Interview Invitation: General Population

From: Devan Zgleszewski
Subject: Meeting Request: First-Gen Research

Hi [Name],

I hope this message finds you well! Thank you for your interest in participating in my doctoral research. To provide you with a little background, when I was in college I identified as a low-income, first-generation student. I worked three jobs throughout college and suffered greatly from imposter syndrome as I tried to find my sense of belonging and purpose at my institution. That is where my passion lies with this work. I am looking forward to meeting with first-gen students, like yourself, to learn more about your sense of belonging and compile narratives about shared and unique experiences.

I am hoping you will be able to provide me with a few times you are free next week for us to chat via Zoom. Let me know when you are free, and I will set up a time for us to chat!

Thank you, again, for your participation. I am really looking forward to meeting with you and learning more about you!

Devan K. Zgleszewski
Director, New Student Programs
West Chester University
Lawrence Center 202
610-436-3305
Interview Invitation: Snowball Sampling

From: Devan Zgleszewski
Subject: First-Generation Students Needed

Hi [Name]

I hope all is well! I am currently in the processes of completing my doctoral research on sense of belonging amongst first-generation college students, and [Name] provided me with your name as someone who might be interested. I am looking to meet 1:1 with a few first-gen students for about 1 hour (no more than 1 ½ hours) via Zoom to talk about their experiences at WCU. If this seems like something you might be interested in and you are willing to help me out, please click this link [insert link] to learn more about the process. As a thank you, I will be purchasing all participants a t-shirt from the campus store (participants choice!).

Any questions, let me know. Thank you for your time and I hope we can connect!

Sincerely,

Devan Zgleszewski
**Interview Confirmation**

From: Devan Zgleszewski  
Subject: First-Gen Research Interview

Hi [Name],
Thank you again for your participation. As promised, here is the Zoom information and informed consent form. If you can review, sign, and send back to me when you get a chance that would be great! I will also review the informed consent before the interview in case you have any questions! I am looking forward to meeting with you!

- [Zoom link]
- Meeting ID: [Zoom meeting ID]
- Password: [Zoom password]
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

**Project Title:** Sense of Belonging in Lower-Income, First-Generation College Students  
**Investigator(s):** Devan Zgleszewski; Orkideh Mohajeri

**Project Overview:**
Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Devan Zgleszewski as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to gain a better understanding of the experiences of lower-income, first-generation current and their sense of belonging to the university. The goal is to use this information to improve the experiences of first-generation college students. Your participation will take about 2 hours to review the interest survey, review the informed consent, complete the interest survey, sign off on the informed consent, schedule a time to meet with researcher, complete interview, and complete member checking and you will receive 15 dollars in the form of t-shirt. There is a minimal risk of to further minimize these risks, participation is voluntary; we will allow you to opt to not answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Devan Zgleszewski or Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (Faculty advisor for this study), or you may contact one of the resources listed below. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time. There are no direct benefits, other than the chance to process your experiences and insights with a dedicated listener, to you as the participant, and this research will help contribute to data that will be used by a doctoral candidate to make informed decisions about ways to improve about the lower-income, first-generation student experience at West Chester University. The research project is being done by Devan Zgleszewski as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to gain a better understanding of the experiences of lower-income, first-generation current and their sense of belonging to the university. The goal is to use this information to improve the experiences of first-generation college students. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. You may ask Devan Zgleszewski any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**

   To gain a better understanding of the experiences of lower-income, first-generation college students and their sense of belonging to the university. The goal is to use this information to improve the experiences of first-generation college students.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - Review the interest survey
   - Review the informed consent
   - Complete the interest survey
   - Sign off on the informed consent
   - Schedule a time to meet with researcher
   - Complete interview (1.5-2 hours)
   - Complete member checking
3. Are there any experimental medical treatments?
   No

4. Is there any risk to me?
   Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. To further minimize these risks, participation is voluntary; we will allow you to opt to not answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Devan Zgleszewski or Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (Faculty advisor for this study), or you may contact one of the resources listed below. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. Is there any benefit to me?
   There are no direct benefits to participants.

