Disrupting Disconnections: A Case Study of One First-Gen Student’s Quest to Belong

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Abstract
Increasing consensus about the value of a college degree in providing socioeconomic mobility and better health outcomes for communities experiencing poverty has contributed to rising college matriculation rates for first-gen students. One in three students in college are first-gen, yet college completion rates for first-gen students are significantly lower than the national average in the United States (10% versus 60%) (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). While there are various factors that contribute to the disparity in graduation outcomes, this dissertation focuses on the role a sense of belonging plays. Research on a sense of belonging has shown that higher rates of belonging are correlated with high academic achievement for all students, and low rates of belonging are particularly detrimental for first-gen students’ academic achievement, which is correlated with graduation outcomes (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). The complex psychological dynamics students experience as they navigate and develop their individual sense of belonging on their campuses warrants further study to better understand the phenomenon (Strayhorn, 2012).

The first paper of this two-paper dissertation provides a comprehensive literature review on college outcomes and theories on college student belonging. The second paper presents a qualitative exploratory case study of one first-gen student’s quest to belong on their campus. The case study utilizes a Relational Cultural Theory lens from which to understand and explore the nuanced experiences of belonging that develop as this student navigates their college experience. An analysis of the interview data illustrates several significant themes: an inherent yearning for connection and relationship with others; the critical nature of growth-fostering moments and people; and the active disconnecting from the campus and from others as a strategy for survival, particularly if the yearning for connection and belonging is unmet. These findings have several implications for practice for those working with first-gen students including those in higher education. First, the findings suggest that the sense of disconnection that first-gen students experience can be invisible and hard to gauge from quantitative data alone (class attendance, test scores). Second, belonging often is experienced in phases and cycles and disrupting the cycle of disconnection can be possible through growth-fostering moments. Third, relationships matter, including relationships with peers, faculty, advisors and other staff at colleges that all have the potential to leave an imprint on how a first-gen student negotiates the various emotions of belonging at any given moment.

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Disrupting Disconnections: A Case Study of One First-Gen Student’s Quest to Belong

Ays Necioglu

A Dissertation in
Social Work
Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania
in
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Degree of Doctor of Social Work
2022

Marcia L. Martin, PhD
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Dedication

I dedicate the work I completed in pursuit of my Doctorate in Clinical Social Work degree over the last three years to my two children, Ayla, 4 and Atakan, 2, who are my whole life. Ayla and Atakan, while you’re too young to understand this now, I hope that you will find and seek opportunities that challenge you to your limits, lift your spirits, give you both confidence, and humility as you push yourself to achieve your goals.
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There are many unnamed mentors, friends, and acquaintances who shared words of support when I needed them, celebrated my journey all the way to the finish, and gave me the vote of confidence when I desperately needed it. A doctorate isn’t an individual effort, and I know that I couldn’t have it done this without my global village.
Abstract

Increasing consensus about the value of a college degree in providing socioeconomic mobility and better health outcomes for communities experiencing poverty has contributed to rising college matriculation rates for first-gen students. One in three students in college are first-gen, yet college completion rates for first-gen students are significantly lower than the national average in the United States (10% versus 60%) (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). While there are various factors that contribute to the disparity in graduation outcomes, this dissertation focuses on the role a sense of belonging plays. Research on a sense of belonging has shown that higher rates of belonging are correlated with high academic achievement for all students, and low rates of belonging are particularly detrimental for first-gen students’ academic achievement, which is correlated with graduation outcomes (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). The complex psychological dynamics students experience as they navigate and develop their individual sense of belonging on their campuses warrants further study to better understand the phenomenon (Strayhorn, 2012).

The first paper of this two-paper dissertation provides a comprehensive literature review on college outcomes and theories on college student belonging. The second paper presents a qualitative exploratory case study of one first-gen student’s quest to belong on their campus. The case study utilizes a Relational Cultural Theory lens from which to understand and explore the nuanced experiences of belonging that develop as this student navigates their college experience. An analysis of the interview data illustrates several significant themes: an inherent yearning for connection and relationship with others; the critical nature of growth-fostering moments and people; and the active disconnecting from the campus and from others as a strategy for survival, particularly if the yearning for connection and belonging is unmet. These findings have several implications for practice for those working with first-gen students including those in higher
education. First, the findings suggest that the sense of disconnection that first-gen students experience can be invisible and hard to gauge from quantitative data alone (class attendance, test scores). Second, belonging often is experienced in phases and cycles and disrupting the cycle of disconnection can be possible through growth-fostering moments. Third, relationships matter, including relationships with peers, faculty, advisors and other staff at colleges that all have the potential to leave an imprint on how a first-gen student negotiates the various emotions of belonging at any given moment.

**Keywords:** First-generation college student; low-income; college completion; sense of belonging; Relational Cultural Theory
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Shared Introduction

There are over 14 million students in four-year colleges in the United States this academic year (US Department of Education, 2021), and it is most likely that one in three of them is the first in their family to attend college, making them “first-gen” (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). Out of that group of first-gen students, statistically, only one in 10 will have a college degree within six years, compared to 60% of the rest of the students who are likely to finish their degree in that six-year time frame (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). A college degree plays a significant role in the lives and communities of those who are from low-income backgrounds, particularly if they have been impacted by intergenerational poverty. Not only does a college degree increase the likelihood that the poverty cycle can be broken through the socioeconomic mobility it provides, but it also ensures better health outcomes (Bauldry, 2012; Chetty et al., 2017; Frakt, 2019).

A sense of belonging and connection to others is believed to be crucial for human development and growth (Huitt, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; Jordan, 2018). Within the landscape of higher education, research on first-gen college student success has indicated the important role that a sense of belonging plays in first-gen students’ ability to achieve academic success as measured by semester and cumulative GPA.

This dissertation is comprised of two papers linking the literature of first-gen student outcomes with how belonging is developed by a first-gen student. The first paper provides a literature review of first-gen student outcomes as well as a detailed examination of the research on a sense of belonging in college students. The second paper presents an exploratory case study of one first-gen student’s efforts to belong at their institution.

During economic downturns or recessions, the unemployment rate of those with college degrees remains relatively stable compared to those without, and those with college degrees can
find jobs faster even during a recession (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013). Those with college degrees are also earning approximately $1 million more over the course of their working years than those who have a high school degree and are thus able to accumulate greater wealth for the next generation (Carnevale, 2015; Carnevale, 2021; Fry, 2021; Ma, 2019).

First-gen students have tended to be from low-income families (though not all first-gen students are low-income and not all low-income students are first-gen). The most elite colleges in the United States have the highest college completion rates, more financial resources, smaller classes, and significant on-campus support services (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Tough, 2019). Research has demonstrated that these tend to be the schools that provide the most explosive socioeconomic mobility, particularly for students who are from low-income backgrounds (Chetty et al., 2017). Unfortunately, admission to an elite college is highly improbable for first-gen students who are most likely to be attending under-resourced high schools that do not provide the requisite preparation and rigor for admission to these types of colleges (Ma, 2019). Representation of first-gen students in elite institutions is remarkably low, accounting for only 3% of students from the lowest income quartile (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016).

With all the focus on the benefits of a college degree and more first-gen students attending college, disparities in graduation rates have piqued the interest of the research, funding, and educational communities to better understand the factors that contribute to the differences we see today. Several factors have repeatedly emerged as collectively leading to the graduation gap between first-gen students and their continuing-generation colleagues. Some of these include the type of college that the student attends, academic preparation from high school, financial challenges, family support, and a sense of belonging.
While the sense of belonging is important for all college students, the lack of belonging was seen to have a much more detrimental impact on students who were first-gen, from a low-income background, or from a racially underrepresented group than it was for students who were continuing-generation or affluent (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). Institutions of higher education have formally aimed to foster belonging on their campuses by creating administrative offices for affinity groups (multicultural students, LGBTQ students) as well as offices dedicated to first-gen students. Aside from measuring the outputs of these interventions as seen in academic achievement and retention or graduation rates, the individual experiences of belonging of first-gen students are largely unknown. The sense of belonging is dynamic and increases and diminishes over time in a cyclical pattern and it is the collective force of the moments of connection and disconnection that can ultimately lead one to gauge the degree of belonging they experience in a particular place with particular people in their lives.

While the nature of belonging is complex, an exploratory case study design is one well-suited way to begin to answer the research question, “How do interpersonal dynamics that occur in communication and interaction with university staff and peers contribute to a first-gen student’s sense of belonging in a residential four-year college?” An in-depth understanding of the complexities and nuances that embody the ways a first-gen student develops and nurtures belonging as they travel through their college journey is enhanced through the lens of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT).

The interview data is interpreted and analyzed from this RCT perspective, informed by a philosophy that the natural and optimal state for human growth and development occurs in connection with others, and that disconnection from others is where the suffering and isolation exist (Jordan, 2010).
Disrupting the cycle of disconnection that an individual might experience provides opportunity and hope that a sense of belonging can be further maintained. A greater sense of belonging might also increase the likelihood of college completion so that the first-gen student who participated in this research study can be the first in their family to graduate from college.
Paper I: The Bumpy Road to College Graduation: A Literature Review of First-Gen Student Outcomes and Experiences

Introduction

Education, and in particular higher education, can pave the way for social and economic mobility in the United States. For those who are from low-income communities, the impact of a college degree is particularly crucial because intergenerational poverty can leave people trapped in a cycle that is hard to break. Bachelor’s degrees are correlated with better health outcomes (Bauldry, 2012), lower unemployment, and higher earnings over a lifetime (Schazenbach, 2017). In 2018, it was reported that the unemployment rate of those with a college degree (defined as a four-year bachelor’s degree) was 2.1%, compared to 3.9% for high school graduates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Further, a college graduate earns roughly $1 million more over their lifetime than those with only a high school degree (Carnevale, 2015; Carnevale, 2021).

An elaboration of terminology can add clarity to how terms are used in literature as well as this dissertation. Much of the literature on college students who are the first in their family to attend college utilizes some variation of the following terms: “First-gen Low-Income” (FGLI) student, “First-gen College Student” (FGCS), or “first-gen” which is the industry shorthand for this student population. The intersection of growing up near or under the poverty line and being the first member of a family to graduate with a bachelor’s degree is where the term first-gen has been used most prominently (Close the Gap Foundation, 2021). Only 28% of colleges actually track first-gen status which is a self-reported data point, and may vary across institutions (Whitley et al., 2018). A student’s low-income status is designated with greater ease as it is
associated with family tax returns that are required with completion of FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and can also be verified with the Pell Eligibility of a student. Pell Grants are federal aid that is provided to college students who have unmet financial need, and typically allocated based on expected family contribution and the cost of attendance. Families earning less than $20,000 annually tend to receive most of the funds from the Federal Pell Grants (FAFSA, 2022). According to Sharpe (2017) there are variations with how first-gen students are defined in higher education and with the Department of Education (no parent in the household has a degree, no education after high school, no degree after high school, level of education of those in the household versus birth family). Students who are in programs supporting first-gen, low-income students often refer to themselves as “first-gen,” dropping the identity of “low-income” due to how being low-income has shaped how others have interacted with them (Goward, 2018). Further, individuals from low-income backgrounds might harbor shame and resentment of their life experiences with financial struggle and wish to distance themselves from the terminology (Goward, 2018). It is in line with the preferred self-reference of first-gen students and other bodies that focus on first-gen student success and empowerment, and as such, this dissertation will also use the term first-gen when referencing first-generation college students who are also from low-income backgrounds.

Even though the value of a college degree has been recognized at local, national, and policy levels, there have been ample challenges with providing adequate access and success for first-gen students. Public and private pressure for programs and initiatives to develop knowledge-building in low-income communities and encourage a college-going culture has led to 33% of all students in college being first-generation (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). One of the main reasons that the research focus of this dissertation is inclusive of students who are low-
income as well as the first in their family to attend college is that graduation rates of students from low-income backgrounds are staggeringly behind their more affluent counterparts, with only 10% of college students from the lowest quartile of income graduating within six years (The Pell Institute, 2018) compared to the national graduation rate of 60% in six years (US Department of Education, 2019; DeAngelo, 2011).

As matriculation rates for first-gen students started growing, the focus in research literature pivoted to building an understanding of the mismatched graduation outcomes for first-gen students who were attending the same college as their continuing-generation (those whose parents also have a college degree) and higher-income peers. Current research on college persistence indicates that several prominent factors have notable impact on graduation outcomes. First, first-gen students are seen as lacking significant academic preparation from predominantly under-resourced high schools and are unprepared for the extra work and rigor that is required in a college setting (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Second, there are financial challenges that first-gen students face by virtue of coming from a family with fewer expendable economic resources. Third, because first-gen students are the first in their families to go to college, their families may not know what type of support is needed for their child to succeed (Dennis et al., 2005). Fourth, a lower sense of belonging that first-gen students have to their campus was shown to have a negative impact on their academic achievement, thereby impacting college completion (Gopalan & Brady, 2019).

While these factors collectively and individually contribute to persistence and graduation rates, this dissertation is focused primarily on how a sense of belonging is navigated, developed, and experienced by first-gen students in four-year colleges. The sense of belonging is uniquely positioned to be a factor which is directly impacted by the presence of other factors and
simultaneously serves as a root cause for the emergence of other factors. For example, not having an adequate sense of belonging can inhibit the ability to maintain a focus on academics, or not experiencing academic success can prevent a sense of belonging. The psychological dimension of sense of belonging is also unique and of utmost interest because it is the variable that cannot be quantified and measured in the ways that one can measure academic preparedness, and financial challenges. Sense of belonging is an individual psychological experience that is predominantly understood through direct engagement with and observation of students, utilizing quantitative surveys and qualitative data from interviews. The abstract nature of belonging, and how it is an adaptive response to inner emotions and external events, makes understanding its development in first-gen students an important element of studying both the concept of belonging and how it contributes to college completion.

Sense of belonging is a crucial aspect of helping students ultimately graduate from college. According to Strayhorn, (2012) a sense of belonging in college can be defined as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (i.e., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers).” Researchers identified that a better sense of belonging can increase personal and academic success, and that an increase in sense of belonging is correlated with higher use of campus resources (including the library, counseling services, academic support services, writing center, tutoring) (Johnson, 2020). An absence of a sense of belonging can be associated with the paradox that first-gen students who might be in greater need of campus resources inevitably utilize them less because of the lack of belonging they feel.
Many universities have various systems in place designed to create a sense of belonging on campus – extracurricular groups, student government, precollege orientation activities, advisory groups, a freshman year experience or seminar, Resident Advisors in dorms, campus-wide events, all-campus events, tutoring, and faculty office hours/teaching assistants (Beauchamp et al., 2020). Research has indicated that it is these types of programs that can lead to a sense of belonging, and they are particularly important for first-gen students, whose sense of exclusion from campus can be detrimental to their academic and graduation outcomes (Beauchamp et al., 2020). What research does not indicate is the way in which first-gen students experience universities’ attempts at fostering belonging and inclusion, formally and informally. All interactions that first-gen students have at an institution can have a positive and supportive or a negative and harmful impact on the sense of belonging that develops.

While the sense of belonging does not single-handedly serve as the variable with the greatest impact on college outcomes for first-gen students, it is a variable that presents tremendous opportunity to be molded, developed, and enhanced as understanding of the phenomenon is better studied and examined. This endeavor would add to the growing body of research and literature on how college completion rates for first-gen students can begin to reach those of their continuing-generation and higher-income counterparts who are attending the same four-year colleges. The quest to bring equality to the first-gen student population’s college success is crucial to the survival, success, and economic mobility of their communities. Better understanding of experiences that first-gen students have in establishing a sense of belonging on their campuses might begin to help institutions of higher education recalibrate, re-envision and reimagine the obligation of enabling the development of a positive sense of belonging for the students they admit.
College Graduation Matters

Socioeconomic, physical, and mental health benefits of college completion can contextualize the critical lens from which college outcomes data can be interpreted. Graduating from college within six years enhances the quality of life for first-gen students and their families. Yet, the nuances of the conditions under which first-gen students are admitted to college, matriculate, and navigate through their college trajectory illustrate the complicated web of interconnected issues that need to be addressed.

Correlations Between Education and Socioeconomic Status and Health

According to the Center on Budget and Policies, nine in 10 working-age adults who rely on government resources (SNAP benefits, public assistance, housing assistance) lack a college degree (Shapiro et al., 2017). The relationship between poverty and a college degree is highly correlated as data indicates that regardless of household type (married couples with related children or female householder with related children), the poverty rate tends to fall as the level of education increases (Ma, 2019). Further, those without a college degree experience much higher rates of poverty than those who have college degrees, and the enormous and increasingly widening earnings and income gaps between those with college degrees and those without shed light on the economic and socio-mobilizing value of a college degree (Shapiro et al., 2017). In addition, the intergenerational transmission of poverty is more prevalent when a college degree is absent (Shapiro et al., 2017). Children who are born into poverty are most likely to be children of color and attend schools that are poorly resourced and unable to meet the educational demands required for college-readiness (Strauss, 2018). Ultimately, children, young adults, families, and communities get caught in a poverty cycle that is challenging to break unless one individual from
the family completes a four-year degree. Take Jorge, for example, who was a first-gen student from NYC attending a prestigious private college in upstate New York. Jorge was the eldest of four siblings. The working-class family had immigrated from the Dominican Republic when the children were young. Their father was a driver at a rental limousine company and their mother cleaned houses for a living. They lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the Bronx in a government-owned building for low-income residents. No one in Jorge’s family, immediate or extended, had attended college, and no one in his immediate community had either so the stakes were high for Jorge. Through his trials and tribulations academically and personally, and through challenges and wins with classes and his career pursuits, Jorge graduated from college and got a job with Goldman Sachs as an analyst. Within two years of graduating, Jorge moved his entire family out of the cramped apartment and bought the family their first home. He was 24 years old. He ensured that his younger siblings applied to college, and he played the role that many parents play in the lives of continuing-generation college students. From this one anecdote, one can see how college completion of one person in a family can have a trickle effect across the entire family and community.

Ongoing research has also indicated a correlation between health outcomes and college education. Those without college degrees are more likely to have higher mortality rates, greater anxiety and depression, and worse health outcomes (Frakt, 2019). Lifetime earnings of someone with a college degree are higher than someone without, and better health is associated with greater wealth (Frakt, 2019).

In addition, there are also better outcomes for long-term socioeconomic mobility for those who have college degrees. As mentioned earlier, when looking at the general population, the unemployment rate of those with a college degree was 2.1%, compared to 3.9% for high
school graduates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). When looking at a specific subsection of the population, young adults aged 25–32, the unemployment rate for those who have a college degree was 3.8% versus 12.2% for those who have only a high school diploma. For adults ages 25–32 who were living in poverty, data showed that 21.8% have a high school diploma, in comparison to 5.8% with a bachelor’s degree (Pew Research Center, 2014). This data suggests the power of college completion as a potentially highly effective poverty alleviation tool.

College education serving as a tool for breaking intergenerational poverty and building generational wealth can also be seen in workforce participation in retirement plans. Data pulled from private and public sectors show that both the opportunity to be offered a retirement plan and the participation in the plan were correlated with having a higher education level (Ma, 2019). Even if individuals without college degrees worked in companies where they were offered retirement plan contributions, their participation might have been affected by the lower wages they earned leading to less disposable income to be put into retirement savings plans (Ma, 2019).
Factors Influencing Graduation Rates

As data increasingly shows the inequitable distribution of college graduation data, more research has tried to understand how students who are deemed to have the requisite skills and abilities to be admitted to college do not graduate. Recognizing that college completion is one of the integral factors to support the economic development of impoverished communities, more research has been conducted to understand factors contributing to the low graduation rates for first-gen students. While the primary focus and area of interest is the concept of belonging and the ways in which it impacts college completion, it is important to address what literature has also identified as contributing elements that influence college completion. These elements are: 1) the colleges that first-gen students choose to attend make a tremendous impact on whether or not they graduate; 2) academic preparedness from high school being inadequate for college-level work; 3) there are pervasive financial challenges that first-gen students must overcome not only in the application process to attend the school, but in the day-to-day financial challenges that make graduation more elusive; and 4) because first-gen students are the first in their family to go to college, the absence of family members who are aware of the strategies needed for first-gen students to navigate the college makes it a lonely and isolating process that they endure very much on their own.