6. How will you protect my privacy?
   - The session will be recorded.
   - The sessions will be recorded via Zoom with closed captioning. Video recordings, voice recordings, and transcribed data will be kept private and will only be accessible to the primary and co-investigator for research purposes. Your name will not be used in any reports.
   - Your records will be private. Only Devan Zgleszewski, Orkideh Mohajeri, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will not be used in any reports. You will be asked to select a pseudonym (pen name).
   - Records will be stored:
     o Password Protected File/Computer.
     o Records will be destroyed three years after study completion

7. Do I get paid to take part in this study?
   To show our appreciation, you will receive a WCU t-shirt (valued around $15)

8. Who do I contact in case of research related injury?
   For any questions with this study, contact:
   Primary Investigator: Devan Zgleszewski at 610-436-2089 or DZgleszews@wcupa.edu
   Secondary Investigator: Orkideh Mohajeri at 610-436-2941 or OMohajeri@wcupa.edu

Resources/Support

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<td>Learning Assistance and Resource Center</td>
<td>610-436-2535, <a href="mailto:larc@wcupa.edu">larc@wcupa.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress Management</td>
<td>Counseling Services</td>
<td>610-436-2301, <a href="mailto:wcucc@wcupa.edu">wcucc@wcupa.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting Healthy Goals</td>
<td>Wellness Promotion</td>
<td>610-436-2509, <a href="mailto:wellness@wcupa.edu">wellness@wcupa.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs at 610-436-3557.

I, _________________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

__________________________________
Subject/Participant Signature

Date:________________

___________________________________
Witness Signature

Date:________________
Appendix D

Participant Eligibility Questionnaire

Q1 Introduction

Hey Rams! Thanks for helping me out with my research!

First, I am going to ask a few qualifying questions. If you meet all of the qualifications, you will then be taken to the Informed Consent. After reviewing that, you will then answer a few demographic questions. That’s it!

Don't worry - it won't take long :) RAMS UP.

Q2 Are you enrolled full-time as an undergraduate student at WCU?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

Q3 What is the highest level of education completed by any of your parents/guardians? (For example, if one of your parents/guardians earned a high school diploma and another parent/guardian earned a bachelor’s degree, select “Completed a bachelor’s degree.”)

☐ Middle School
☐ High School
☐ Attended college but did not earn a certificate or degree
☐ Completed a certificate
☐ Completed an associate's degree
☐ Completed a bachelor's degree
☐ Completed a graduate or advanced degree
☐ Unsure

Skip To: End of Survey If What is the highest level of education completed by any of your parents/guardians? (For example,... = Completed a bachelor’s degree
Q4 As of today, are you 18 years of age or older?

- Yes (please provide birthdate and year)
- No

Q5 How would you define your family's income?

- Lower-income - family income less than $52,200 (money.usnews.com) *Individuals with lower-income ratings tend to have lower-status occupations, income at or below the poverty level, and lower levels of formal education. These individuals have limited access to the kinds of financial, educational, and social resources that could promote their own health and well-being and that of their families (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).*

- Middle-income: family income of between $52,200 and $156,600 (money.usnews.com)

- Upper-income: family income more than $156,600 (money.usnews.com) *Individuals from upper income families are likely to have parents or caregivers that work in prestigious positions or have higher salaries (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). They are more likely to have inherited intergenerational wealth.*

- Not sure/Other (explain): __________________________________________________

Q6 Informed Consent:

**Project Title: Sense of Belonging in Lower-Income, First-Generation College Students**

**Investigator(s):** Devan Zgleszewski; Orkideh Mohajeri

**Project Overview:**
Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Devan Zgleszewski as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to gain a better understanding of the experiences of lower-income, first-generation current and their sense of belonging to the university. The goal is to use this information to improve the experiences first-generation college students. Your participation will take about 2 hours to review the interest survey, review the informed consent, complete the
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9. **What is the purpose of this study?**

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10. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**

- Review the interest survey
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- Complete the interest survey
- Sign off on the informed consent
- Schedule a time to meet with researcher
- Complete interview (1.5-2 hours)
- Complete member checking

11. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**

No

12. **Is there any risk to me?**

Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. To further minimize these risks, participation is voluntary; we will allow you to opt to not answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Devan Zgleszewski or Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (Faculty advisor for this study), or you may contact one of the resources listed below. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

13. **Is there any benefit to me?**
There are no direct benefits to participants.

14. How will you protect my privacy?
   - The session will be recorded.
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     - Records will be destroyed three years after study completion

15. Do I get paid to take part in this study?

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16. Who do I contact in case of research related injury?

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   Secondary Investigator: Orkideh Mohajeri at 610-436-2941 or OMohajeri@wcupa.edu

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation Student Support</td>
<td>West Chester’s First</td>
<td>610-435-3282, <a href="mailto:wcfirst@wcupa.edu">wcfirst@wcupa.edu</a></td>
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For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs at 610-436-3557.

Q7 I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all
possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

☐ I would like to participate in this study. (1)

☐ I do not wish to participate in this study. (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk (please sign).

Q8 I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk (please sign).

Q9 Name:

Q10 WCU Email Address:

Q11 Cell Phone Number:

Q12 How do you prefer to be contacted?

☐ Via phone call

☐ Through texting

☐ My WCU email

Q13 What is your class year?
☐ Freshman (first-year)
☐ Sophomore (second-year)
☐ Junior (third-year)
☐ Senior (fourth or fifth-year)
☐ Other: __________________________________________________

Q14 How would you describe your admit status when you started at WCU?
☐ New college student
☐ Transfer college student
☐ Adult learner (over the age of 24 attending college for the first time)
☐ Other: __________________________________________________

Q15 What is your current housing status at WCU?
☐ On-campus, residential
☐ Off-campus (within 5 miles)
☐ Commuter (over 5 miles)
☐ Other: __________________________________________________

Page Break

Q16 Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity? (select all that apply)
Asian or Pacific Islander

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino/a

Native American or Alaskan Native

White or Caucasian

Multiracial or Biracial

A race/ethnicity not listed _______________________________________

Q17 Which of the following best describes your gender expression? (select all that apply)

Woman

Man

Transgender Woman

Transgender Man

Gender Variant/Non-Conforming

Not listed: ________________________________________________

Prefer not to Answer

Q18 What was your most recent cumulative grade point average (GPA) at the end of your last semester?

- Between 4.0 - 3.5
- Between 3.4 and 3.0
- Between 2.9 and 2.5
- Between 2.4 and 2.0
- Between 1.9 and 1.5
- Between 1.4 and 1.0
Q19 Please select your past and current student organization involvement:

- A Chorus Line Company
- A Voice at the Table
- Abbe’ Society
- Accounting — Beta Alpha Psi
- Accounting Society
- Actuary Society
- Adapted Physical Education Club
- AFRISA (African Student Association)
- Alchemist Club
- Allied Health — Alpha Eta
- Alpha Chi Rho
- Alpha Delta Pi
- Alpha Gamma Omega
- Alpha Phi
- Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.
- Alpha Phi Omega
- Alpha Sigma Alpha
- Alpha Sigma Tau
- Alpha Tau Omega
Alpha Xi Delta
Alzheimer’s Foundation of America
American Choral Director’s Association
American Institute of Graphic Arts
American Marketing Association
American Medical Women's Association
American Sign Language Club
American Society of Microbiology, Student Branch
American Statistical Association
American String Teacher’s Association
American Student Association
Anthropology – Lambda Alpha Nu
Anthropology Club of WCU
Arabic Club
Art – Kappa PI
Art Club
Asian Student Association
Association for Women’s Empowerment
Association of Black Social Workers
Astronomy Club
Athletic Training Club
Autism Speaks
B.O.D.Y. Peace
Best Buddies
Black Men United
Black Student Union
Board Game Club
Bowling
Bridges International
Bringing Hope Home
Business – Beta Gamma Sigma
C.A.L.Y.P.S.O.
Campus Recreation Club
Catholic Newman Student Association
Cello Ensemble
CHAARG (Changing Health, Attitudes & Action to Recreate Girls)
Chemistry – Gamma Sigma Epsilon
Chess Club
Chi Upsilon Sigma Latin Sorority, Inc.
Chinese Club
Circle K International
Climbing Team of WC
Colleges Against Cancer
Communication Studies - Pi Kappa Delta
Communications - Lambda Pi Eta
Competitive Programming Club
Computer Science – Upsilon Pi Epsilon
Computer Science Club
Council for Exceptional Children/Special Ed.
Creative Writing Club
Criminal Justice – Alpha Phi Sigma
Criminal Justice Student Association
Crossfit Club
CRU
D.R.E.A.M. Dance Team
Daedalus (magazine of the Creative Arts)
Dance Team—Women
Darlington Biological Society
Delta Chi
Delta Phi Epsilon
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
Delta Zeta
Diabetes Awareness at WCU
Earth & Space Science Club