Type of College Attended

Having seen the data that suggests that first-gen college graduates might have a reliable mechanism to get themselves, their families, and their future families out of poverty, it is worth
examining the data that sheds light on the types of schools that first-gen students attend, their success and persistence at these institutions, and their graduation outcomes.

Numerous studies and reports have consistently identified that matriculation at a highly selective or elite college increases the likelihood of graduation within six years. Selective colleges, while they are more expensive and academically more demanding, have larger endowments and grant-making abilities for first-gen students, more academic and psychosocial supports in place, and a culture of graduation, which provides the greatest economic benefit to students who graduate (Tough, 2019). A 2019 report published by the College Board illustrates that lower-income students attending public colleges are less likely to complete a degree than their higher-income peers while having similar high school GPAs (Ma, 2019). Even having a high GPA may not necessarily increase likelihood of graduation unless the student attends a competitive college. For example, data has shown that low-income students with high GPAs from high school who attended public four-year colleges had a 61% college completion rate within six years compared to the same group of high GPA students who attended a private four-year college who had an 80% graduation rate in six years (Ma, 2019).

The socioeconomic translation of graduation from an elite school within six years provides context for the significance of college choice. The Equality of Opportunity Project has been developing mobility scorecards for universities to gauge how fast students from the bottom income quintile move to earnings in the top quintile and demonstrates that first-gen students who enroll at elite institutions with high graduation rates are much more likely to succeed than if they enroll at colleges that have substandard graduation rates (Chetty et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, as much as outcome data continues to illustrate the explosive power that matriculation at a selective college can have for first-gen students, families, and communities,
the 2016 report titled “True Merit” by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation suggests that first-gen students at the most elite institutions were profoundly underrepresented. Analysis of the report suggests that a mere 3% of students from the bottom socioeconomic quartile went to the most competitive colleges (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). In 2019 the outlook grew increasingly more grim and the College Board reported that children whose parents were in the top 1% of the income distribution were 50 times more likely to attend the most selective schools than children whose families were in the bottom 20% of income distribution (Ma, 2019).

As shared earlier, over 30% of all college students are now first-gen, and they are primarily represented in public colleges and less competitive colleges. While there is a push to have more representation at the most elite schools that have the highest graduation rates and the best socioeconomic mobility cards, another practical strategy might be to increase graduation rates for the students who are attending public colleges.

As part of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the federal government established TRIO programs to support college access and success for students who are low-income, potentially first-generation, and students with disabilities. TRIO is not an acronym; it is what legislators called the collective group of programs at the time and the name has withstood the test of time. The TRIO programs initially began with Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student support Services and later expanded to Educational Opportunity Centers, Veterans Upward Bound, Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs, Ronald Mc Nair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, and Upward Bound Math-Science (The Pell Institute, 2021). Federal TRIO programs have shown success rates for first-gen students in enrollment, persistence, and graduation (The Pell Institute, 2021). Unfortunately, mostly due to funding issues, TRIO only reaches 1% of eligible students (The Pell Institute, 2021).
Academic Preparation from High School

Two common standardized measures for college readiness are the Standardized Aptitude Test (SAT) and (American College Testing) ACT scores. The SAT score is commonly viewed as a score which determines whether a student is college-ready, and the higher the score, the more elite the school options are. The College Board, the organization that administers the SAT, establishes benchmarks for the Math section and the Evidence-based Reading and Writing section. They argue that if a student meets or exceeds the expectations of each section that they have a 75% chance of earning at least a C in their first semester credit-bearing course (College Board, 2021). As Tough (2019) demonstrated, the ability to score high on the SAT is a combination of subject matter knowledge as well as test-taking skills. Tutors or specialists in the SAT teach their clients the strategies they need to score high on the test, usually a combination of anxiety reduction and mastering the setup of the test (Tough, 2019). Unfortunately, SAT preparation is not a resource that is readily available for first-gen students in poorly funded high schools. The gap in access to adequate resources that prepare someone to take a standardized college admissions test is one way that first-gen students are excluded from admissions to colleges where they have the greatest chance to graduate and move their families out of poverty. First-gen students with SAT scores of 1400 who matriculate at elite colleges only make up 7.3% of the student population (St. Amour, 2020).

Another way that academic preparation becomes a factor for college success is how calculus has recently become the course which universities use to gauge academic preparedness and success. Even if students are not interested in engineering or quantitative subjects, they report taking the course with the hopes of increasing their likelihood for admission to a
competitive college (Tough, 2019). As one can predict, access to calculus is inequitable as only 48% of high schools in the country reported having a course in calculus, and predictably, these high schools are those where students are in the highest income backets (Tough, 2019). If first-gen and low-income students are attending high schools where they do not have an opportunity to take calculus, and successful completion of freshman calculus is a predictor of whether one will succeed in college and beyond, grim graduation statistics for first-gen students await (Tough, 2019).

Financial Challenges

Many first-gen students must work while they are in school to support their families. According to the US Department of Education, “low-income” is a term given to an individual whose household income for the previous year did not exceed 150% of the poverty line (US Department of Education, 2021). For a family unit of two people, this would be $26,130, and for a family unit of three people it would be $32,940 (US Department of Education, 2021). For the New York State EOP, income guidelines say that the annual taxable income cannot exceed $32,227 for a household of two people and cannot exceed $40,626 for a household of three (State University of New York, 2022).

This data illustrates the lack of access to funds that most first-gen students have in college, relying heavily on financial aid, consisting of federal and state-level grants and loans to be able to afford tuition and room and board. Once first-gen students are in college, they generally must work to continue to provide financial support for their families. For example, 66% of first-generation students are employed and working an average of 20 hours per week compared to their continuing-generation peers who work about 12 hours per week (RTI
If first-gen students are working excessive hours to fund their education and support their families, they may resort to pursuing their degrees at a part-time basis. The correlation between part-time status and graduation is that only 21% of students who were enrolled part-time graduated in six years compared to 80% of students who were enrolled full-time (RTI International, 2019).

Financial obstacles can be so overwhelming for first-gen students that out of the various services offered in colleges including financial aid, health, academic advising, academic support, and career services, first-gen students by and large used the financial aid services more than their continuing generation counterparts: 65% of first-gen students compared to 49% of continuing-generation students (RTI International, 2014). In all other services provided, the report indicated that first-gen students utilized the services at significantly lower levels than their continuing-generation counterparts.

Similarly, for first-gen students who do not resort to part-time education, the sheer number of hours they are working outside of school impacts their ability to focus on their academics and active participation in developing community and friendships at their school, the combination of which impacts academic success and graduation (Falcon, 2015). Take Kendra, for example. Kendra was a hardworking high school student who was admitted to a competitive SUNY in upstate New York and had an expected family contribution that far exceeded what the family could realistically provide. Kendra had to work 15 hours per week at the local Chipotle, in addition to the 10 hours of work study on campus as part of her financial aid package. Between attending class, and running between her on- and off-campus jobs, Kendra was barely able to study for classes she signed up for and which she genuinely enjoyed. Without working those hours, Kendra would not be able to provide financial support to her family and be able to fund
her education. After the first semester Kendra had barely passed three classes and had failed one. If one were to only look at Kendra’s transcript, one might presume that the student was not capable of mastering the content or was not disciplined enough in her studies. It is the financial responsibilities that Kendra has, by virtue of being low-income, that contributed to the academic challenges she faced.

**Family Support**

Students whose parents have gone to college have a distinct advantage over students who are the first in their family to go to college. Continuing-generation students have parents who are involved with the college application process, and who have the time and financial resources, the personal experience from having gone through the process themselves, and a knowledge of the distinct pathways needed to succeed in college, so they can push and nudge their children to take the steps they need to take (Dynarski, 2017). Navigating choosing classes, applying for financial aid, and figuring out housing is something that often falls squarely on the shoulders of first-gen students who cannot lean on their parents to help them sift through the volume of information and make strategic choices in contexts in which they have no lived experience (Banda, 2021; Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018).

While families of first-gen students can provide the emotional support and as much financial support as they can muster, the lack of knowledge of the specific tools and strategies needed to succeed in a higher education setting makes it challenging for first-gen students to lean on their family to guide them through understanding common terminology such as “office hours” or the value of getting to know their professors. The lack of cultural capital negatively impacts
first-gen students’ ability to academically succeed even if they are academically prepared for the rigors of college (Forrest Cataldi, 2018).

To sum, better understanding the conditions in environments where first-gen students attend college would contribute to the development or improvement in existing efforts to promote their college completions. With one third of students in four-year colleges being first-generation and only 10% of this subgroup graduating within six years (Forrest Cataldi, 2018), it is crucial that the understanding of the factors that impact college outcomes is better developed. As mentioned before, the factor of how belonging is developed and experienced is the focus of this work and warrants a detailed examination of the literature on how belonging is experienced by first-gen students.
A Closer Look at Belonging

Theory of Belonging

Strayhorn’s theory of college student belonging closely described the lived experiences of first-gen students and is a practical guiding theory to understand the literature on how belonging impacts first-gen college student graduation outcomes. Strayhorn’s theory of belonging was primarily built on several other prominent theories: Abraham Maslow’s theory on the hierarchy of needs and T. Schlossberg’s theory of mattering and marginality. With the former, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs stipulates that human beings grow from having their needs met at five levels of a pyramid, namely physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Pichere, 2015). Maslow’s theory posits that, without having these needs at each level more or less fulfilled, human beings will not be able to reach the goal of self-actualization (Pichere, 2015). According to Schlossberg’s theory of mattering and marginality, it is necessary for people to feel that they matter and belong in their environment. Schlossberg said that it is even more important to have a sense of belonging, particularly during periods of transition (Schlossberg, 1989). Sense of belonging as defined by Strayhorn is “a student’s perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

Strayhorn (2012, p. 29–39) argued that there are seven core elements of belonging, which are:

1. Belonging is a universal basic human need. Using Maslow’s hierarchy as a visual, Strayhorn theorizes that the deprivation of middle needs, belonging, prevents
people from higher order needs of knowledge production, which is what is needed for academic success.

2. Sense of belonging is strong enough to drive human behavior. All people wish to feel special, needed and valued, and cared about by others.

3. Sense of belonging takes on greater importance in certain contexts, certain times and among certain populations. Studying and learning are more challenging until students are able to feel a sense of belonging.

4. Sense of belonging is related to mattering. There are five dimensions to mattering: attention, being noticed in positive ways, importance or feeling cared about, dependence or feeling needed, appreciated, and experiencing oneself in others who share both successes and failures.

5. Intersecting identities impact student belonging, and true belonging develops from authenticity and acceptance and is not about merely “fitting in.”

6. Sense of belonging leads to additional positive outcomes and success in the domain in which there is belonging (academics or extracurriculars, for example).

7. As conditions, contexts, and circumstances change, the sense of belonging needs to be continuously satisfied.

The importance of belonging is more critical for populations that are more likely to feel marginalized, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income, first-gen, Muslim, military vets with disabilities, and gay students (Strayhorn, 2012). First-gen students are marginalized as a population, as can be seen in matriculation and attendance statistics shared earlier, and particularly in four-year institutions. Several research studies have found that belonging and student success are connected, particularly for first-gen students (Hausmann et al.,
2007; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Strayhorn (2012) argued that there is a link between social isolation, loneliness, perceived fit, and belonging, and students who feel that they do not belong, do not graduate.

Gopalan and Brady (2019) utilized the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, which included 23,750 participants, to explore the degree of belonging that first-year students have at their schools and whether their under-represented racial minority status, first-generation status, and sex might lead to the variation in outcomes. Their analysis of the data indicates that while belonging was protective for all students in the group, very low belonging was highly correlated with lower persistence. They also found that the lowest levels of belonging were experienced by students who were under-represented minorities and first-generation. (Gopalan & Brady, 2019).

Belonging tends to be experienced on a spectrum where several factors can contribute to the enhancement or diminishment of belonging that first-gen students experience. Research conducted by Meeuswisse et al. (2010) studied the correlation between students’ learning environments and their interaction with peers, teachers, and study success. What they found was that ethnic minority students were more likely to have a sense of belonging if they had good formal relationships with their teachers and peers, compared to majority students whose sense of belonging was correlated with informal relationships with fellow students (Meeuwisse et al., 2010).

Researchers have found not only that belonging is a predictor for academic and social adjustment to college, but also that marginalized students have lower sense of belonging than their white and higher-income peers (Gummadam et al., 2016). Interventions that are targeted to
increase a sense of belonging have also seen positive outcomes for higher grade point averages over time (Gummadam et al., 2016).

Both experimental and correlational research studies have found that college students’ sense of belonging can lead students to be more engaged and interested in their coursework, leading to increased persistence and graduation rates (Strayhorn, 2012; Yeager et al., 2016). This research also indicated that students who have a higher sense of belonging to their campus are more likely to use resources that can be connected to their success, that belonging can be an antidote to stress, and that an improvement in mental health is another positive side effect of having belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Yeager et al., 2016).

Despite the various positive academic and social outcomes that are associated with having an increased sense of belonging on the campus, this success can come at a social cost (Jack, 2019). When first-gen students head to college, there is often a complex dynamic that occurs for the family and friends who are “left behind.” First-gen students can end up changing as a result of their exposure to different people and ideas during their first semester and this change may or may not be well-received by their community upon their return home (Banks-Santilli, 2014). Part of the cost is manifested in the familial conflict that develops as first-gen students have to reconcile family roles with their educational mobility (Banks-Santilli, 2014). To reduce friction, some first-gen students resort to separating their “home” identity and their “college” identity, while others take pride in showing their family how their education has already started to pay off (Banks-Santilli, 2014). Byron, for example, was a first-gen college student from New York City who went to the University of Chicago. After finishing his first semester at college, he came home to his parents and siblings, who, instead of celebrating his successful completion of his first semester in college, began to make comments about how
different he was. Byron hurtfully shared that his parents said, “What, we’re not good enough for you anymore?” And, “Now that you’re a college boy and all, you forgot where you come from and who you are!” This kind of chilly reception from some first-gen families could also stem from a family’s perception that by choosing their college identity their child was in effect rejecting their family. While college students seek acceptance at their colleges and at home, they might find themselves living simultaneously in disparate worlds, neither of which fully accepts them.

**Microaggressions and Imposter Phenomenon**

Microaggressions are a type of everyday experience of discrimination that is targeted to people in racially and socioeconomically marginalized groups (Ellis et al., 2018). What could be the most difficult element of microaggressions is that they are ambiguous by nature, making it challenging for both the victim and the perpetrator to identify the mechanism at play (Walker, 2020).

A mixed methods research study conducted by Lewis and colleagues (2021) using survey data from over 1,700 participants found that African American students experienced significantly greater frequency of racial microaggressions than their Latinx, Asian, and multiracial peers, and there was a strong correlation between increased frequency of microaggressions and a reduced sense of belonging on campus.

While growing literature has continuously shown that microaggressions based on racial group have had a negative impact on academic outcomes for students, there has been less research on microaggressions based on socioeconomic status. Ellis and colleagues (2018) studied the lived experiences of first-generation students and found that microaggressions involved
assumptions about students, invalidated their efforts, and isolated them when they were seeking to connect with others. The microaggressions were in the form of microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. Of crucial significance, the researchers found that when faculty and university staff were validating, the core beliefs that students had about their academic and personal success in college were positive (Ellis et al., 2018).

Another factor to consider is the experience of imposter phenomenon that first-gen students experience at their campuses and how it erodes at their academic potential. Imposter phenomenon is a growing area of research that examines cases in which individuals from underrepresented backgrounds (women in technology or finance, for example) or from historically marginalized groups acquire access to a space from which they had been excluded. The thoughts that they are an imposter and that at any one point someone may approach them and that it was a mistake begin to take hold. These thoughts can bring on a state of anxiety that is paralyzing and leads to inaction (Peteet et al., 2015). The other manifestation of imposter phenomenon can lead individuals to work longer, to work harder, and to seek perfection to minimize their stress and anxiety (Parkman, 2016). The author further argued that these tools are the only ones that individuals might feel that they have (Parkman, 2016).

In the article “Predictors of Imposter Phenomenon Among Talented Ethnic Minority Undergraduate Students,” the authors argued that imposter syndrome can lead students to disengage from academics, resist evaluation from tests/homework, struggle with feelings of unending inadequacy, and carry an unhealthy pressure to succeed (Peteet, 2015). The study outcomes indicated that there was correlation between first-generation status and experience of imposter syndrome (Peteet, 2015). The disengagement from academics is in line with Parkman’s
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(2016) view that individuals experiencing imposter phenomenon often demonstrate a decrease in visibility, turn away from support that is offered, and they might withdraw completely.

The Exclusion Perpetuated by the Hidden Curriculum

There are formal ways in which institutions aim to nurture a sense of inclusion and belonging. The formal visible curriculum includes the classroom setting, courses, professors, various administrators and staff, building infrastructure, deadlines, assignments, student groups, campus-wide organized events, orientation programs, etc. These elements can be seen by everyone, are typically documented, serve as norms, and create predictability and structure for students, professors, and the campus community at large (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2015). Universities create formal coursework, mentorship, dedicated offices and leaders, student-led groups, and institutional philosophies and beliefs about how they intend to create environments of inclusivity and diversity (McNair et al., 2016). While those efforts are well-intended, they may not fully address the hidden curriculum that complicates the pursuit of persistence and ultimate and timely graduation for first-gen students who have not been informed that a separate, unspoken, unwritten lay of the land also exists (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2015).

These unspoken methods that continuing-generation students may have already been aware of by virtue of having parents or siblings communicate these norms that one must follow to succeed, are not always apparent to first-gen students. The hidden curriculum can perpetuate the sense of not belonging and an inability to keep up with expectations and can serve to maintain the status quo of dominance of those who are continuing-generation and of higher income (Alsubaie, 2015).
The concept of the hidden curriculum and its potentially deleterious impact on first-gen students led to innovative courses at institutions as part of democratizing education and helping students fill the knowledge gaps that the hidden curriculum engineered (Chatelain, 2018). These types of courses are one way to begin to make explicit some of the coded language and implied knowledge of how to navigate institutions of higher education through content that ranges from balancing school and family responsibility to contending with detours and setbacks, and traversing more practical elements of relationship building with professors (Chatelain, 2018). There remains much work to do and many issues to address in creating an environment of belonging and success for first-gen students.

**Peer Relationships and Belonging**

Peer relationships are an important facet of how first-gen students can experience belonging at their colleges. There are two dimensions for how peer relationships can influence belonging. First, one can examine the role of peer relationships when measuring sense of student belonging and understanding whether and how strong an influence peers have on a first-gen student’s sense of belonging. Second, one can observe the sense of belonging first-gen students experience when they are among their peers in social and academic settings.

In discussing the first phenomenon mentioned above, one can wonder if a higher sense of belonging overall increases engagement with peers or whether it is the nature of peer interactions that can contribute to the sense of belonging that first-gen students experience. Various studies indicate that both perspectives on the relationship between the variables are possible. On the one hand, one study posits that peer relationships (and the nature of these relationships and the dynamics experienced within) can have a significant role in the ultimate retention and success
since college students spend much of their time with their peers in various settings, both academic and social (Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Research conducted on understanding the trajectory of Latinx student sense of belonging found that when first-year students spoke frequently with their peers about classes outside of formal class time, and took part in social and community organizations, they were more likely to have increased levels of belonging in their second and third year of school (Ribera et al., 2017).

On the other hand, it has been suggested by Ribera et al. (2017) that since students must first have an interaction with peers (or faculty at large) to gauge their sense of belonging within these groups, peer relationships might be an input rather than an outcome. Hausmann and colleagues (2017) found that the initial sense of belonging students felt was a predictor for the nature of interactional dynamics that the students would then continue to have with their peers and faculty over the course of the academic year.

Of interest were the findings on a research study conducted by McClure and Ryder (2018) on how money and peer relationships might be involved in the sense of belonging students experienced. While the focus group participants in this study were predominantly White and considered middle income, it is worth recognizing that one of their findings is highly applicable to first-gen students. They found that students who either ran out of spending money, did not have access to adequate funds, or had to work, and thereby missed out on opportunities to have social interactions, experienced the most isolation and exclusion, and they had the greatest struggle in forming and maintaining friendships (McClure & Ryder, 2018). They also found that the amounts of money used by participants was determined by the desire to keep up with peers and the spending was also driven by the fear of social exclusion (McClure & Ryder, 2018), which might mean that first-gen students could be in a belonging deficit before they even arrive
to campus. As mentioned earlier, one of the challenges for first-gen students is that they have less access to spending money and are more likely to have to work many hours during the week to pay for school or support their family (RTI International, 2019).

The second phenomenon of belonging within peer relationships was studied by Ribera et al. (2017). They used the data from the 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement which has data from over 1,500 institutions, with over 470,000 respondents. Their analysis of the data used responses of 9,371 students where two in five identified as first-generation college students. Their findings indicated that first-generation students and students of color had less positive perception of peer belonging than their counterparts, and that first-generation students had a significantly lower sense of peer belonging than continuing generation students (Ribera et al., 2017). Another interesting finding was that students at public institutions had a lower sense of peer belonging than students at private institutions (Ribera et al., 2017). While the researchers indicated that sense of belonging increases when students are involved in leadership positions in campus organizations, or participate in a learning community or service learning and research with faculty, the parameters of their research did not identify or highlight the factors that contribute to such low levels of peer belonging in historically marginalized and under-represented students.

The psychological experience of belonging and its academic manifestations clarify how belonging can impact college persistence in first-gen students. As this section has illustrated, the concept of belonging has been studied in several different ways; none of these have used the framework of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) to begin to understand the human experience that first-gen students are having as they seek a sense of belonging in their college.
Institutional Efforts to Increase Graduation (and Belonging)

Formal measures of college graduation are those that are most notably addressed in literature and research and initiatives’ success tends to be measured by first-gen graduation outcomes. As earlier discussions of belonging have illustrated, it is likely that initiatives first had an impact on student belonging that was then translated to academic success and ultimately graduation. Even though the language in programs and articles focuses on graduation rates, the inherent connection of these initiatives to student belonging is important to remember.

McNair et al. (2016), in the book *Becoming a Study-Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success*, have declared the importance of the responsibility that institutions take to make all the necessary modifications, changes, and transformations needed to serve all students that they admit. The authors encouraged a degree of accountability and ownership for student success instead of putting the onus of student success on the student, and this a particularly challenging stance for students who may struggle to navigate the complex web of institutional bureaucracy if they are first-gen and have not had any exposure to systems of higher education (McNair et al., 2016). Years after the publishing of that book and call to action, in 2018 a report by the Center for First Generation Student Success at NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) indicated that first-generation students make up one third of all college students and that even with institutional acknowledgement more of a focused and systematic effort is needed to increase first-gen graduation rates. Many of the institutions that participated in the survey do not have systems to identify what the supplemental services need to be and how to deliver them in a way that benefits students at scale (Whitley et al., 2018).
With institutions beginning to heed the call to be more strategic in providing better support to all students who are admitted, not just continuing-generation students, there are some notable examples that are worth mentioning, namely the Educational Opportunity Program, a national undertaking by NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) as the professional organization of student affairs professionals, and approaches undertaken by the University of California system (largest public college system in the United States).

**Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)**

The EOP, founded in 1967, is a state-run program that provides admission support and campus assistance for first-gen students attending public universities (Office of Opportunity Programs, 2020). Since students who are low-income will most likely have attended under-resourced schools and may appear less academically prepared than their higher-income counterparts, these programs at the state level provide financial support and academic assistance to matriculated students. For example, New York, California, and Pennsylvania have the EOP, New Jersey has the Educational Opportunity Fund, and Texas has the Texas Educational Opportunity Grant Program. In New York State, the program has an office in each public college in the state and admits students and provides both the financial assistance and the additional academic safeguards and programming to help them succeed and persist once they enter college (https://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop/). The Arthur O. Eve Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) is a partnership between the State of New York and its independent and private colleges, and similarly provides financial and academic assistance to students from low-income backgrounds (Higher Education Opportunity Program, n.d.).
EOP programs recognize that the students are predominantly first-gen, low-income, and from underrepresented communities and provide individualized academic counseling and targeted programming for college-level skill development (time management, academic skills, etc). There is typically a designated office with designated staff who serve as counselors and advisors for students who are admitted through the program. They are able to make referrals for services that the student needs and are a regular touchpoint to provide comprehensive support to ensure that EOP students have a successful transition to college. EOP counselors often advocate or liaise between the student and faculty and other academic advisors as needed. Since financial challenges are one of the obstacles that first-gen students must overcome, EOP provides direct aid grants to students, so they can purchase books, supplies, or use the funds for living expenses.

One of the EOP components in SUNY is a mandatory tuition-free four-to-six-week summer bridge program before classes start. Students take one or two summer courses for credit in courses such as writing, mathematics, computer skills, or library skills, or take placement tests in preparation for the fall semester. The program’s rationale is that this concentrated time of immersion with a group of students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds can establish a sense of community in the cohort of admitted students, develop familiarity with campus services, and start to develop belonging and connectedness to the institution.

Unfortunately, there aren’t many published studies about the effectiveness of specific EOP programs as they are decentralized, and each campus has their own respective version of how they facilitate the programming, expectations, and services. Winograd and colleagues (2018) conducted a longitudinal study on graduation outcomes for EOP students enrolled in a competitive SUNY. They found that EOP students had GPAs comparable to students who had been admitted with much higher test scores and had continuous academic enrollment at rates that
were similar to non-EOP students at the end of the first year. They shared that this is an indication the program is working. They include, however, there was an inequitable disparity between EOP students who transferred out after their third year and non-EOP counterparts at the institution. Not only did the EOP students have lower GPAs at the time of transfer, the EOP students tended to transfer to community colleges rather than the bachelor’s granting four-year colleges to which the non-EOP students transferred. This outcome also likely contributes to the low completion rates of four-year degrees of first-gen students. They attributed some of the credit accrual challenges to the fact that first-gen students do not tend to come to college with college credits from their high schools and have less of a cushion if they do not earn credits they are taking. Second, when financial aid is tied to credit accrual and when students lose financial aid because they do not complete all attempted credits, the loss of financial aid leads to loss of access (Winograd et al., 2018).

An Investment from Student Affairs Professionals

In 2018, the partnership between the Suder Foundation and the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals (NASPA) created the Center for First-generation Student Success (https://firstgen.naspa.org/). This collaborative effort not only drives institutional policy and program development, but also provides an opportunity for knowledge sharing among institutions that have successful initiatives supporting first-gen students. The center exemplifies the type of structural changes that McNair et al. (2016) argued for regarding how colleges must be more adequately prepared to support all the students they serve, not only the continuing-generation students. Recognizing that first-gen students have unique and different needs and
establishing practices that promote successful graduation for first-gen students is one way that the Center does this.

A series of commitments that universities are encouraged to make are housed under an initiative named *First-gen Forward*. With this initiative, institutions who are committed to providing supports, resources, sharing, and acquiring best practices to help their first-gen students succeed can apply to be a First-gen Forward Institution. Institutions are expected to be a two- or four-year school with accreditation, be a NASPA member, secure support and commitment from senior leadership, participate in monthly calls, host online events, and publish blog posts about their first-gen student initiatives and support. With three sets of cohorts that this initiative has developed, it is an indication that institutions are acknowledging both the need and the benefit of serving their first-gen students with greater intentionality and better outcomes. Since the 2019–2020 school year, 268 institutions have been recognized under this program for demonstrating their commitment to ensuring first-gen students succeed.

**An Example from University of California**

One of the largest public university systems in the country is the University of California (UC) system. In a 2018 PBS NewsHour video, Hari Sreenivasan interviews students, faculty, and the president about the initiatives that the UC system has undertaken strategically supporting their first-gen student population (How Faculty Mentors Can Help First-generation Students Succeed, 2018).

Institutions have utilized the concept of peer and faculty mentorship to develop and deliver an intervention to their first-gen students with the hopes that it will increase graduation
rates. First, they have undertaken an approach that utilizes first generation faculty to teach first-
generation students, teaching the content through identifying their own first-gen life and school
experiences as a way to connect with the students. The first-gen faculty can become mentors and
begin to help undo the damaging effects of imposter syndrome, which many first-gen students
face in college. The incorporation of peer support into providing mental health resources to first-
gen students complements the support students receive from their faculty mentor. Administrators
hope that the mentorship will lead to community change. As Janet Napolitano, President of the
UC system says, “We know that our first-gen students within just a few years of graduating are
making more than their entire families. We know that they’re tremendous contributors to the
state of California, to the economy of California” (How Faculty Mentors Can Help First-
generation Students Succeed, 2018).

Despite much of the improved rhetoric on diversifying higher education and policies both
at the national and institutional level, the gross disparities in graduation rates indicate that further
study and understanding of first-gen student college experiences can shed light on the issue.
Conclusion

For a student who is the first in their family to go to college and who was born into a family with a low-income background, college graduation opens doors to opportunity for socioeconomic development and mobility, increased access to wealth, better health outcomes, and a likelihood of breaking out of the cycle of poverty. These promises of a bright future for first-gen students, however, are accompanied by a six-year 10% graduation rate (Forrest Cataldi, 2018) compared to the 60% national six-year college completion rate (US Department of Education, 2019, DeAngelo, 2011). It may be that first-gen students are not receiving the necessary or adequate resources and support to graduate from the four-year colleges to which they were admitted. With one in three students in four-year colleges being first-gen, it is imperative to understand the various factors that contribute to these low graduation outcomes (Forrest Cataldi, 2018). Data has shown that 33% of first-gen students left school within the first three years compared to 14% of continuing-generation students (Forrest Cataldi, 2018). Growing research in the area of first-gen student support is an indication that the factors contributing to the disparity in college persistence between continuing-generation and first-gen is one that warrants attention and mitigation.

As highlighted earlier, the focus of this dissertation is on understanding the role belonging on campus plays as first-gen students navigate relationships with faculty, peers, and advisors. To that end, the second paper of this dissertation presents a case study of how one first-gen student navigated this challenge of belonging at their college. While there are several pertinent conceptual frameworks that can inform the study of belonging, this dissertation uses Relational Cultural Theory as the lens from which to understand the participant’s journey of belonging.
Paper II: An Exploratory Case Study of One First-Gen Student’s Quest to Belong

Introduction

Zero (they/them) stepped foot onto their college campus in upstate New York six weeks before classes were to begin for their first year of college. Having never had a best friend, Zero was filled with hopes of finding the types of close bonds that only best friends have. Success was at Zero’s fingertips as they felt the pressure of being a first-gen college student, knowing what college graduation would mean for their family and future. The reader is invited to immerse themselves into a detailed examination and understanding of Zero’s intimate and powerful moments of seeking connection while on a quest to belong in a Primarily White Institution. Some of these moments led to connection and some of them led to an isolated disconnection, while Zero continued to yearn for an elusive sense of belonging. Zero’s story is a compelling illustration of the complex cyclical patterns that encompass the way people move in and out of connection as they continue on the path to belong.

Case Study Description

Zero is a fourth-year student in junior standing at a residential four-year college in the State University of New York system. Zero immigrated to the United States when they were in 11th grade from a country in Central America. Zero is Latinx and lives with their mother and their mother’s partner in a New York City borough when they are not living on campus during the school year. Zero is from a low-income background, as seen by their receipt of the federal Pell Grant (given to students who demonstrate the highest financial need). Zero was admitted to this college through the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) which admits low-income
students who might narrowly miss the qualifications of admission based on academic scores alone. Zero immigrated to the United States during high school and completed two years of the New York City public school system in the Bronx. Zero’s journey to find belonging is ongoing and this report captures merely a small piece of what is a profoundly rich and varied experience. Interviews conducted on Zoom consisted of in-depth discussions with Zero focusing on their experiences of belonging through interactions with peers, faculty, and other staff.

Zero’s eagerness to be part of this research study and the multiple interviews in which Zero participated demonstrate their insight and candor as they give voice to many of the experiences common to other first-gen students.

**Research Question**

The research question of the exploratory case study is:

> How do interpersonal dynamics that occur in communication and interaction with university staff and peers contribute to a first-gen student’s sense of belonging in a residential four-year college?

**Significance of Study**

This State University of New York (SUNY) system is the largest public university system in the United States, with 372,948 students spanning enrollment in Fall 2019 across 64 campuses. According to the SUNY Fast Facts (2020), as of 2020, 37% of the students were receiving the Pell Grant, a federal grant program providing grants for students who typically have a family income below $20,000 (even though a total maximum family income of $50,000 is what is required for eligibility). The SUNY system does not provide data on students’ first-generation or continuing generation status. Research has shown that there is significant overlap
DISRUPTING DISCONNECTIONS

and intersectionality for students who are low-income and first-generation (NASPA Center for First-Generation Success, 2017), so it is therefore the assumption in this dissertation that the students receiving the Pell Grant are largely to be first-generation.

The study explored the experience of a student who was a college junior (had started college in fall 2018) at the time of recruitment. The rationale for selecting that class year was:

1) they would have moved to upperclassman standing and would be closer to graduation, potentially an indication that they might have a sufficient enough sense of belonging to persist beyond the two common attrition points – end of first year and end of second year;

2) they might be able to have a broader series of experiences on which to draw to tell their stories, and

3) the campus shutdowns from COVID-19 would have occurred after they already had three and a half semesters of on-campus in-person experience unlike sophomores who would have only had one full semester on campus before the COVID-19 disruption.

The execution of this study has several dimensions that can contribute to understanding influential factors that impact first-gen students’ sense of belonging. First, it explores the depth of experiences that the participant had when interacting with various individuals on campus such as faculty, advisors, peers. Other studies have covered the variables of interactions with specific subgroups, faculty for example, without looking at how relational experiences might differ across groups (Jones, 2018). Second, it provides a unique angle for building awareness and insight into the elements of dynamics between the student and a range of individuals that foster or break the inroads into a sense of belonging for the student. The relational dynamics and the conversational presence of these individuals and how they were experienced by first-gen students
has not yet been studied. Third, it considers the ways in which relational approaches to engage students might be less effective or even destructive to a first-gen student’s sense of belonging (Ogunyemi et al., 2019). The in-depth discussion about the sense of belonging and how the student participant experienced interactions with university staff and peers could deepen understanding of how interpersonal and relational dynamics in conversations contribute to belonging over a period of time.

The case study approach gives the literal and metaphorical microphone to a first-gen student to directly share their experiences and story of belonging and to have autonomy in how their story is shared. Incorporation of the study’s findings might help higher education institutions reimagine their policies and approaches to how they foster first-gen students’ sense of belonging.
Conceptual Framework

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) provides a framework that complements the lived experiences that Zero shares about their life and represents a practical lens that contextualizes the conflation of Zero and others’ inner and outer experiences and collectively provides a way to understand their experience of belonging on campus. The themes that emerged from Zero’s story are in line with the theoretical underpinnings and philosophy of RCT and can contribute to one’s understanding of how first-gen students navigate through moments of belonging on their campus and how RCT can provide a meaningful mechanism to appreciate those moments.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) was founded in the 1970s through the work of Jean Baker Miller, Judith Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Irene Stiver, as an alternative to psychodynamic theory. This group of psychologists and a psychiatrist would gather to discuss their clinical cases and soon recognized trends and patterns that had been primarily explained by traditional psychological theories built completely around male developmental experiences. Miller (1986) wrote: “The close study of an oppressed group reveals that a dominant group inevitably describes a subordinate group falsely in terms derived from its own systems of thought” (Kindle Location 199). In their gatherings, these clinicians began to push back on scholarly acceptance of the universality of a male-framed human experience. There was recognition that despite exerting effort to generate theories explaining development of historically marginalized communities, they had also unintentionally perpetuated exclusive and universal language by not including writers, researchers, and theorists of varied diversity including other sexually identified women, women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, women of color, and physically challenged women, for example (Jordan, 2018).

In the 1980s, this core group of clinicians began to expand and be more inclusive in the voices represented in their discussions (Jordan, 2018). RCT has over time made a conscious
effort to recognize both women’s and men’s voices as critical to further an understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural forces that contextualize the lived experiences of all people (Jordan, 2018).

There are a combination of relational characteristics and growth-fostering interactions that are fundamental to RCT. Relational characteristics as described by Jordan (2017) and Crumb and Haskins (2017) include:

1) humans grow through relationship and that connection and relationship is crucial, and it is through the connectedness between individuals that empowerment can occur, not necessarily through individuation and separation,

2) the achievement of mutual empathy (the openness to being impacted and impacting another person) happens as a result of relational maturation,

3) relational images that individuals have of themselves and others might determine how they respond and feel in present relationships and situations,

4) authenticity is necessary for real engagement where individuals can be their whole selves,

5) in growth-fostering relationships all people grow and benefit, and

6) relational competence capacity increases through life and drives the potential for further connections. (Crumb & Haskins, 2017)

Relational psychology is grounded in the underlying assumption that human beings grow through and to relationship and these relationships are crucial for the survival of both the individual and society at large (Jordan, 2018). RCT theorists believe that as a result of being in a growth-fostering relationship, five good things occur: individuals have a sense of zest, increased self-worth, a better developed understanding of self and others and interpersonal relationships,
higher levels of productivity, and a desire to seek more meaningful connections with others (Lertora et al., 2019; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Miller (2010) wrote, “In times of disconnection, we experience the reverse of ‘the five good things’ and also several additional negative consequences, especially a sense of psychological isolation” (p. 20). In RCT, disconnection is defined as what is experienced when “we feel cut off from those with whom we share a relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 11).

Relational authenticity can be seen in relationships when both individuals feel safe in sharing their insights, emotions, and life experiences in ways that are accurate and true to their understanding (Jordan, 2018). Experiences of relational authenticity enable the relationships to grow and for both individuals to benefit, which is the concept of mutuality. Walker (2004) has written that the contributions of each person and openness to change allow something new to happen, which is the growth that both parties experience in a growth-fostering relationship.

When past experiences of empathic failure occur or an effort to be relationally authentic is not perceived, received, or validated, one of two things might occur: the central relational paradox can occur or the person might engage in strategies of disconnection (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The central relational paradox explains that while individuals experience ongoing disconnections, they continue yearning for relationship, and out of a desire to fit in and be accepted, they begin to alter themselves and, as a result, relationships lose their authenticity (Jordan, 2018). If a person experiences disappointment, shame, or humiliation in an interpersonal context in which they were their authentic self, they may share less, isolate, and utilize a strategy of survival (disconnection) by asking for less, sharing less, and paradoxically isolating and engage in self-suffering (Frey, 2013).
While the act of disconnecting might typically be pathologized by mainstream theories on human development, RCT views it as a tool for survival (Jordan, 2018). Empathic rupture can create a sense of insecurity for the individual on the receiving end. The strengths-based approach of RCT posits that the strategy of disconnection serves as a self-protecting tool during moments of nonresponsiveness or violation from another person (Jordan, 2018). Since humans are wired to connect, most strategies of disconnection will dissipate when the interactions with others are deemed safe, welcoming, and growth fostering.