EARTH (Environmental Association for Repairing the Habitat)

Economics – Omicron Delta Epsilon

Economics & Finance Society

Education – Kappa Delta Pi

Educational Services – Chi Alpha Epsilon

Emergency Medical Services

Empowering Communities Around You (ECAY)

English - Sigma Tau Delta

English Club

Environmental Health Club

Equestrian

e-Sports Club at WCU

Exercise Science Club

Fellowship of Christian Athletes

Fencing

Field Hockey

First-Generation Students—Alpha Alpha Alpha

Fishing

Food Recovery Network

Foreign Languages - Alpha Mu Gamma
Forensics Speech and Debate Team of WCU
Fraternal Programming Board
French – Pi Delta Phi
French Club
Friar’s Society
Gender Studies Club
Geography - Gamma Theta Upsilon
Geography and Planning Club
Geology - Sigma Gamma Epsilon
German Club
Golden Gamers
Gospel Ministries of WCU
GraceNotes (Female A Capella)
Habitat for Humanity
Hands Helping Paws
Health and Physical Education Club
Helping American Heroes
Her Campus
High Street Harmonix (Male A Capella)
Hillel Jewish Student Union
Hispanic – Sigma Delta Pi
History - Phi Alpha Theta
History Club
Hogwarts Houses
Honors Student Association
Ice Hockey—Men & Women
IMPACT Movement
Improv Club
Institute of Management Accountants
Interfraternity Council
International Student Association
Investment Group of WCU
Irish Dancing Club
Italian Club
Japanese Club
Judo
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.
Kappa Delta
Kappa Delta Rho
Kappa Kappa Psi Band Fraternity
Kickboxing Club
Kinesiology - Phi Epsilon Kappa
KSTAN Bollywood Dance Club
L.A.S.O. (Latin American Student Organization)
L.E.A.D.– Leadership, Empowerment & Development
Lacrosse—Men & Women
Lambda Alpha Upsilon Fraternity, Inc.
Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc.
Leadership - Omicron Delta Kappa (ODK)
Linguistics Society of WCU
Literacy (Reading) – Alpha Upsilon Alpha
Lutheran Student Association
Management – Sigma Iota Epsilon
Marketing—Mu Kappa Tau
Mathematical Sciences - Pi Mu Epsilon
Mathematics Club
MEDLIFE at WCU
Minorities in Medicine
Model United Nations (U.N.)
Mu Sigma Upsilon Multicultural Sorority, Inc.
Multicultural Greek Council
Music - Pi Kappa Lambda
Music Teacher’s National Association (MTNA)
Music Therapy Club
Muslim Student Association
NAACP of West Chester
National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI)
National Association for Music Education Collegiate
National Association of Black Accountants (NABA)
National Association of Black Journalists
National Council of Negro Women, Inc. (NCNW)
National Council of Teachers of English
National Panhellenic Greek Council (NPHC)
National Student Speech Language Hearing Association
Now Music Society
Nursing - Sigma Theta Tau
Off-Campus and Commuter Association (OCCA)
Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.
Order of Omega Greek Honor Society
Outdoor Club
Panhellenic Council
Pharmaceutical Product Development Club
Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.
Phi Delta Epsilon Pre-Med Honors Fraternity
Phi Gamma Delta (FIJI)
Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia
Phi Sigma Pi National Honors Fraternity
Phi Sigma Sigma
Philosophy Club
Photography Club
Physics - Sigma Pi Sigma
Pi Kappa Alpha
Pi Kappa Phi
Poesis
Poise Beauty Club
Political Science - Pi Sigma Alpha
Political/Activism
Precise Fashion Organization
Pre-Dental Society
Pre-Law – Phi Alpha Delta
Pre-Law Society
Pre-Med Club
Pre-Physician’s Assistant Club
Psychology - Psi Chi
Psychology Club
Public Health Club
Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA)
RAM Recovery
Ram Squad
RAMS for Reading
Red Cross Club
Residence Hall Association
Retro Gaming Club
Roller Hockey—Men
Rotaract
Rugby—Men
Russian Club
SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance)
SIGMA (Swope Inter-Greek Music Association)
Sigma Alpha Epsilon
Sigma Alpha Iota
Sigma Alpha Omega
Sigma Chi
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.
Sigma Lambda Beta
Sigma Phi Epsilon
Sigma Pi
Sister to Sister Peer Mentor Program
Sisters United
Ski & Snowboard Club
Slow Food WCU
Soccer—Men & Women
Social Science - Pi Gamma Mu
Social Work - Phi Alpha
Social Work Club
Society of Physics Students
Sociology - Alpha Kappa Delta
Sociology Club
Songwriter’s Club
South Asian Student Association
Spanish Club
Sport Club Council
Student Activities Council (SAC)
Student Athlete Advisory Committee
Student Dietetic Association
Student Government Association
Student Nurses’ Association of PA (S.N.A.P.)
Transfer Student Association
Ultimate Frisbee—Men & Women
Under A Rest Co-Ed A Cappella
Undivided
University Dance Company
University Theatre
Veg Out Club
Video Game Club
Volleyball—Men & Women
Wahala African Dance Team
Water Polo—Men & Women
WCU Studios—West Chester University Television
WCUR 91.7—West Chester University Radio
West Chester Consulting Group (WESCON)
Without Limits
Women in Business
Women in Computer Science
Women in Science
Wrestling
Young Life
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.
Q20 Please list any additional involvement not listed and selected above (ex: student organizations with titles if you held a leadership position, on campus employment, sports teams, etc.)