Believing that relationships are contextualized in culture where power dynamics are central to human interaction, RCT theorists have emphasized that unacknowledged power differentials can overwhelm interpersonal dynamics with biases borne through value structures (Jordan, 2018). Jean Baker Miller’s essay “How Change Happens: Controlling Images, Mutuality, and Power” underscores the importance of power in any exchange (Miller, 2010). Miller demonstrated that both client and therapist have opportunities to exercise power in the relationship: the client can engage in strategies of disconnection to stall or halt the development of the therapeutic relationship and the therapist can wield power merely by the hierarchical position in which the therapist sits in that dynamic (Miller, 2010). The societal context in which controlling images are imagined, generated, and perpetuated create both social norms as well as a framework from which individuals operate (Miller, 2010). This is particularly problematic when the controlling images of those who are marginalized in society are adopted and internalized by those who in the helping professions, be it therapists or other professions in the helping services or educational fields. Unfortunately, these controlling images are constructs that are carried without awareness and inform the frameworks of interaction between people (Miller, 2010).
RCT’s focus on bringing intentional awareness to the life contexts of many individuals with whom therapists interact makes it an excellent framework through which to learn about the ways belonging is experienced especially by marginalized and historically oppressed populations including first-gen students (Hall et al., 2020). In addition, RCT’s move to recognize the impact of external factors (such as the impacts of grave social injustices committed on marginalized and oppressed communities, the reality of racism, homophobia, and sexism with which many individuals must contend) on an individual’s psychological development can be instrumental in understanding how the various interactions that first-gen students like Zero have with those around them inform their inner experiences, which ultimately can be used as the foundation from which to engage with others whether it was from a place of connection or isolation.

Much of RCT theorists’ earlier works were publications of white papers and writings of the Stone Center, which utilized their own client cases, case vignettes, or composites of various client narratives. This approach was helpful in elucidating the enactment and presence of highly complex psychological and internal mechanisms at work and a way in which they might be interpreted and understood from an RCT lens. It is in this vein that the integration of theory into practice will be provided, utilizing the experiences of belonging as navigated by one first-gen student. The goal of this integrated approach is twofold: first, to provide a unique illustration of how the cycles and narrative of belonging can be understood from an RCT approach, and second, to provide readers (practitioners, clinicians, higher education professionals) a theoretical framework with which to interpret their students’ experiences of belonging.
Methodology

Research Method

The study is an exploratory case study with an aim to shed light at interpreting the narrative of how belonging is developed and experienced through the lens of Relational Cultural Theory. An in-depth interview was conducted to gather memories of interactions that the first-gen student participant had with faculty, staff, and peers both socially and in classroom settings and it explored how these interactions might be connected to their sense of belonging on campus.

Sample and Recruitment Procedures

Purposive sampling was used for this case study. Recruitment was focused on identifying a sample that might provide useful insights that can shed light on the questions around belonging. Participants were intentionally selected utilizing inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Recruitment targeted first-gen students in junior standing at a residential school in the SUNY system. First-gen status was determined by self-reported first-gen status and participation in either the Pell Grant program, or an Educational Opportunity Program (designed to help low-income students gain admission and success in college). Recruitment for the case study had several components. First, the recruitment flyer was sent to individuals within the researcher’s professional network (recruitment flyer can be found in the Appendix). Second, the researcher identified senior leadership staff or directors of the various Educational Opportunity Programs at the 34 residential SUNY campuses (see full list in Appendix). These individuals received emails with the flyer and description of the study requesting their assistance in circulating with the students who are participants in EOP at their respective schools. Request for participation was
sent to professional listservs including National Partnership for Education Access (NPEA) and student success networks of organizations.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:**

**Inclusion:**

- Currently matriculated full time at a four-year residential college in the SUNY system, pursuing a bachelor’s degree
- Transfer students must have been from within the four-year residential SUNY system
- Self-identified first-generation college student
- Receiving the Pell Grant, or TAP (tuition assistance program), or EOP (Educational Opportunity Program) as indicator of low-income status
- Currently in the third year of school (does not need to be consecutively three years) and have completed four full semesters of coursework
- Identify as Black, Latinx, or Native American

**Exclusion:**

- Participants who only met some of the inclusion criteria
- Students who identify as White and/or Caucasian

As part of determining eligibility to participate, a questionnaire was administered that indicated that the student was both first-generation and low-income, as measured by participation in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), or receiving the Pell Grant, both of which are specific programs for students who are low-income with specific income guidelines for eligibility (see Appendix for questionnaire). The goal was to have equal representation of both
male and female identifying students, and any students who identify as non-binary and transgender and students who are typically racially under-represented in higher education – Black, Latinx, and Native American students. Caucasian students were excluded from this study as their representation in the first-generation and low-income student populations have been significantly lower (US Department of Education, 2019).

**Research Methodology Journey**

The research study design was initially an exploratory grounded theory study aiming to have 8–10 participants. The initial timeline to recruit in February/March was not met due to a logistical complication with the research committee, which led to receipt of IRB approval at the end of April instead of February. Upon receiving IRB approval, the recruitment flyer was widely shared. However, due to the late time frame in the school semester, several contacts shared that the challenges COVID-19 brought to students were just as taxing on staff, and that by the time the semester came to a close in May, they advised to not expect much by way of response or engagement from students or staff alike. By the first week of June, after several rounds of outreach, the researcher had received 10 responses, eight of whom were eligible based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Each of the participants received an outreach email to schedule an interview, and none responded. A follow-up outreach email was sent to key contacts again, with most auto-responses sharing that staff were out of the office for several weeks during the summer break. Despite the researcher’s relationships with individuals in various organizations and ongoing outreach on social media, during the end of the spring semester and summer it was a challenge to garner interest and participation in the research study.
In the second wave of recruitment, one participant responded in the summer. An in-depth interview resulted in data that did not provide the substantial depth of understanding of belonging. In a second follow-up to the group of initial participants, one participant responded and completed the consent form to participate. The unexpected delay with getting approval to begin the research study led to a change in the qualitative approach from grounded theory to case study.

**Research Design**

The format for this dissertation was a qualitative research method utilizing a case study design to explore one first-gen student’s navigation and development of a sense of belonging on their campus. The study employed two semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom, lasting 90 minutes and 50 minutes. Topics included how the participant defined belonging, what spaces impact their sense of belonging, and how interpersonal dynamics with university staff and peers helped to shape their sense of belonging.

The study analyzed the themes of belonging as they were experienced by the participant who attends one of 34 residential four-year colleges in the SUNY system. It is the intention of the researcher that the findings of this study might provide nuance and depth of understanding of how interactions with university staff and peers can contribute to the trajectory of first-gen students’ sense of belonging. As the participant attends the SUNY system, the generalizability of the findings to other first-gen students might be limited due to the small sample size of the exploratory individual case study and the targeted subsection of residential students in a particular public college system.
The semi-structured interview comprised of a detailed discussion about the participant's experiences of applying to college, and relationships with peers and faculty. The interview structure was exploratory and contained open-ended questions.

The first interview was 90 minutes long and the follow-up interview was 50 minutes long. The interviews took place on Zoom and were recorded. The following protections were placed on the Zoom settings to maintain confidentiality and security: the participant received a meeting password to use for entering the room, random meeting IDs were be generated, a waiting room was enabled, the file transfer function was disabled, the participant would not be able to join before the researcher, there were restrictions on permissions and screen sharing, and the meeting details were shared only with the participant to log in for the interview.

The interview recordings were downloaded from the Zoom server and placed on a USB flash drive where only the researcher had access for uploading for a transcription service (Rev Speech to Text Services, www.rev.com) which sends audio content in an MS Word format. The information security and privacy policy for Rev is included in the Appendix. Once transcripts were received, the researcher watched the video of the interview and confirmed accuracy in the transcriptions. The Zoom recordings of the interviews were promptly deleted. There was no identifying information used at any point in the data collection; the pseudonym the participant chose was used to replace all of their identifying information in the transcript.

Instrumentation

An in-depth interview guide was used to ask open-ended questions, explored themes that emerged with predetermined probes, and suggested language use to keep the interview process streamlined (see Appendix for full interview guide). The questions centered on understanding
how participants define a sense of belonging and describe people and places that contribute to their sense of belonging, and what role staff and peer relationships play in the participant’s sense of belonging. Examples of interview questions include:

1. Can you share a little bit with me about your personal journey of how you have come to this point in your college trajectory?
2. What were some of your initial expectations of college before you got here?
3. Can you tell me what the concept of “belonging” means to you?
4. Can you tell me a little bit about individuals who have made an impact (positive or negative) on your sense of belonging on campus?

The second follow-up interview enabled the researcher to get additional clarification and insights around specific experiences that the participant shared in the first interview, and to follow-up on topics that came up at the end when the interview was wrapping up. The second interview also allowed the researcher to ensure that the meaning behind what the participant shared was accurately captured. The participant received $25 after completion of the second interview.

There was intentional use of self by the interviewer for two reasons. First, it was crucial to build positive rapport with the participant in order to collect data that contained the depth of insights and experiences around their experience of the phenomenon. The intentional use of a relational presence was also in line with literature indicating that first-gen students are less likely to utilize counseling services and are less likely to have someone who is providing psychosocial support and emotional validation (Stebleton et al., 2014). The researcher intentionally utilized clinical skills to provide a safe and caring space for the participant. The second purpose of the use of self was the opportunity to demonstrate several RCT concepts within data collection.
Mutual empathy was present as the researcher allowed the participant’s story to inform and guide the approach and enabled the participant’s authentic engagement.

**Human Subjects**

Protection of the participant was of utmost importance. The study received an approval by the University of Pennsylvania’s IRB and the study did not commence until the review process was completed. The participant completed a confidentiality and consent form (see Appendix), which outlined the process and procedure of the study and how their answers would be analyzed and utilized. The participant was informed that they did not have to answer questions if at any point they felt uncomfortable and that they may stop the interview at any time. They were notified of the transcription process that would take place after the interview and that the video recordings would be destroyed once the transcription has taken place, and that all participant information would be de-identified. They were informed that the data collected would be downloaded, encrypted, and stored in a USB flash drive in the researcher’s home office, deleted from the Zoom server, transcribed for analysis, and destroyed once the dissertation has been completed. They were informed that they would only be referred to by the pseudonym established by the participant, and that their institutional affiliation will not be shared at any time, except as one of the institutions in the SUNY system.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used in interpreting the interview data where an inductive approach was used to develop the codes for analysis. There were several steps to analyzing and interpreting interview data. The first cycle of coding, which is the first review of the entire data
set was done using the splitting method, where detailed and nuanced codes were generated using small volumes of text (Saldana, 2016). Two coding methods were used in interpreting the data which were elemental and affective (Saldana, 2016). Within elemental methods, the analysis had two characteristics that were applicable: in-vivo coding and concept coding. In vivo coding which selects the verbatim language used by a participant that accurately depicts what the researcher is interpreting as summarizing a sentiment. Concept coding was utilized to generate codes that were symbolically representative of a broader concept that went beyond the specific observable and tangible examples that were being shared. For research that focuses on the investigation of the human experience of a phenomenon, affective methods are often recommended (Saldana, 2016). For example, emotion coding generates labels for feelings that the participant might have experienced even if it is not explicitly shared as such. Emotion coding can be emotions that are recalled by the participant or those that are inferred by the researcher. In this case, when the participant labeled their own emotion in their responses, it was an in-vivo code, and if it was inferred by the researcher it was an emotion code.

Once all the codes were generated after the first review of the interview transcript, the second cycle of coding methods utilized theoretical coding to not only develop the major categories to which the first cycle codes belonged, but also illustrated relationships that exist between the categories to depict how a pre-existing theory (RCT) can be applied in this context of studying the journey of a first-gen student’s quest to belong on campus.

Detailed readings of the text enabled the researcher to generate meaning and specific segments of the text were coded as meaning units, and a subcategory label given to the meaning unit. The first cycle of coding generated 154 codes over the course of the data set. These codes were further grouped into 22 subcategories which were then collapsed into seven main categories
from which themes emerged. Observations and patterns on broad ideas, concepts, behaviors, phrases, and feelings that emerged from the data were used to draw an interpretation for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Findings and Discussion

A thematic analysis of the interviews led to the emergence of three themes with various subcategories that demonstrate the multidimensionality of how belonging is developed and molded as Zero tried to find their place on campus.

Theme 1: Yearning for Connection

Over the course of the multisession interview, Zero communicated a yearning for connection that they had not had their whole life. Having immigrated to the US from central America to attend the last two years of high school, Zero shared that high school was a transitory time in their life and they did not go out of their way to make close friends and instead focused on getting to college where the quest for the best friend who they never had might take place.

Throughout the interview, Zero spoke in ways which were indicative of how important the sense of connection was to them. Very much in line with the theoretical underpinnings of RCT, connection with others is needed for survival and the unplanned and unfortunate consequences occur when the yearning for connection is unmet. Jordan (2004) wrote, “Disconnection from others is viewed as one of the primary sources of human suffering. …disconnection from oneself, from the natural flow of one’s responses, needs and yearnings creates distress, inauthenticity and ultimately a sense of isolation in the world” (Kindle locations 635–637). Three sets of distinct subcategories fall under the umbrella of the RCT concept of yearning for connection: trying to fit in with others, wanting to be seen and valued by others and wanting connection, each of which illustrated the crucial value that connection would serve for them to survive in college.
**Wanting Connection**

Starting at a young age, Zero had never had a best friend in the way that everyone spoke about having this single peer with whom they had a close closest bond that created the safety and connection of friendship. Zero had believed that they might find this friend in college, in this exciting new chapter of their life.

I think I was expecting to find people that had my same interests, and engaging with them and probably making, I don’t know, proper friends. I don’t have... You know how people are like, “Oh yeah, I have a childhood best friend,” or something like that? I never had those. I don’t have solid friendships that are constant and that come from right back when, it just has never worked for me for one reason or the other.

Even in the sharing of their dream of finding a best friend, the scattered nature of Zero’s friendship history can be seen in their choice of language. For example, the use of the word “proper” seems to be an indication that other surface, fleeting, and transitory friendships from childhood or from high school did not suffice the need of connection they were seeking, and increased depth of friendship and connection might have made the friendship a “proper” one. The friendships from high school and childhood were not “real” and Zero eagerly anticipated the experience of something “proper”. Zero spoke in this segment with a tone that was telling of the repeated disappointments and disillusionment experienced in their interpersonal relationships with peers. When they added further that they didn’t have any “solid friendships that are constant,” it insinuated the existence of fragile friendships that were fickle and vacillating in nature. Jordan (2004) shared, “Relationships that fail to be mutual or adequately honor both people’s realities also push toward disconnection” (location 690).
Zero emerged out of this precollege life eager to connect with an individual in a way that they had yet to encounter and it seems that they were ready to do what it took to get there.

**Trying to Fit In**

When asked about how Zero engaged with those they considered their friends in college, there was a sense of desperation to fit in, and a willingness to do whatever it took to be around other people, regardless of the discomfort it caused. Zero said:

And I would go to just go and to show them that I was there. I’m like, “Yeah, I’m fun and cool. I am down for a good time.” But to me, a good time is being in my dorm and wrapping myself in a blanket and eating a lot of food and watching a movie.”

Zero had a full sense of the boundaries of comfort and discomfort for themselves, and out of desire to be in connection with others, would go to the parties where they felt completely out of place, performing to fit in. Zero wanted to be seen as “fun” and “cool” and “down for a good time” even though those were the concepts that they believed were desirable by the people Zero was trying to impress. Zero was fully aware of what they themselves found desirable, and it was comfortably watching a movie and eating.

Over time, Zero realized that this ongoing effort to try to be someone they were not increased their own suffering as the awareness of inauthenticity and inauthentic social performance sunk in: “I think trying to fit in into different groups was what made me a little bit more miserable when I was in school.” Literature on RCT has also demonstrated the despair that accompanies inauthenticity. Jordan (2018) wrote,

In the face of repeated disconnections, people yearn even more for relationship, but their fear of engaging with others leads to keeping aspects of their experience out of
connection… Individuals alter themselves to fit in with the expectations and wishes of
the other person, and in the process, the relationship itself loses authenticity and
mutuality, becoming another source of disconnection. (p. 132)

The inner experience of turmoil while exerting external efforts to fit in was reflected in the
efforts Zero described.

Zero’s fear of how they might be perceived if they were to allow their true authentic self
to emerge, kept them in a state of living an illusion of the perception they wished to create for
others. The attempts to fit in and be seen as one of the dominant group are caused by a type of
peer pressure that many young people face in college. In social relationships in college, through
school-authorized engagement in extracurricular student organizations or in peer relationships,
the conformity that precedes the sense of belonging and connection can be problematic for
authentic engagement (Silver, 2020). One study found that the social motive to fit in was a main
factor that drove female college students to drink (Schick et al., 2022). The study also found that
the participants with lower self-esteem were more likely to try to fit in through drinking alcohol.
While Zero did not share how much or if they were consuming alcohol at the parties they
attended, the attendance at the parties seems to reflect their desire to fit in and be liked.

Interestingly, Zero seemed to have a sense that the inauthentic performance might have
been noticed by others, potentially fostering a greater need within themselves to try harder to be
liked and cared for by them. If a person experiences disappointment, shame, or humiliation in an
interpersonal context in which they were their authentic self, they may share less, isolate, and
utilize a strategy of survival (disconnection) by asking for less, sharing less, and paradoxically
isolating and engaging in self-suffering (Frey, 2013). This theoretical dynamic can be seen in
how Zero maneuvered social interactions. Demonstrating a profound sense of maturity and self-
awareness, Zero shared, “But I could tell that they didn't really like me or care for me. So I think unconsciously, I try to make myself seem more appealing to them.” The sense that Zero’s full and authentic presentation of themselves may not have been acceptable or lovable to those around them might have led them to begin to form an inauthentic presentation of themselves to gain acceptance or to fit in. Zero went on to say, “I felt like I had to water down my personality and my interests so I can find a way to mature, I guess, and be on par with all these people that I was meeting.”

**Wanting to be Valued as an Individual by Others**

Despite (or because of) Zero’s felt need to create a social performance of behaviors and characteristics that they felt would be more acceptable to a new peer group, they maintained and communicated very clearly with commendable fortitude how important it was for them not to be categorized by people with whom they interacted and that they remained a unique individual. The ongoing pattern in the dataset of Zero’s desire not to be categorized or incorrectly perceived by others was prevalent. Whether it was in academic settings inside a class, social settings with friends, or discussions with others, Zero aimed to be as elusive as possible so that they did not get arbitrarily categorized into a group driven by some form of stereotype.

When asked about their racial, ethnic, or gender identity, Zero would often ask individuals why they wanted to know this about them. Instead of possibly perceiving the questions that might have emerged from a desire to connect or out of curiosity, Zero shared, “I feel like other people would attempt to categorize me or put me in any sort of ... I don't know. Like include me with any sort of stereotype or whatnot.” Though not directly connected by Zero, it might be the case that Zero’s personal recollections of how homophobia and transphobia
manifested in their home country could have created a traumatized approach to both wanting to be valued as an individual and also being “discovered” as nonbinary.

In trying to understand how the simultaneous dynamics of seeking connection and being wary of connection, it makes one wonder if a series of disconnections at the institution led Zero to be excessively cautious and cynical of others’ desire to get to know them. It is also possible that Zero’s fears and experience of being “outed” in a culture of homophobia in their home country became an inner working model which drives their perception of the interpersonal dynamics of social curiosity.

While discussing the nature of the ways Zero’s sense of belonging existed at the individual, small group, and institutional levels, they shared a sentiment that was telling of the true impact of how it might feel to have their experiences completely invisible to those around them – the desire to be seen by others and yet fearing what they might think if they really got to know them. Zero illustrated the complexity of the relational ambivalence with which they existed:

You might have all these people that come from all these different backgrounds. But at the same time, they have absolutely no awareness of each other and their struggles, and that’s something that totally impacted me when I was in school.

The way in which Zero shared this opinion at first glance seems to be generalized to the entire school possibly being in a state of disconnection. On further consideration, however, it could also be Zero’s attempt to normalize and generalize their own specific experience of existing on the sidelines and fringes of being in relationship without owning it as their own unique experience of both wanting to be seen and struggling to connect at the same time.
On the topic of academic belonging, this was one of the few moments during the entire data collection period when they shared that they had confidence and had a voice they wished to be heard. This was an interesting pivot in not only wanting to be seen, but also actively participating in a circumstance that might enable them to be seen. The course at the center of the discussion focused on a topic about which Zero had strong opinions and personal experiences that were different and unique to others in the class. Zero said: “I think I also wanted to show off a little bit and be like, hey, I know things.” The context of this statement was rather interesting because it appeared that Zero made an initial assessment of those in the class, including the professor, and noticed that their racial, ethnic, and immigrant status excluded them from knowing the lived experience of the content that was being discussed. After realizing that others might not have the degree of lived experience that they had, Zero felt the confidence to participate and share. The sharing of self from a place of presumed safety is a sign of how crucial emotional safety is to engaging towards relationship.

**Theme 2: Growth-fostering Moments and People**

Following Zero’s yearning for finding and establishing connections to people and the institution, there were 33 themes identified that represented the hope and ability for Zero to move towards being in relationships with individuals or groups on the campus. While the moments noted may have been transient, much like the totality of Zero’s experience at the school, their mere presence is indication of the cycle from disconnection, to yearning to connect, to connection forming. For theoretical context, RCT posits the life-nurturing qualities of growth-fostering relationships. Miller and Stiver (1997) have argued that it is one’s participation in growth-fostering relationships that serves as both the source and goal of psychological development, and that as the quality of the relationships that individuals form grows, so does the
individual. Zero’s experience of these positive moments in relationship and development of connection are significant for their development. Their presence is also an illustration of Zero’s motivation and ability to move from yearning for connection to acting in ways that promote engagement with others.

The theme of positive experiences of belonging and connection had several facets through the interviews with Zero. Zero’s blossoming relationships with professors and others fell into several groups: interactions with faculty, positive dynamics with one close friend, being listened to by those around them, and connection to the researcher herself.

**Growth in Connection with Faculty**

First, despite sharing that they had no relationships with any professors and only interacted with them when it was absolutely necessary, Zero actually was able to readily recall several very touching interactions with professors who were supportive, compassionate, and kind to them. Contextualizing Zero’s experience with faculty within the RCT literature is helpful in understanding the tremendous opportunity that faculty have in building connections with students, particularly those who are first-gen. Harriet Schwartz posited in “Connected Teaching: Relationship, Power, and Mattering in Higher Education” that there are transferrable and important elements from RCT’s emphasis on connectedness that can be applied to higher education in ways that support student success (2019). Schwartz’s research found that one good exchange can have positive transformational qualities for the student, and that one does not need to engage with the student over and over in order to have a positive impact (Schwartz, 2019). Further, while Schwartz was predominantly targeting teaching faculty and instructors, she argued that the dynamics between student and university staff can have a similar effect regardless of
their role, and that staff working in other functions could apply some of the fundamental practices to enhance connection and relationship with students (Schwartz, 2019).

In response to the question of how Zero was able to develop a sense of belonging in a particular class, it seems that it began with Zero sharing more of themselves in the class. Zero discovered that they had rather strong opinions and a background on the topic that was taught:

I have things to say about this class and I want to share the things I want to say about this class. So, it just started like that, me telling her [the professor] different things about when I was growing up and oh, I learned about this and this and that. And oh, I know about this woman who did this and who did that.

When the researcher noted that Zero’s active engagement with the material might have made it easier to have a sense of confidence and belonging, Zero shared that it was ultimately the professor’s interest in them and remembering things they shared that helped them develop the relationship:

So, it was just a matter of me sharing what I knew with her and her actually being interested in what I was saying and her actually make note of what I was saying. And then maybe bringing it up at some other point in class or talking to me a little bit more about my experience as a Latinx person. Living in the US, going to school in the US, she was just interested in me.

The repetition of the phrases “interested in what I was saying” and “interested in me” is worth pointing out. The demonstration of curiosity and interest in students, particularly first-year students, can be instrumental to their sense of connection to their school and the higher the levels of perceived social support, the higher the levels of connection to the campus (Rayle & Chung, 2007).
Integration of Schlossberg’s theory of mattering (1989) can be helpful in further understanding the importance of Zero’s sense of being perceived as someone interesting by the professor. One of the most important forms of mattering is the ability to command the interest or notice of another person (Schlossberg, 1989), and Zero’s professor made them feel that they mattered. Research has shown that when someone feels another is interested in them, it can serve as a powerful influence on the actions one takes (Schlossberg, 1989). This is illustrated by the professor’s interest in Zero that then enabled them to experience a sense of belonging in that class and resulted in greater commitment and focus on the course.

Although the close relationship with the professor did not develop further and Zero shared that they disconnected partially due to the disruption of COVID-19, Zero enrolled in another course the same professor was teaching two semesters later. To Zero’s surprise, when the professor saw them on the Zoom screen,

[the professor] was like, "Zero." I was like, "Hello, how are you?" And she was like, "Oh my God, I'm so happy to see you here." And then she told everyone, she was like, "Zero was one of my students in one of my spring classes. She's so great." And it just made me feel so warm and I was so happy. I was like, oh my God, I can't believe you're remembering me. It was a whole moment.

Zero shared this memory with a smile, recounting how it felt to be remembered even after many months had gone by and the relationship had appeared to be nonexistent. The public sharing of how great Zero is/was with the rest of the class seems to also have felt particularly special for Zero and demonstrated another way in which Zero’s fate mattered to the professor through this public display of appreciation for Zero. This further fostered the development of academic belonging and mattering.
Another example of Zero’s experience of connection with a professor can be seen in their recollection of an interaction regarding a course in which they were struggling. As Zero recalled the timing of this interaction, they added that it was a particularly challenging time in their life as they were having housing and roommate issues and falling behind with schoolwork. Zero timidly reached out to the professor to explain their situation. Research on RCT indicates how crucial these conversations with faculty can be, particularly for the student. Schwartz (2019) wrote that even seemingly mundane meetings that faculty have with a student around clarification on an assignment can present an opportunity for a potentially life changing discussion (pursuit of graduate work or a career-choice), and that these moments can broaden a student’s sense of possibility. Zero made it clear that they wanted to have this meeting as a live meeting rather than asking for an extension via email because they did not want the professor to think that they were a slacker or waited until the last minute. Painting a vivid picture of this meeting, Zero shared:

I remember that I was making a canned soup because I didn’t have any utensils in the house or anything. So I was in my kitchen, making a soup in a can by heating the can up a little bit on top of the stove. It was so bad, it looked like a really sad movie.

Hearing about Zero’s struggles, the professor made the assignment one that reduced the length of what was expected, while still enabling Zero to demonstrate their knowledge on the topic within a time frame that allowed Zero to complete the work before the due date. The researcher asked how it felt for someone to be able to recognize Zero’s needs and be there for them, and Zero responded:

I felt like... It felt like before that, someone had been stepping on my chest continuously, and there was this constant pressure on this area of my chest. And when she told me that and she told me that she could help me out with anything else I needed, it just came off, it
was physically relieving. I had been feeling this pressure, this knot, and I think that's where all the crying came from because I was just so relieved.

The framework of RCT highlights how the professor’s flexibility in responding to Zero’s symbolic (and literal) cry for help in an understanding and compassionate manner can be profoundly helpful in allowing students to experience connection with faculty. Citing research from multiple studies, Schwartz (2019) demonstrated that meaningful interactions are important to students and that these can be established without having to spend hours with students. These short opportunities for connection can help students move forward (both in their work and forward in the relationship) when the faculty can be present and show care and enthusiasm.

Without empathic attunement on the part of the listener, there is a risk that the person sharing may experience disappointment and invalidation (Jordan, 1997) which is the risk Zero took in reaching out to the professor in the first place. While an outreach from a student asking for an extension or getting clarity on the assignment might appear insignificant, it represents a risk to the student at a moment of fragility, and the responsiveness of the faculty member is a pivotal factor in the student’s experience of this moment.

When Zero further elaborated on the conversation with the professor, it was touching that both the professor and Zero were crying at the same time, “I just broke down crying, and this woman and I were crying on the screen… it was a very emotional moment. And I just felt so relieved because I had been so stressed about that class.” For Zero to add in the detail that the professor was also crying reflects the concept of mutual empathy in RCT.

RCT says that for there to be a growth fostering connection or relationship necessary for both parties to grow, they both must have an impact on each other which reflects a mutuality in the relationship (Jordan, 2018). As much as the professor impacted Zero and helped them feel a
sense of relief, Zero’s commitment to the class while managing personal challenges in their life had an impact on the professor. The professor’s knowledge that they played a small part in bringing relief to a student in need might have enabled them to feel that they also grew from that moment. Jordan (2018) wrote:

> In this movement of empathy, with each person affected by and seeing [their] impact on the other, the individual sees the possibility for change and connection. Thus, aspects of one’s experience that have been split off and seen as unacceptable or threatening begin to come back into relationship. (p. 29)

The details in Zero’s story demonstrate the impression that these positive interactions can leave in one’s memory. Additionally, RCT research has indicated the power of these interactions, especially for students who will experience them differently than faculty. Depending on where an individual is on the hierarchy of power, their perception, memory, and sense of importance will differ (Schwartz, 2019). In a research study comprised of faculty and student alumni, Schwartz (2009) found that not only were the meetings with faculty viewed as significant by students, but the students were able to specify in great detail how they were changed by particular interactions or aspects of the relationship. Faculty’s recollection of the student engagement had far fewer details and their stories vacillated between one student or groups of students they worked with in that cohort or career. This might also help contextualize the reality that faculty likely have many meetings throughout their days or weeks, but for students, it might be the only one or one of very few meetings with an individual who is in a position of power (Schwartz, 2019).

While not sharing extensive details on the individual basis, Zero did mention other categories of professionals with whom they had some connection. When asked about nonfaculty
relationships with other staff at the school, Zero shared that they would ask for help from their EOP advisor who would provide suggestions, tips, and strategies whether it was related to academics, finances, or housing issues. Zero spoke knowledgeably of the various supports and services that EOP offered, and that they were constantly reminding students of services they could utilize. It appeared that in Zero’s mind there was not a specific meaningful connection with one individual that developed, rather it was the safety and trust they built in the physical space and the group of individuals who worked at the space. This type of growth-fostering connection enabled Zero to reach out specifically to their advisor to ask for help:

The EOP office, I just feel like they were always very clear with what they were providing. They do provide a lot of different resources and they're constantly saying, "We have this, we have that. We can do this for you, we can do that for you." And even in the past year, while I was... Past semester, when I was deciding if I wanted to stay [on campus] or come here, I've met with my counselor a couple of times... So she was actually super helpful in trying to make me find a place to live or places that I could afford, or literally helping me find actual scholarships or extra money that I could access, which was an incredible help.

The other important detail to note is that Zero worked at the EOP office for their work study as a TA for study hours which let them feel that they had meaningful contributions to make, and their time at the space was valued by others. This type of physical belonging in a space as qualified by being an “employee” or part of the office “team” is another way in which the sense of mattering can be developed (Schlossberg, 1989) which might have led Zero to have more confidence in reaching out for help even though they did not participate in any of the social gatherings that the EOP office hosted.


It Takes one Good Friend

The second way in which Zero experienced connection through a growth fostering-relationship was with one close friend they met in college. Zero shared tender moments of connection. For the purpose of illustrating connection, Zero described how the friendship developed, using a similar trajectory of how mutual empathy and sharing led to increased connection with the professor. Zero shared:

I think we trauma bonded a little bit. And she just opened up to me, and she told me about all this thing[s], all these stuff that had been happening to her. And eventually, I did the same for her, and we found a lot of comfort in each other’s presence.

When Zero spoke of this friend, there was an instant smile on their face reminiscing about the last time they had seen each other in person. Zero said that they speak to this person every day and the mere mention of the friend brought a softness to Zero’s facial expressions. In trying to understand what helped Zero form this friendship with this person and not others, Zero explained that despite having completely different upbringings and backgrounds, they have similar identities with similar interests and passions. Since Zero is introverted and quiet by nature, it is of particular importance that it was the friend who approached them and struck a conversation for the friendship to begin. It makes one wonder if this relationship would have developed in this way had Zero’s best friend not approached them and claimed that she wanted to be friends with them.

In applying this friendship to the larger context of how peer relationships might develop on campus and the way in which these connections can develop and be nurtured, it appears that for first-gen students who might initially feel out of place or not have an immediate sense of
belonging, there does need to be one individual or a group that is intentionally creating inclusion, inviting participation by first-gen students, or creating experiences of connection in an externally driven arrangement with the anticipation that individual connections can occur as a result of participation and engagement. Cole et al. (2020) found that first-gen student participation in supportively structured programs, which the researchers called comprehensive college transition programs, such as EOP, were found to be positively correlated to a sense of belonging, especially for students of color. In addition, Winograd and Rust (2014) found that first-gen student participation in EOP programs increased the sense of belonging and greater willingness to utilize campus support services that would increase academic achievement. EOP also utilizes the importance of peer connection by creating events that encourage student interaction informally or peer-mentoring more formally through the program, which also increases sense of belonging to the community (Winograd et al., 2018).

This seems to be Zero’s experience also with the EOP friendships that were formed at the start of their college journey. When discussing these friendships with other EOP students they spoke positively on the impact that the session had at generating a sense of belonging at the start of their college career. Zero shared:

So I think what helped me the most was the fact that I did the summer school thing for EOP. So when I came into college, I already had a decent, pretty big group of friends. So we had this group, and it was me and other, I don't know, 10 people, probably, that used to hang out all the time. And for the first few weeks of college, we would do a lot of things together.

EOP as a program itself was less conducive to how Zero’s sense of belonging developed over time even though EOP was a reliable resource for Zero in their academic pursuits. Zero shared
“Well, I think my experience with EOP has less to do with belonging and more of the academic and also financial support that I received.” An interpretation of this might suggest that the physical space of the EOP office and the formal function of the EOP office may not have directly impacted belonging, however the initial peer relationships that the program function facilitated might have made the transition to college easier, as Zero shared: “I met a lot of kids during the summer session, and I formed a lot of friendships, at least, during that period of time.”

Another positive element of the sense of confidence that the EOP function gave Zero was that, as a result of having been on campus with a group of students before classes formally began, there was a sense of familiarity that was critical to feeling that Zero belonged on campus:

And when I got there my freshman year, I remember people would think that I was a sophomore, an upperclassman because I already knew so much stuff about the campus and how campus worked. And I'd be like, "No, I'm a freshman like everyone else."… We were there for about a month and a half. And we lived in the dorms, and we took classes on campus. I didn't know much about the town because we weren't allowed out, but I did know a lot about the campus and about resources and where everything went, and that was very nice. That was very nice.

**Having a Voice that is Heard**

In continuing the focus on growth-fostering moments, Zero shared a distinct appreciation for not simply having a voice but having a voice that is actually heard and validated by others. The importance of having someone genuinely listen to Zero and care about what they are saying meaningfully demonstrated the presence of connected moments that could eventually lead to the development of a sense of belonging.
When asked specifically about moments of belonging, Zero shared:

Few occasions where I came across a person that had the same ideals as me or the same interests as me and I was able to share with them what I thought, and they would not necessarily agree, but at the very least listen to me and see where I was coming from, that certainly aided my sense of belonging on campus.

This was an interesting comment because on the one hand Zero seemed to say that having the same ideals and interests could be the source of belonging, yet ultimately it was more about being heard, appreciated, and respected. There are a number of ways in which this is also prevalent in RCT literature, reflecting what humans need as part of their developmental trajectory. RCT posits that being in a context that is responsive to one’s voice is crucial for the development of relational competence (Jordan et al., 2004). When one faces nonresponsiveness from the listener, it can stagnate growth of relational competence and indicate the presence of a power over dynamic, where those in power resist the influence of others by silencing them (Jordan et al., 2004). Being cared about and having a sense of mattering to others is also seen as a crucial factor in the process of first-gen students’ development of belonging on campus (Strayhorn, 2012).

In discussing a class on Latin American Women’s History, Zero described a sense of being enabled to develop a relationship not only with the professor but also with the content and peers in the class. The course content closely related to how Zero identified, and the class size and student demographics enabled Zero to have a sense of belonging. Zero shared,

And it just made me feel really good and warm inside because I was connecting back to what I knew and what I had been taught and things that applied to me and that cater to
me. So, it was also a very small class and there was (sic) definitely more Hispanic people in that class as well.

The connection to the course generated the warmth of the feelings of safety that Zero mentioned several times during the interview. Warmth also seems to be an indicator of connection and safety for Zero since the moments that they recalled as being “warm” were the ones that were often affiliated with connection and belonging to an individual or a space. With regard to the comment that not only was the class small (which might mean more visibility for everyone instead of being lost in a large group which seems to be Zero’s way of functioning in crowds), it also was a class that had more Latinx students enrolled. Literature on affinity groups for first-gen students emphasizes how protective it is to have a critical mass of students from the same backgrounds in social and academic settings. Research on affinity groups has indicated that having a community of peers with similar life experiences based on socioeconomic status or racial and ethnic background can increase the sense of belonging that students have and that these social networks tended to form in response to the experience of discrimination and marginalization on campus (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021).

When asked about the development of a relationship with a professor, Zero commented on the professor’s approach and characteristics that aided in their ability to build a connection. Zero said, “She is the one professor that I think has actually behaved like a human and has demonstrated any interest in me and her students at all.” This is the same professor who Zero described as “funny” despite initially writing her off as a “senior white lady” teaching a course on Latin American Women’s History. Zero demonstrated a relationship that developed and eventually transitioned to a connection that went beyond the formal course with the professor in which the professor asked Zero to help on a nonacademic project she was working on.
The ways in which faculty show interest in their students’ voices can pave the road for showing the students that they matter and are valuable. RCT’s concept of anticipatory empathy might be a useful lens through which to consider the interpersonal dynamics between a professor and first-gen students. Anticipatory empathy can be viewed as the therapist’s ability to understand and recognize factors that impact their client, and to be able to anticipate responses the client might have based on the therapist’s unique knowledge of that person (Walker, 2006). What makes anticipatory empathy an advanced skill set is the ability of the therapist to be able to go beyond the explicitly shared information from a client to intentionally weaving in the contextual factors and how they may affect the individual’s life circumstances (Purgason et al., 2016). Walker (2006) argued that the skill of anticipatory empathy might be crucial in interpersonal dynamics where the person who is receiving the help is from a marginalized community, and the person providing the help (counselor, faculty advisor, therapist) is from a dominant group that holds greater privilege. This skill can be the antidote to the fear and discomfort that those who are from different cultural groups and different socioeconomic backgrounds have about starting conversations about challenges with people who they believe might not validate their experiences or voices (Walker, 2006).