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
Appendix E

Interview Questions

1. Let’s start with some introductions. Tell me a little bit about yourself:
   a. Major, hometown
   b. Tell me about your parents and siblings’ journeys and experiences with higher education. (Talk through each parent and sibling individually).
   c. What did you learn from their experiences? What lesson or advice from these family members did you bring with you as you pursue your own higher education?

2. How much time do you spend on campus? What do you do during your time on campus?

3. How would you describe your connectedness to your peers here at WCU?

4. How would you describe your connectedness to faculty and staff here?
   a. Can you give me a couple of examples or share a story or two of either a time when you felt very connected or a time when you felt very disconnected?

5. How would you describe your connectedness to the university as a whole?

6. What are some of the biggest struggles you’ve faced during your time at the university?
   a. Can you tell me a specific story? Who helped you figure this out?

7. On the other end, what were some of your biggest triumphs?
   a. Can you tell me details of a specific story? Who were your supporters in this accomplishment?

8. Next, we will do a small activity. Make a list on a word document of your most salient social identities (ex: gender, sexuality, race, etc.).
   a. After thinking of those identities, are there some identities which enhance your sense of belonging?
   b. Are there some which make it harder to feel connected to campus? How and why?

9. You are in this study because you self-identified as coming from a lower-income background. What does that mean for you? How do you think that impacts your sense of belonging at college?

10. Do you believe that your lower-income status impacts your experience as a college student? If so, when did you first notice that your lower-income status affected your student experience on campus? What did you notice?

11. This study is primarily about sense of belonging for first-generation students and the impact of socio-economic status. Is there anything else you would like to share around this topic that I missed? Anything else I should be asking other students as I continue to study this topic?
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