**Connection to the Researcher**

As indicated before, the researcher made a strategic decision to use the timeframe of the interview to be intentionally relational, providing a therapeutic presence, and one that was affirming and validating of Zero’s responses (Stake, 1995). The intentional use of self as a caring individual and not just a researcher created a trusting space for the participant to feel safe in sharing more of themselves and to use the conversation for their own growth. This was partially
driven by the need to develop a relationship with the participant that would serve as a support for the participant and the recognition that these types of encounters can be healing and therapeutic (Roger et al., 2018). In addition, perhaps further proving the impact that a relational approach can have on student relationships (Schwartz, 2019), and serving as an indicator of Zero’s interest and willingness to find connection in relationship, the healing impact of the interview appeared evident. Zero made several comments to the researcher that illustrated this point.

First, Zero shared, “After our last conversation, I told you that I was going to be thinking about this interview for the past day or so,” and they mentioned that the nature of the questions provided them with an opportunity for self-reflection with someone that they had not had before. To know that the relational approach to conducting an interview can promote additional self-reflection is telling of the power of relationship:

I mean I think, and I said this the last time, but I think you’ve been incredibly thorough. I’ve honestly, in the past few days, since our last conversation and since today, I have thought so much about my college experience and my identity and how it relates to my college experience.

Second, after the lengthy second interview, Zero offered to keep talking after the predesignated 45 minutes ended. This highlighted that they were getting something meaningful out of the interaction as much as the researcher was in collecting data. Their interest in speaking and being heard was prevalent through the final comment they made upon the conclusion of the interview: “Thank you so much for spending time. Whatever you need, whatever information you need, if you need to meet again, just let me know. It was super fun.” Zero was thanking the researcher for THEIR time as much as the researcher was appreciative of the time Zero spent in discussing belonging with them. Both the researcher’s genuine curiosity and interest in Zero as a
person and Zero’s authentic engagement with the researcher illustrated the presence of “zest” in the connection. “Zest,” as defined by RCT, is the “feeling that comes when we feel a real sense of connection, of being together with and joined by another person. It feels like an increase – as opposed to a decrease – in vitality, aliveness and energy” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 30).

The interest in having yet another interview or continuing the relationship is telling of the fifth good thing in RCT that says that once an individual is experiencing a growth-fostering moment or connection, they are likely to seek more of it (Jordan, 2018). Zero requested more time with the interviewer, presumably because they themselves were able to benefit from being heard and listened to, having their experiences validated, and hearing that their experiences mattered to the listener. This was indication that Zero was eager and actively participated in moments and engagements that would enable them to be in relationship, even if temporarily.

**Theme 3: Actively Disconnecting**

The majority of the coded subcategories and main themes that emerged reflect the challenges that Zero experienced in fostering a sense of belonging and finding their place at the school. Out of the 154 codes the researcher identified in the data corpus, 77 fell into the category of active disconnection, which helps to explain how Zero might have found themselves transferring institutions in what would have been their final year in college, yet with only third-year standing with credits. Further, Zero shared that they were transferring to a school that the researcher identified is lower ranked than the institution they were attending at the time of data collection. The tension and cyclicality – between on the one hand yearning for connection by pursuing and engaging in growth-fostering moments and people, while on the other hand actively participating in actions that could be construed as promoting disconnection and inhibiting the
forming of strong relationships – were prevalent both in language and conceptual patterns throughout the data.

The researcher identified five subcategories reflective of the ways that Zero’s relational ambivalence manifested in an inability to truly experience belonging. These subcategories are: drifting away and apart from people and places; creating intentional distance between themselves and others; hiding and withholding; cyclical isolation and exclusion; and disconnection as a means of developmental maturation. As the discussion demonstrates, there is a subtle variance in the degree of active participation by Zero in the creation of disconnection, to Zero experiencing exclusion inflicted by others. The active strategies of disconnection that Zero utilized when ambiguous tension arose while seeking connection maintained a significant presence during the course of the interview.

**Drifting Away and Apart**

Both the specific use of the words “drifting apart” as well as the metaphorical casual separation of Zero from people and places were noticeable throughout the interview. The language of “drifting apart” invites the concept of relational ambivalence about which Jordan (2010) has noted, “Natural anxiety is an expression of the uncertainty and ambivalence that checks our expectation for, and our movement in relationship” (p. 71). When referencing their friendships from high school, Zero said, “Everyone just drifted apart,” which is not uncommon among many college-going students who seek to leave their high school selves behind and move “up” in their world. Literature on first-gen students has indicated that those who are able to escape to college often do have strained relationships with their peers from high school, particularly if the friends from home are not also seeking a college education (Hinz, 2016;
Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). Literature has also suggested that the tension college-going first-gen students experience is in part due to having to straddle their working-class and middle-class identities as part of socioeconomic mobility and the resulting modification of their self-identification (Hinz, 2016). In Zero’s case, because they are a recent immigrant to the US, the drifting apart could also have occurred as a natural transition because they had not invested the time or energy to create strong bonds since the period of high school was a transient time for them:

I just think I never really had enough time to actually hone any relationships, proper relationships with people in my high school years here because I also just saw it as transitory like, "I'm not even going to spend that much time here."

Similarly, when referencing friends that Zero had made during the summer as a member of the school’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Zero reported that once classes began, those friendships also did not last: “Eventually, that group fell apart because we start actual college now. And all of us have different interests and whatnot, so we can just drift apart… And then after that, after I stopped talking to those people from EOP.” While some college students can have long-term friends as a result of summer bridge programs, the formal ending of the summer program, in Zero’s mind at least, seems to have signaled that the friendships would end with the bridge program, “I met a lot of kids during the summer session, and I formed a lot of friendships, at least during that period of time.” Zero seems to have needed to keep relationships contained within the parameters of the program structure; perhaps the bounded systems of programs and friendships create a sense of predictability and security for Zero, even though they ultimately led to weaker bonds of connection.
Zero had awareness of their own tendency to be a floater in social circles. It appeared that this might be an easier way to identify than to get into complex interpersonal dynamics that are bound to occur as relationships are forming.

Well, I mean, I was always the quiet kid in high school. I consider myself a very social person, but in the way that I think I'm very good at nitpicking at every single group. And I know people from this group, and I know people from this group, and I know people from another group, but I wasn't much for actually going out and meeting people or engaging with people on a deeper level.

The confidence and self-awareness with which Zero shared this sentiment was interesting, suggesting that Zero simultaneously enjoyed participation in multiple social circles yet avoided depth of engagement with the various groups. This might have generated a sense of belonging and connection by virtue of knowing many individuals while also preventing the depth of connection that would help them thrive when those relationships are connected in a deeper way.

The language and visual depiction of drifting apart from friends connotes an equal separation from both Zero and the other party, an equal distancing in which both parties partake. When discussing relationships with professors who had positive impacts on Zero, the repetitive pattern of drifting away and apart developed. However, in the discussion of connections with faculty, it appeared that it was Zero who initiated the drifting away. For example, there was a professor who showed compassion and kindness to Zero when they were falling behind with deadlines and needed help to complete the final assignment. Zero recalled this interaction with a profound level of detail and warmth, and when asked about the relationship they said:

I didn't really pursue any further relationship with her because I wasn't going to take classes with her again. I didn't do that because I didn't need to take any other of her
classes. But I did tell her that what she did for me was very special and that I'm really thankful.

There is a transactional quality to Zero’s engagement in the relationship with this professor, deciding that the relationship would end with the end of the course, similar to how Zero decided the friendships formed in the summer bridge program would also not last beyond the program. This time it appeared to Zero that there was no need to follow-up because there was no class they would need to take with this professor again. This could also be a manifestation of what literature has shown, that first-gen students may not have the knowledge or awareness of the vital role relationships with faculty can play both in college and beyond, and in addition they can experience a hesitation to connect with faculty, viewing them as their superiors (Hutchison, 2017).

Zero recalled a second relationship with a professor that was growing both inside and outside the classroom. There seemed to be a promise that this connection could last, but this time the impact of COVID-19 is worth noting. In spring 2020, Zero was involved with a research project that the professor was conducting with an overseas institution. The professor provided Zero an opportunity to be involved and grow their professional experience and acquire some leadership skills. It is unclear whether it was COVID-19 that prevented the relationship from further growing or if it was a justification that Zero was able to make as they disconnected from yet another relationship: “So I just disconnected and that was on my part. I disconnected myself from the project.” The sudden way in which Zero was able to break the bond without attempting to maintain the relationship or focus on the project can be an indication that the bond that formed was too fragile to withstand the interruption caused by COVID-19, or that the wide-scale
disruption that the pandemic caused did not provide opportunity for newly developing relationships or projects to continue.

The other area in which Zero’s drifting away presented itself was reflected in the way Zero discussed the desire and need to transfer from the institution. Zero stated several times that they wanted to and were in the process of transferring without seemingly any second guesses or doubt about leaving the institution. Had there been some connectedness to the institution, there might have been some hesitation about the decision to leave. Yet, similar to the other relationships from which Zero absconded, they also drifted away from the institution. Early in the interview Zero shared:

[Zero’s university] was really one of those schools that I just applied because I had to fill up the requirement, it was nowhere near my top choice. I didn't do as much research on it as in other schools because I didn't really care much for it… The thing with me is that I never truly felt like I belonged when I was in [Zero’s university].

It appears that the drifting from the institution was easier because the sense of belonging might not have developed enough for them to feel that there was much at the school that they might miss as far as friends, faculty, staff, or physical spaces. Zero’s departure from their university fits Vincent Tinto’s theory of student departure that argued that when the academic and social integration into an institution is lacking, the student’s commitments to the institution can be brought into question with a likely decision to leave (Strayhorn, 2012). Further, it seems that Zero did not have relationships with individuals to the degree that their departure would lead others to be concerned or care if they left college entirely. Strayhorn (2012) has argued that if a student was made to feel that they matter to someone, that it might cause some hesitation before deciding to leave.
As Zero’s drifting from individuals and the institution started to take hold, the evidence of disconnection can also be seen. RCT argues that when disconnection occurs, the following can be seen: “…a drop in energy, decreased sense of worth, less clarity and more confusion, less productivity, withdrawal from all relationships” (Jordan, 2010, p. 2). These were all evident as Zero discussed the various ways that they disconnected.

**Intentional Distance**

The element of intentional distance Zero created in relationships seems to serve as a tool that prevents formation of depth-filled connection and relationship with others. The concept of emotional distance presented itself in several ways during the interview including among peers, close friends, and university faculty and staff.

By identifying themselves as “not a social person,” Zero seems to have created the justification in their mind that the distance from others was where they experienced an authentic self. As much as Zero communicated a desire to connect, there was a recurrent theme of how they maintained interpersonal, psychological, and emotional distance from others, even those who they said were their closest friends and acquaintances. When discussing how the sense of belonging to a community might have impacted their high school years, Zero said, “I never really had the intention of having community in high school because I just wanted to get through it.” While the belonging was not there in high school, Zero made it known that it was not something they had ever intended to create in the first place. In the same vein, when asked about the ways in which Zero was able to be their authentic self, gain acceptance from others, and be able to grow, the response was surprisingly void of authenticity:
I had a few conversations with peers and stuff like that. Not in depth, but in passing. It would be about either my interests, or how things were going for me in college, or certain things that I wanted to see done in school.

When individuals asked questions about Zero’s ethnic background or opinions on sociopolitical matters, Zero shared, “I make it very clear that I don’t want to answer.” The historic experiences of microaggressions that first-gen students have in college or in formative years could contribute to the sense of safety they experience by not giving anything to others that might be used against them (Ellis et al., 2019). The desire to keep themselves safe from emotional attacks can inadvertently also create the intentional distance that Zero was actively upholding.

Zero’s distance and avoidance of answering when their peers asked about their ethnic/racial background can also be viewed through an RCT lens. The subtlety of racist encounters can be debilitating for those on the receiving end. Walker (2020) has shared that the selection of words that people say or do not say, and the avoidance of eye contact, can send messages of not mattering or invalidation to the recipient. Since dominant culture has created internalized images of implicit biases, the interactions that people of color have with those from a dominant culture can create anxiety, ambivalence, and avoidance (Walker, 2020).

Even though Zero spoke fondly and at length about their best friend at their school, describing how they met and how they continue to speak every day, and that their friendship seemed to have filled the desire they had for a “best” friend, the strict emotional boundaries the friendship sustains appears to be at odds with an authentic connection. For example, Zero explained the friendship dynamics as:
My friend, O, the one that I've been talking about, her and I are very good at setting boundaries between ourselves. I'm a very private person, and she's also a very private person. And we both deal with different things at different times, so we have implemented the system when one of us isn't feeling great, I can be like, "Hey, can I vent to you?" But then if she's dealing with something else, she'll be like, "No, sorry, I'm taking care of myself for now.” But we can talk this other day, or we can do this this other day.

In an attempt to normalize the emotional distance that has been instituted as part of the friendship, Zero demonstrates yet another instance in which they do not have the true genuine connection that they seek, and ironically ensures that the connection will not fully develop.

When answering questions about relationships with faculty or university staff, Zero made it clear that professors and faculty were serving a professional role in their life, and were not individuals with whom Zero thought a personal connection was necessary or even possible. When describing the relationship with the professor who they were assisting, Zero described the relationship as, “It’s just a good professional relationship.” The choice of words to signify that it was “just” a “professional” relationship seems to make it clear that it could not be any other type of relationship. Similarly, when asked about other professors, Zero said, “I didn't really have any conversations with my professors or anything like that unless it was strictly necessary.” The word choice of “strictly necessary” illustrates the continued presentation of the rigidity with which Zero approaches the interpersonal context.

The importance of role clarity for student and professor seems to be one that served as a barrier for how close they were able to get to authority figures. When asked about a tender moment of connection with a professor, Zero responded, “I’m very happy that we were able to
create that in a time as a student and professor.” In interactions with the EOP office staff with whom Zero interacted weekly and who advised them on academics and helped find solutions to issues that they shared, they maintained a similar distance. Speaking highly of the staff at the office, Zero insisted that it was a professional relationship and not “an emotional personal relationship.” RCT has a powerful perspective on the distance that Zero maintains in relationships. Jordan (2010) wrote:

When someone is hurt in a relationship and can represent her feelings of hurt authentically to the other person, and the person responds in an empathic, caring way, the disconnection can move back into connection. If, however, the other person does not respond and if the other person has more power, the disconnection will not be reworked. Instead, the less powerful, hurt person will begin to develop strategies of disconnection. He or she will withdraw and present only what is acceptable to the other person in the service of staying in the relationship. But at that moment of withdrawal, the relationship loses much of its authenticity and vitality as the less powerful person keeps increasingly more of herself out of relationship in order to stay in the semblance of relationship.

While it is unclear in the interviews if professors or advisors were sources of pain for Zero, Zero has shown up in these relationships in a state of disconnection and emotional distance, thereby grouping many different individuals in power in the same group from which they need to protect themselves.

**Hiding and Withholding**

The image of a young and terrified person would come to the researcher’s mind when hearing Zero’s detailed recollections of critical moments in their college career, particularly
pertaining to how they navigated the interpersonal context. Not only does Zero identify as someone who is quiet, they also frequently referenced moments of social awkwardness while discussing group dynamics within peers and other social gatherings at school.

Zero’s timid approach to the interpersonal context appeared to be grounded in the fear that they might be categorized or judged. Zero gave very little of themselves to socially engaging moments, saying, “When people are asking me unnecessary answers and I’m like, ‘Why are you asking me this? We don't have a relationship. I don't think we're going to have any kind of relationship either. Why do you want to know?’” If the act of creating a relationship might begin with curiosity, this illustration of the type of response Zero gave suggests a belief that there never would be a relationship and generates a sense of withholding, making it challenging to grow a connection with others.

Another way Zero appeared to hide from relationships was evident in their identification as someone who is quiet, making it clear that they “didn't want to bring attention to [themselves]” and “didn’t want to make a fool out of [themselves] in academic or social settings.” In group settings at a party for example, Zero shared that they would often be “silent the entire time” and in moments of acute internalized anxiety they would think, “There is something wrong with me.” The sense of hiding metaphorically transitioned to literal hiding, or almost wishing to be invisible during a specific interaction in class during which students were discussing low-income students in education. This felt to Zero that the classmates were essentially talking about and around Zero’s academic experience without speaking directly to them. Even though the incident happened during Zero’s first year of college and they were now in their fourth year, Zero’s immediate recollection of the memory was a testament to the power that moment had in their emotional experience. Zero recalled the t-shirt they were wearing and
the writing utensil they were holding, “I was like sitting there, with my little pencil. I had not saying absolutely anything.” Zero was hiding their voice, and possibly trying to make themselves as small as possible to not get any additional attention. This is reminiscent of RCT’s view that individuals in disconnection can be avoidant for self-protection (Jordan, 2018).

Despite being open and sharing during the interview, there also was a profound sense of privacy that Zero maintained through the conversation with the researcher that suggested an element of withholding. They described the unwillingness to let anyone in to know their authentic self. This ranged from disguising their nonconforming gender identity to strangers, to giving small crumbs of details of who they are to see if there might possibly be any backlash before sharing any further. The unwillingness to open up can reflect Zero’s internal working model through which they avoid potential risks and the impact they might have. Without being asked directly about how they share their gender identity, Zero offered, “I let people call me by she, her pronouns because I don’t want everyone to be knowing my business.” The potential for consequences of invalidation and intimidation of nonbinary young people coming out have been documented (Johnson et al., 2020; Pryor, 2015) and can explain Zero’s fear associated with having their authentic gender pronouns known. It is also possible that from an immigrant experience and the way in which transphobia was prevalent in the country from which Zero immigrated, withholding gender and sexual identity could have been a survival skill and tool.

Of interest around the concept of hiding and withholding is a sense of nothingness, an emptiness and a void. The pseudonym Zero selected for themselves is indicative of a possible internalized view of themselves. It might be representative that there is an absence of anything relevant in how Zero views themselves, and if there is nothing, nothing can be hurt, nothing can be judged, and nothing can be evaluated. By using a word that represents nothing, Zero can be
indicating that their view of themselves makes it impossible to have belonging to anything or anyone. If mutuality is to exist in the formation of a connection and relationship (Jordan, 2010) and Zero identifies as nothing, one wonders about the possibility of an authentic growth-fostering relationship with Zero.

**Cycles of Exclusion and Isolation:**

The definition of exclusion according to the Cambridge Dictionary is, “the act of not allowing someone or something to take part in an activity or to enter a place” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). The movement between Zero’s experiences of exclusion (driven by others) and the self-driven isolation into which Zero retreated to prevent the possible re-experiences of exclusion further demonstrate the cyclicality that defines Zero’s patterned movement towards and away from relationship.

RCT argues that exclusion and isolation are the cause of human suffering, and this has been proven by advances in neuroscience research. The neurobiology of pain, and the pain of exclusion or marginalization were proven in lab tests conducted by Eisenberger and Lieberman in 1995. Their research consisted of having a group of people play a computerized game where they passed a cyber ball to each other, and while having wires connected for fMRI images. FMRI stands for Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging and is used to measure brain activity through detection of changes in blood flow, such that when an area of the brain is being used, the blood flow to that region also increases. In this experiment, one participant began to be excluded and the others stopped passing the ball to that person. The results showed that the parts of the brain that were lit up as a result of this social exclusion were the same parts of the brain that register physical pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). Said a different way, the brain’s functions that
send an alarm bell when someone touches a hot stove are the same ones that create alarm signals when people experience social marginalization and isolation or are deprived of relationship (Trepal & Duffey, 2016).

What is remarkable about this finding is that even if the person’s body is not engaged in a physical altercation, the subtle expressions of judgment, ridicule, shame, invalidation, and distrust can create physical responses in individuals, as if they had been fighting for survival. How does one move to a different social situation after feeling like they have been physically attacked? The pain of social exclusion can understandably lead to a cycle of self-induced isolation that can then make establishment of connection and relationship incredibly challenging for those who are protecting themselves from further metaphorical injury (Trepal & Duffey, 2016).

In Zero’s case, it’s challenging to know if initial experiences of exclusion at the college might have led to their self-isolation, or if Zero was in a state of ambivalent engagement even before they were starting college. While Zero shared that they did not directly and personally experience microaggressions that might have led to self-isolation, they shared that they had heard of others who had direct experience. However, in the stories that Zero shared, the researcher did identify several moments of microaggressions of which Zero was the target, particularly in the social friend circle. Zero’s lack of acknowledgement, or perhaps awareness, of the microaggression is also seen in RCT literature where the subtlety of these occurrences are marked by ambiguity and neither victim nor perpetrator might fully understand what transpired (Walker, 2019). Microaggressions are a form of exclusion, a psychological crafting of a barrier that sets one group apart from another, pinning the recipient of the microaggression as lesser than and having less power (Walker, 2019; Wesselmann, 2020).
In Zero’s first year of college, they reported having a close friendship with a roommate who unpredictably turned on Zero by calling campus security and claiming that they were afraid of what Zero might do to hurt them. Zero wondered out loud to the researcher if the roommate was projecting a stereotype of a person of color who might get violent even if they have never done so. This altercation led Zero to not only drift away from this friendship without resolving it, but also to end up moving to another dorm to be further removed from the former friendship. What might have been a misunderstanding or a rupture in connection is a normal part of being in relationship, and RCT literature shows that the issue is not that the rupture happens, it is rather how that rupture is repaired (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Without any repair, Zero merely moved on, retreating into isolation, not having understood why or where this rupture and the microaggression emerged.

Another example of a microaggression occurred when Zero was in a first-year English class where the discussion was about education reform and how low-income students in public education perform. In telling this story, Zero recalled the complicated paradigm of what it means to be an EOP student at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Students in Zero’s cohort wore EOP t-shirts as a source of pride for participating and completing the summer program and also for being a member of the EOP community, which is a growing source of pride on college campuses (Duras, 2020). This physical marker that can be a source of pride can also be used against the very students the school is trying to support. Zero shared:

It's like, "You're an EOP student. You're a person of color. You're poor. You're poor, and as a result, maybe you haven't gotten a good education...You only got into school because you got into this opportunity program. Maybe, I don't know, your GPA wasn't that good in high school or you're a person of color. You're being accepted into a school because of,
I don't know, affirmative action or diversity and whatnot." Those things people don't say them, but I know that there's people that think those sorts of things when they see a person of color in academia.

The unspoken views of others leave a mark on how first-gen students might feel in a campus setting. There is a stigma attached to being a low-income student that can hamper first-gen students’ efforts to have a sense of belonging (Crockett, 2017; Jack, 2019). Even if these prejudices were not explicitly said to Zero, the internalized sense of inferiority or judgment that Zero felt in that class can be a tremendous barrier to feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance in an academic setting.

At some point in college, Zero was in a relationship with someone and had befriended his friends and would socialize with them at parties. Attendance at these parties was not authentic to who Zero was, rather it is what Zero did to try to fit in and be accepted by their boyfriend’s social circle. Perhaps it was the act of performing a role that was inauthentic, or, perhaps it was the intentional exclusion by the group, but Zero reported feeling that they did not care for their presence. Zero described vividly,

I would try to talk about something, and they would either not engage with me at all, or they would acknowledge it like, "Oh yeah. Yeah," and then just move on… Or if I was ever alone with a few of them, they would talk amongst themselves, and I would be more left out of the conversation. I remember distinctly when they would be... You know how when you're talking to a group of people, you guys talk in a circle? So they would get in the circle and I'd be, not outside but removed from the circle somehow, so that wasn't very cool. I could just tell that they didn't really want to engage with me. Don't know, it just made me feel a little desperate and, I guess, inadequate. I just felt like there was
something wrong with me. What am I being weird right now? Or am I killing the vibe?

So, I would get in my head and be like, oh, is there something wrong with me? And then I think I would just isolate myself in a way. It was like a defense mechanism. So, they would start isolating me, but I would also isolate myself in return as a defense mechanism.

The researcher could feel the pain that Zero experienced while retelling this story of social exclusion. Zero appeared to have the expressive language of how it felt and a basic understanding of the psychological mechanisms in play including the internalization that the self was to blame for the exclusion. Zero’s experience of social exclusion can also be seen in RCT literature where Jordan (2018) wrote:

The individual feels that she or he is to blame for her or his powerlessness and hopelessness and that there is something intrinsically “wrong” with her or him. Under such conditions, she or he will not risk the vulnerability necessary to make connections. The threat of further isolation is simply too great. (p. 33)

In reviewing Zero’s response to the exclusion, one can also see the power Zero had in utilizing self-isolation as a method for self-preservation and survival. Zero did not stop going to the parties, they merely stopped engaging with the individuals there. This approach might have inadvertently then complicated the quest of belonging as the self-inflicted isolation in itself further prevented engagement. Instead of interpreting the exclusion as evidence of the group members’ dismissive, rude, or unwelcoming behavior, Zero wondered if they were the one that was standing out, “killing the vibe” or “inadequate.” RCT literature argues that this type of social humiliation can often lead to the onset of self-conscious emotions and that these emotions tend to make individuals reflect upon themselves (Hartling & Linder, 2014). Jordan (2010) also
shared that in response to the exclusionary experiences like Zero’s, “He or she ceases representing herself or himself fully in that relationship. With that, often necessary, self-protection, the relationship is weakened, mutuality is lessened and people often move into more chronic disconnection” (p. 2).

RCT further posits that when an individual senses that they might experience empathic failure, they might try to disengage and disconnect prior to re-experiencing empathic failure or that they might leave parts of them out of the relationship (Eldridge et al., 2010). In a case vignette that highly resonates with Zero’s story, RCT theorist Eldridge and colleagues (2010) shared,

Mary feels isolated; her acute awareness and fear of rejection leaves her feeling alone, and by fighting for understanding, she is also resisting her isolation. This, again, is her central relational paradox: she deeply desires and needs connection, acceptance, and celebration; yet, she is so fearful of potentially hurtful encounters with those important to her that she leaves large parts of who she is out of connection. (p. 35)

Instead of trying to work through the exclusion to communicate their experience with a potential to achieve greater connection, Zero acted to ensure that they did not experience the feeling of exclusion – there is nothing to be excluded from if there is no engagement to begin with. As disconnected and isolated as Zero was in those social settings and although it generated further exclusion and moved them further away from the possibility to have peer belonging, there is an empowering strength in Zero’s approach, particularly as it was done with a strategic intention and not an unconscious response.

Developmental Maturity
Several times throughout the interview, Zero made references to the role that their age played in various social contexts. At times their age served as a source of pride and confidence, but most of the time their age, and how young they were in comparison to those around them, was used as a justification for why they could not connect or why others could not see them for who they are. Developmentally, Zero is also at a juncture where they are yearning for connection and a desire for independence and autonomy, which can also explain the continued psychological pull that Zero created by both seeking connection and safety and creating distance to gauge self-sufficiency (Tucker, 2011). Zero’s struggles to be proud of their accomplishments or have confidence in their own identity seem to also be in line with the state of confusion rather than the clarity that defines adolescent behavior (Sylwester, 2007). There are three ways in which Zero’s age and maturity become apparent in the interview: Zero’s confidence in their age, their existential pull between dependence and independence, and how their age and/or maturity level is justification for their experience of the central relational paradox.

First, the instances in which their young age was a source of pride seem to be about how their achievements correlated with their age. Zero shared within the first few minutes of the first interview, “I skipped a grade when I was living in the [home country]. I didn't do first grade because I was more advanced than other kids my age,” and also shared that they were 19 years old in what would be their senior year of school and they were “only” 16 when they started college. The use of the word “only” is indication that Zero might want the researcher to recognize this as a noteworthy attainment. Zero also shared that they are “the youngest person at [their] job” where they work with their mother. Accomplishing college admission and securing work where they are seemingly ahead of their coworkers seem to be a source of pride.
Second, the ambivalence between dependency and autonomy appeared to create a sense of role confusion for Zero. Zero initially moved away from home to college, and perhaps due to the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, or perhaps giving in to the pull of still needing the dependence and comfort of a caregiver, Zero moved back home, and then got a job working with their mother. The way in which Zero sought out the comfort of their mother seems to also be an indication that they might still be in the stage where they are pulled back and forth between independence and dependence (Tucker, 2011), the kind of tension described by Mahler as “ambitendency,” having opposing desires and needs (Mahler et al., 1985).

The third and more prominent manifestation of Zero’s conceptualization of their age in comparison to their peers was frequently referenced as some type of explanation or justification for why they could not get into relationships with their peers or why others struggled to see Zero for who Zero was. Without the researcher’s prompt about age, Zero shared,

I was probably the youngest one out of my group and the one with least, I guess, experience in a lot of things, so... It's not like I felt pressured, but at the same time, I felt like I had to water down my personality and my interest so I can find a way to mature, I guess, and be on par with all these people that I was meeting.

In the vein of wanting to be seen as their authentic self, and justification for the lack of connection, Zero said, “I think that other people don't really understand the fact that I can be super mature, but I can still read comics in my spare time and that doesn't take any maturity or depth out of my character.”

It seems that Zero was trying to demonstrate to the researcher that they have internalized the lack of maturity that others have perceived about them.
I have, how many? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight plushies on my twin-size bed. Which some people might think is really weird. I like astrology and art. I like Japanese media, like comics, anime. I feel like it's more on the sense of my interest sometimes make people uncomfortable because they're like, "You act like a little kid." Or, "You're a little bit grown up, why don't you ... You know what I'm saying? Some people don't want to engage with me because they think that I'm not mature, sure enough.

The conflation of Zero’s interests and hobbies with maturity which then leads to lack of connection appeared to be some form of active disconnection that Zero created to explain why they could not be in relationship with others. This can also be understood from the RCT concept of central relational paradox. Because Zero’s hobbies and interests were ridiculed or shamed in some form, they feel the pressure to keep those parts of themselves out of relationship and connection, keeping them further in condemned isolation.

The nuanced exploration of how Zero’s active participation in disconnecting themselves from others illustrates the complexities of how one engages in strategies of disconnection and condemned isolation after disappointment or ruptures in connection. In Zero’s case, the external forces of exclusion and the inherent need to be in connection also fostered a state of ambivalence where Zero would be noncommittal in their engagement with others and avoid the risks of showing up as their authentic self. Active disconnection can also be the enactment of an empowered choice and be an active arbiter of self-isolation even while yearning for connection.

**Summary of Findings**

Within the nuances of Zero’s experience of belonging which became apparent through the data analysis, the cyclicality in Zero’s sense of belonging is seen in the connections formed
and ruptured and re-formed with others. As RCT literature has consistently argued, disconnections are a normal and expected component of being in relationship; misunderstandings are bound to happen and feelings are bound to be hurt, and it is rather how individuals move from a rupture in connection to repairing the connection that keeps individuals in a healthy growth-fostering relationship (Jordan, 2018). RCT has also continued to demonstrate that being in connection and experiencing belonging within relationships is part of human nature’s drive to thrive (Jordan, 2010). Growth happens in connection and community and without experiencing belonging, humans are bound to be in isolation and suffering.

The hope that Zero’s story provides is that the yearning for connection is the driving force that brings them back into finding growth-fostering moments with individuals on their campus. When there is an experience of isolation or exclusion, disappointment, and pain from certain interpersonal dynamics and interactions, Zero often retreats and shuts down with the hope of not experiencing the negative inner emotions associated with that disappointment. At times Zero approaches possibilities of engagement from a place of cynicism and paranoia about how this engagement might turn out. Zero also demonstrated that the opportunity for healing and moving into engagement is possible when yearning is met with a metaphoric embrace, an empathic attunement, and acceptance from peers, faculty and staff, and even the researcher. Others demonstrating interest in hearing what Zero had to share was seen throughout the interview as moving Zero into connection and providing an opportunity to experience belonging in that moment. This is consistent with RCT’s view that respecting and showing appreciation for someone’s voice can move even the most chronically disconnected person into engagement (Walker, 2019).
Zero’s story, and the selection by Zero of “Zero” as the pseudonym, is a possible indicator that between the positive interactions that lead to connection and belonging and the negative interactions that lead to disconnection and loneliness, Zero finds themselves in an ambivalent state.
Limitations and Benefits

Generalizability of the findings of this case study to the wider population are limited and are not the intention of the research design as it is particularization that is the goal of this approach. The findings are intended to shine the light on the complicated interpersonal and psychological mechanisms that occur over the course of one first-gen student’s quest to find belonging on campus. The individual case for this research was a first-generation, low-income, nonbinary college student in junior standing attending a four-year college in the State University of New York system. The purpose of the study was to learn about this student’s journey, focusing on the moments, spaces, and people that contributed to not only their sense of belonging but also their feelings of disconnection and isolation as they tried to find their place within the university community.

The case study shown here can be representative of the subtlety of emotional experiences that first-gen students experience as they seek to develop a sense of belonging. This student’s expectations of friendships formed with peers and connections with faculty provide insights into the ways they fit into an academic environment. Their story unfolds through a series of powerful moments of negotiation during which they are evaluating themselves and their environments as they negotiate the delicate path of finding their place.

The case study research method utilizes a subjective process which can be influenced by researcher bias. All efforts were made to ensure that the findings were presented as interpretations rather than facts. Transcripts of the entire data set were coded for themes which were connected to literature on first-gen college students as well as literature on RCT’s theoretical framework. While generated codes were connected to subcategories and themes for analysis and interpretation, the participant’s life experiences and narrative are honored and
respected as their own individual life story. To preserve the multiple realities that exist in case study research, the researcher attempted to present the different and even contradictory themes of what emerged during the interviews.

Another limitation of the study was that recruitment was focused only on first-gen students in their third or fourth year attending residential State University of New York colleges. Recruitment flyers and information for the research study were sent to directors and senior staff working in the EOP offices at all residential SUNY colleges as well as professionals in the researcher’s network and on social media (LinkedIn, Facebook). The recruitment information was sent at the end of spring semester and limited the number of participants who were still engaged with institutions and willing or able to complete the participation survey. Completing the recruitment process at the start or middle of the semester might also reach additional students whose voices could be represented in the study. Expanding inclusion and exclusion criteria or recruiting from a broader range of college systems might have resulted in a different series of themes and interpretations to be derived. Further research that might consider students with various immigration statuses, attendance at different college systems, and different class years or college graduates would be crucial in the understanding of how belonging is fostered, broken, and recreated as first-gen students navigate their years in college.

Despite limitations for generalizability, the case study method has many advantages that make it an excellent choice for examining certain topic areas. For example, it provides a unique opportunity to gain access to a detailed study of complex phenomena such as belonging through the experiences of a single individual (Stake, 1995). Reis (n.d.) noted one of the most impactful strengths of a case study approach that suggests its usefulness in examining belonging:
The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. (Reis, n.d.)

While much research elucidates first-gen students’ experiences of belonging from a quantitative or a qualitative perspective, a case study approach mines the depths of how various interactions create micro-impacts that collectively lead to the experience of holistic belonging. A detailed story which illuminates the way in which the participant interacts with their contexts can provide a deeper meaning and learning opportunity for those who read the report (Stake, 1995).

In utilizing a single instrumental case study design, the researcher is able to focus on an issue and utilize one bounded case to illustrate the issue (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Zero’s telling of their story of finding belonging at their college adds the color and pixelation to understanding the path many students take on their quest to belong on campus. The case study adds a powerful dimension to the typical two-dimensional descriptions that work to identify the ways institutions can foster belonging for first-gen students. In a sense, the stories endemic to a case study detail the journey of an individual on multiple levels and can provide the critical context through which to develop quantitative studies. Zero’s experience and navigation of belonging and critical moments of connection with and disconnection from both peers and faculty provide ample opportunities to utilize quantitative studies to gauge the prevalence of these themes across students in different class years, students in different schools in the SUNY system, and students in different regional universities. Zero’s challenges and successes with fostering a sense of belonging were apparent in the academic sphere (in class and with faculty) and social belonging
with peers. These are all components of what could be further elaborated with quantitative studies.
Implications and Next Steps

Zero’s story of how they moved in and out of relationships with different individuals and the roles those certain individuals played in their quest of belonging can have implications for individuals working with, supporting, or teaching first-gen students in higher education or in nonprofits supporting first-gen students while they are in college. There are three ways that the findings of the case study can contribute to the strategic approaches adopted by faculty and staff in providing student support.

First, we must recognize that disconnections might be invisible. Students might be participating in the campus community, attending class, and socializing yet simultaneously experiencing a painful disconnection that is not immediately noticeable. Strayhorn (2012) has demonstrated how the quest of belonging can prevent students from being able to focus cognitively on academic pursuits, and that the sense of survival that is crucial to belonging strips the priority from academics, leading to lower academic performance and potential dismissal from the school. Since the experience of belonging is predominantly a psychological mechanism, institutions of higher education and professionals working within those systems and with first-gen students must be intentionally mindful of how a state of disconnection might manifest in different students. When Zero was experiencing disconnection and social isolation, they still attended parties and went to their work study job in the EOP office, despite being in a state of suffering and loneliness. Discussing openly how a student feels in their social and academic contexts can be an important way to normalize discussions on which external circumstances and interactions might predicate a sense of belonging.

Zero communicated during the interview how they stopped going to class when they were experiencing personal issues with their peers, insecurity with housing, and an overall state
of despair. The strategy of disconnection academically was how Zero focused on survival and self-protection. It is all too common for students to be punished or face negative consequences when there are for example, late assignments and excessive absences in class. It might be helpful when these occur, for faculty and staff rather than reacting punitively to explore what might be occurring in a student’s social context (peers or family) that might be contributing to their sense of disconnection. While some students are able to externalize their sense of connection and seek help from faculty other services that universities provide, this cannot represent the sole standard from which to operate, as there are students whose experience of academic shame might cause them to retreat as a survival tool (Hartling & Linder, 2016). It is worth noting that Schwartz (2019) pointed out that most faculty in teaching roles do at their core have an interest in being in relationship with students and mentoring them, and that it provides a mutual joy for them to know that they are having an impact on their students’ lives outside of the classroom.

Second, belonging might be experienced cyclically and disrupting the cycle of disconnection is possible. As the case study indicated, belonging is not a linear process in which there is an expected increase of campus belonging as students go through their college career. Belonging ebbs and flows between a desire to be in connection, disconnection when there is a disappointment in relational expectation, and greater levels of belonging when there are greater growth-fostering moments. It is possible and important to try to disrupt the state of disconnection for students to prevent the chronicity that can ultimately lead to a student dropping out. Research has repeatedly shown that belonging matters and belonging can be a predictor for academic achievement and graduation rates and is of greater importance for first-gen students than for their higher-income and continuing-generation counterparts (Gopalan & Brady, 2019).
Third, relationships matter. Zero shared again and again how advisors in the EOP office or faculty in the classroom made them feel. The detailed memories that re-emerge are indications of how important these moments of connection are for students, and a testament to how crucial it is for faculty to be engaged in connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019). On the spectrum of unintentionally harming a student’s sense of belonging by being nonresponsive to the student’s emotional or mental state, to being in connection with a student, faculty have tremendous opportunities to engage first-gen students in connection. Whether a student is missing class, turning in late assignments, or making appointments to ask for help with a project, each of these moments presents a growth-fostering opportunity that can dramatically alter how a student experiences belonging both academically and at the institution as a whole.

Similar to how a therapist might provide a safe space to build positive engagement to move into a state of connection, university staff and faculty have an opportunity to bring a discouraged, humiliated, and ashamed student out of a state of disconnection to one where they can be shown that there are individuals who care about how they feel, and that their success is important and matters to them. Since those who wield power in interpersonal dynamics have greater responsibility in interpersonal exchanges, the inadvertent practice of writing a student’s narrative is a line that staff must toe with utmost care. For example, if an first-gen student were to ask a professor for help with a challenging assignment, and the professor’s response is, “You seem to be struggling with this class,” versus “this is a very difficult assignment,” the professor might have planted a seed that is invalidating of the student’s abilities and one that might make a student doubt their ability to do the work. What might be more normalizing and supportive for a student would be if the professor says that they believe the student can succeed and asking for help is a sign of strength and commitment, and they will guide them through until they
understand. A power-over narrative has the potential to create a negative self-image of the student that is ineffective at best and harmful at worst. The positive impact of a caring individual who is in a place of power and privilege in comparison to the student can leave a memorable impression on the student as they move into engaging more academically and socially, thereby increasing a sense of belonging. Zero demonstrated the value of how faculty were able to disrupt the state of disconnection that Zero was experiencing by engaging with them as a human who is suffering first, before they were seen as a student.

Beyond sitting with the structured format of the meeting, faculty have an opportunity to engage with their students with curiosity, an interest in who they are as individuals and to show them that they matter, their opinions matter, their voice matters, and their success matters (Rayle & Chung, 2007; Schlossberg 1989; Schwartz, 2019). Faculty and staff can validate students’ experiences even if they might not fully understand them. Connectedness to an institution goes beyond the brick-and-mortar architecture of the buildings. Belonging can be fostered in each moment faculty and staff have with a student, on email, on Zoom, or in person. These relationships have an indirect protective mechanism for first-gen students, and each moment of belonging can manifest into a more holistic and comprehensive sense of belonging to the campus and increase the likelihood of college graduation.

Relationships with peers impact how students move through their college journey. The nature of these interactions and relationships are possibly more challenging to understand for institutional employees as they are beneath the landscape of what is visible and occur mostly in nonacademic settings (dorms, parties, etc). Although staff and faculty may not be able to directly influence how a first-gen student is experiencing belonging in their peer relationships, what this case study illustrates is that these interactions and interpersonal dynamics are complex
particularly in the way in which the engagements move into connection and disconnection repeatedly. It is not so much that a disconnection occurs, it is rather that it stays in a state of disconnection that can have an impact on how a student is able to psychologically function in their day-to-day lives (Miller & Stiver, 1997). If a student is struggling academically or missing classes, faculty and administrators can gently explore the nature of their friendships at school, the social groups to which they belong, and how these interactions impact their ability to focus on school and related matters. The act of curiosity and an indication that the student’s experience matters to someone in power can serve as the protective mechanism that can help disrupt the cycle of disconnection.

There has been greater recognition that universities can be doing more to help first-gen students succeed (McNair et al., 2016). The large policy decisions that universities make to create offices dedicated to first-gen students, financial support, and other initiatives are one way to increase first-gen student belonging and success at the college. This case study suggests that it is essential to include and make central in these policies the relationships and growth-fostering interactions that have instrumental impact on how a first-gen student navigates their college journey.

Next Steps

Building on findings that have emerged from this case study illustration, additional and follow-up research could be conducted to further understand the way in which belonging develops for first-gen students. One of these next steps could include utilizing an Attachment Theory framework to build the interview protocol and gain an understanding of the nature of the relationships the participant has with family and caregivers in the past and present. An
interpretation and analysis of the interview from an attachment perspective might help explain and help one understand how the student approaches relationships and belonging with peers, faculty, and advisors at the school. This might enhance insights about what relational capacities students embody prior to their campus arrival and how their interactions with peers, faculty, or advisors informs the development of their sense of belonging.

Another area to better understand could be the nature of the relationship that the participant has with their caregiver/parent. The sense of having to live in multiple realities for first-gen students complicates their quest for belonging whether they are trying to be accepted into the social landscape of college or the way in which their family might respond when they return home, seemingly changed. The psychological dynamics of the parental response to a first-gen student’s academic and personal growth can be supportive or the fears of abandonment that the parent has might emerge as unwelcoming to the student. Further research on how family dynamics develop once first-gen students have started their college journey can shed light on additional complexities that students have to manage that extend beyond their experiences at their campus.

A final other next step could be to expand the case study to include several other first-gen students and gauge the prevalence of the themes that emerged from this case study with other students. The cyclicality and emergence of phases of belonging that the participant experienced are worth exploring with additional participants because this indicates that not only is it hard for research to pinpoint at a moment in time how a student feels about their sense of belonging at their institution and it is a dynamic phenomenon that is affected by the context in which the student is asked about over the course of data collection. If the participant in this case study was asked about their sense of belonging in a particular moment, their response would have been
impacted by the specific series of interactions they might have had with peers, faculty, or advisors. When sense of belonging is presented as a static data point, it might undervalue the inherent complexity of the nature of belonging. Further qualitative inquiry using additional participants could contribute to further understanding the nature of how belonging is experienced and developed over the course of a first-gen student’s college career.

Repeating the exploratory case study in a non-COVID world might also change the way in which belonging develops. Since this research was conducted when COVID restrictions were in effect, it impacted how the sense of connection to individuals and the campus developed for the participant.
Appendices

Residential colleges in the SUNY system that grant bachelor’s degrees:

University Colleges:
- SUNY Brockport
- Buffalo State
- SUNY Cortland
- SUNY Empire State
- Fredonia
- Geneseo
- New Paltz
- SUNY Old Westbury
- SUNY Oneonta
- Oswego
- Plattsburg
- Potsdam
- Purchase College

University Centers:
- University at Albany
- Alfred University
- Binghamton University
- University at Buffalo
- Cornell University – NY State college of Agriculture and Life Sciences
- Cornell University – NY State College of Human Ecology
- Cornell University – NY State School of Industrial and Labor Relations
- Cornell University – NY State College of Veterinary Medicine
- SUNY Downstate – Health Sciences
- College of Environmental Science and Forestry
- College of Optometry
- Stony Brook University
- SUNY Polytechnic Institute
- Upstate Medical University

Technology Colleges:
- Alfred State College
- SUNY Canton
- SUNY Cobleskill
- Delhi
- Farmingdale State College
- Maritime College
- SUNY Morrisville
Recruitment Flyer

Participants Needed for Research Study on First-Gen College Students’ Sense of Belonging

Are you a first-generation student attending a four-year residential college? Are you currently a junior? You may be eligible to participate in a research study on campus belonging.

You may qualify if you:

- Attend a four-year SUNY institution
- Live on campus
- Are currently in junior standing
- Are the first in your family to go to college
- Receive the Pell Grant, TAP or member of your campus EOP

Participation involves:

- Attending a Zoom interview with the researcher and discussing your experiences of belonging on your campus
- Duration of interview will be 75-90 mins
- Participants will receive a $20 electronic gift card upon completion of interview

Potential benefits:

Participating in this study may inform how higher education employees understand how first-gen students experience campus belonging.

To sign up (takes approx. 2 minutes to complete):

- Please click First-Gen Student Belonging Study
- Or https://upenn.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9QNvH9WTfm37JMW

NOTE:

This research study is part of a DSW doctoral dissertation. Participants will not be identified in any reports of findings. For more information please contact Ays Necioglu at ays@upenn.edu.
Participant Recruitment Survey

Q1
First Name

Q2
Last Initial

Q3
Race (please check multiple boxes if bi-racial or multi-racial)
- [ ] American Indian or Alaska Native
- [ ] Asian
- [ ] Black or African American
- [ ] Hispanic or Latinx
- [ ] Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- [ ] White
- [ ] Other

Q4
To which gender do you most identify?
- [ ] Female
- [ ] Male
- [ ] Transgender Female
- [ ] Transgender Male
- [ ] Gender variant/ non-conforming
- [ ] Not listed
Q5
Are you currently enrolled full time at a SUNY college?
   •   Yes
   •   No

Q6
Which SUNY do you currently attend?
   •   Alfred State College
   •   Alfred University
   •   Binghamton University
   •   Brockport
   •   Buffalo State
   •   Canton
   •   Cobleskill
   •   College of Environmental Science and Forestry
   •   College of Optometry
   •   Cornell University – NY State college of Agriculture and Life Sciences
   •   Cornell University – NY State College of Human Ecology
   •   Cornell University – NY State College of Veterinary Medicine
   •   Cornell University – NY State School of Industrial and Labor Relations
   •   Cortland
   •   Delhi
   •   Empire State
   •   Farmingdale State College
Q7
When do you anticipate to graduate with your BA/BS?

- Fall 2021
- Spring 2022
- Fall 2022
- Other (please specify your anticipated graduation date if not listed above)
Q8
Where are you living during the Spring 2021 semester?

- ☐ On campus/ near campus
- ☐ At home

Q9
Are you the first in your family to attend a four-year college? (First-generation college student?)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q10
Do you receive the Pell Grant or TAP, or admitted through the Education Opportunity Program?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other (please list below)

Q11
If you are interested in being contacted to be interviewed for the doctoral research study on college student belonging please provide your email address.

[ ]

Add Block

End of Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in this doctoral research study on college student belonging. You will be contacted by the researcher if you meet eligibility requirements. If you have any questions, please contact Ays Necioglu, nays@upenn.edu. Have a great day!
Interview guide for first-gent student attending four-year SUNY institution:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research about the sense of belonging first-generation students have at a four-year school in the SUNY system.

The main concept I am studying as part of my doctoral research is how interpersonal dynamics that occur in communication and interaction with university staff impact first-generation and low-income students’ sense of belonging in residential four-year colleges. The questions I will be asking are predominantly about your experience of your sense of belonging at your school.

It is my intention to explore and understand your unique experiences. This interview will take approximately one hour 15 mins to one hour and 30 mins and will be conducted using a semi-structured format so this should feel like a conversation. I will follow your pacing. Your participation will include two scheduled interviews. This allows you to expand on topics we discussed in the first interview and enables me to ask follow-up questions in the second interview to be sure I understand your story. You can stop at any time and you do not need to answer any questions that you do not wish to. I may ask some clarifying questions or ask for additional details so that I can best understand what your experience has been.

As indicated in the consent form, your participation is voluntary. You can terminate your involvement in this study at any time. Your personal identification information will remain confidential, and you may choose a pseudonym for use with your data.

Pseudonym: ___________________________________________

As a quick reminder, none of your identifying information will be available or released at any time, and the recording of this interview will be kept on a USB flash drive until it is transcribed, and it will be promptly destroyed upon completion of my dissertation. If any quotes from your interview are to be used in the dissertation, I will ensure that it is scrubbed of any identifying information that might have been shared.

Your $25 Starbucks gift card will be emailed to you after the second interview.

Do you have any questions, comments or concerns before we begin?
1. Can you share a little bit with me about your personal journey of how you have come to this point in your college trajectory?

2. What were some of your initial expectations of college before you got here?
   a. How has that changed over time?

3. Can you tell me what the concept of “belonging” means to you and how you might define it?
   a. Can you give me an example of ways you have felt like you belonged?

4. Can you tell me a little bit about individuals who have made an impact (positive or negative) on your sense of belonging on campus?
   a. Probe:
      i. What was it about these individuals that helped you feel a sense of connection?
      ii. How did this connection develop over your time at school?
      iii. How has Covid-19 impacted this relationship?

5. Can you tell me about your most memorable interaction with someone who made you feel like you didn’t belong?
   a. Probe: If they talk about peers, to refocus back to university staff.
   b. Probe: When did this interaction happen?
   c. Probe: How did you feel after the interaction with them?
   d. Probe: Can you describe the individual – their role, title, relationship with you
   e. Probe: What did they say/do that made you feel like you didn’t belong?
f. Probe: Wondering if any of the experience you had with them create a sense of isolation for you?

g. How did your relationship with this person develop overtime?

h. IF identity (race/ethnicity/religion/gender, etc) did not come up-Can you share a bit about your identity and how that may or may have not impacted your sense of belonging with this individual?

6. Can you tell me about your most memorable interaction with someone who made you feel like you belonged?

   a. Probe: Individuals who helped you to have positive sense of belonging. How would you feel after the interaction with them?

   b. Probe: Can you describe the individual – their role, title, relationship with you

   c. Probe: What characteristics or personality traits would you say this person had that helped you feel this way?

   d. Probe: Can you share the most memorable interaction that you had with this person and how it left an impact on you?

   e. IF identity (race/ethnicity/religion/gender, etc) did not come up-Can you share a bit about your identity and how that may or may have not impacted your sense of belonging with this individual?

7. I know we are still in the midst of a pandemic and you are still persisting in college. Can you share how Covid-19 has impacted your relationships with advisors or other university staff?
8. In what ways has your experience of sense of belonging matched or not matched your expectation?

   a. Probe: What are some reasons you think that was the case? Can you provide some concrete examples?

We have talked at length about how you define sense of belonging, your expectations and experiences of belonging at your school. Is there anything that I didn’t ask about that you would like to talk about? Is there anything that you want to share that you think will add detail and depth to my understanding of your experience?
Information and Consent Form for Interview

University of Pennsylvania Doctoral Research Study:

Introduction and Purpose of Study
As part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in social work at The School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, I am conducting a research study. I am studying the impact of interactions and interpersonal dynamics between first-generation low-income (first-gen) students and university staff have on students’ sense of belonging at their institution. Since you are a third-year first-gen student pursuing a bachelor’ degree at a SUNY institution, I am inviting you to participate in this interview.

What is involved?
The interview will take place on Zoom where I will be in my private home office, and you in a private space, with no distractions. The interview will last an hour and 15 mins to an hour and 30 mins. We will need 15 minutes to go over consent. You will see that there is a recording light during the Zoom interview. I may also take some written notes during the interview.

I will ask you questions about:
1) Your definition and experiences of belonging on your campus
2) Spaces that contribute to your belonging
3) Individuals who contributed to your sense of belonging
4) An exploration about the most memorable interactions you had that contributed to your sense of belonging.

I will also give you an opportunity to share anything you feel is important that I did not specifically ask about. Some of these questions may bring up personally sensitive issues and you are always able to decline to respond and to end the interview at any point.

Confidentiality:
The information you share will be kept completely anonymous. I will not share with anyone information about whether or not you participated in this project. I will never use your name or other identifying information in my write-up of the interview aside from the fact that you are a residential student at one of the thirty-four four-year degree-granting SUNY institutions. Your school, professors, or peers will not have any knowledge of your or of your participation in this study, unless you decide to share this information yourself.

Once I have written my dissertation from my analysis and results of this study, I will destroy the transcription and interview notes. I will remove anything that might identify you in the transcript, including your school name, and names of particular individuals you might mention. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the dissertation, aside from the fact that you are a third-year first-gen student at a four-year school in the SUNY system. Any quotes that are used in the dissertation will be completely anonymous.

Risks of participating: There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this interview. I have already described the ways in which I will protect your confidentiality. There is a small
possibility that you may feel distressed in talking about your experiences of belonging, and if this is to occur and you wish to end the interview, you are able to do so at any time. If you feel you need to speak to someone when the interview is over, I will offer some resources for teletherapy and text-based support platforms that you can use.

Benefits of participating:
Although being interviewed may not help you directly, it is also possible that having a chance to share your story will be an interesting and possibly even a rewarding experience for you. It will be used for research purposes with the intent of helping to improve and increase the sense of belonging that first-gen students experience.

Payment
If you decide to participate you will be emailed a $20 gift card to compensate for your time when the interview is completed.

If you have questions about the project after the interview is over, please feel free to contact me: Ays Necioglu, LMSW, 914-474-1708, nays@upenn.edu.

Your participation is completely voluntary:
You do not have to participate in this research study. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate. Your school, other organizations in which you have membership, will not know whether you participated in this study or not. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your standing your school or anything else.

If you do decide to be interviewed today, you can stop the interview at any time. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

By signing the below consent form, you are indicating that you have had all of your questions about the interview answered to your satisfaction and that you have been given a copy of the consent form.
Consent Form

I………………………………………agree to participate in the above-described research study on first-gen student sense of belonging being conducted by Ays Necioglu, LMSW as part of her doctoral degree requirement at The University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work and Policy.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Ays Necioglu, LMSW to be recorded on Zoom.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted and destroyed immediately.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box and initial your name next to the appropriate selection:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

Participant e-signature:

Participant printed name:

Date:
Rev Information Security & Privacy Program Overview

The following document provides an overview of Rev’s Information Security & Privacy program. We advise reviewing this document in its entirety.

Rev.com’s advanced platform is a multi-tenant, multi-user, on-demand service providing unbeatable quality, speed, and value to clients and freelancers alike.

Rev.com may be securely accessed 24x7 through any internet-connected computer with a standard browser, an application program interface (API), or mobile applications.

Objectives

Security is a critical part of our business. With our security & privacy program, we strive to achieve the following goals:

1. Ensure that customer data is encrypted and inaccessible to other customers and the public.
2. Ensure that customer data is accessible to staff only to the extent necessary to perform the required work.
3. Prevent loss or corruption of customer data.
4. Maintain a redundant infrastructure with 99.9% uptime.
5. Provide timely notification in the unlikely event of downtime, data corruption or loss.
6. Provide continuous training for our staff on proper operation of our systems and best practices for security and privacy.

Our security policies and procedures are reviewed on an ongoing basis by the Rev security team, which is also responsible for their enforcement. All our staff have signed confidentiality agreements.
Information Security

Rev.com uses appropriate technical, organizational and administrative security measures to protect any information in its records from loss, misuse, unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration and destruction. Rev.com uses National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) guidelines as a foundation for its security program including information security policies and incident response.

Privacy

Please see the Rev Privacy Policy (https://www.rev.com/about/privacy) for details on how Rev.com treats personal information and complies with privacy regulations.

Personally Identifiable Information

Rev follows best practices handling Personally Identifiable Information (PII) with guidance from the published General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Rev never stores credit card information. Rev maintains a PCI certification for payment processing. Rev works with PayPal to ensure that all payments are secure and encrypted.

Employees

Employees are restricted to handle data required to perform their job. Our staff is trained on proper use of our systems and best practices for security & privacy. All employees have completed background checks and have signed confidentiality agreements.

Transcriptionists & Captioners

Revvers (our transcriptionists, captioners, etc.) are vetted through a rigorous screening process and receive training. All Revvers have signed NDAs and strict confidentiality agreements.

While actively working on a file, Revvers are required to use our secure and proprietary tools, only accessible through a web-based portal.

Revvers cannot download audio, video or transcript files as a general rule (configuration can be modified regarding audio/video download if the customer requests it). They are required to have a valid username and password.

Technical controls exist to block Revvers from accessing Rev.com while using VPN technology. If their account is deactivated, they are locked out of all platform customer resources including forums. All Revver account modifications and customer data access are logged.

Third Party Marketers

We do not share or sell information we collect to third party marketers.

Secure Infrastructure

All Rev.com services are hosted by Amazon Web Services (AWS). AWS maintains strict physical access policies that utilize sophisticated access control mechanisms.

Environmental controls such as uninterruptible power and non-destructive fire suppression are integrated elements of all data centers.
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rate 2.1 percent for college grads, 3.9 percent for high school grads in August 2018.


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