A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Meaning of First-Generation Students and

Adjunct Faculty Relationships in Higher Education

by

Melissa Greenlee-Rasnake

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how the first-generation student describes the meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct instructors at a community college and how this relationship influences their academic development and institutional sense of belonging. For the purpose of this study, the first-generation student and adjunct faculty relationship was defined as the formal and informal contact between the student and the faculty member. The theory guiding this study was that of proximal process and campus ecology developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) as it explores the importance of how the student's environment and relationships influence their academic growth and sense of belonging while attending an institution of higher education. This study was conducted by use of semi-structured interviews after completion of a qualifying screener to ensure all data was purely from the perspective of the first-generation students, with their statements organized into themes. Participants shared both positive and negative interactions with adjunct instructors that impacted relationship development and their overall sense of belonging at the institution they attended, identifying the lack of communication and engagement as a core issue.

Keywords: first-generation student, adjunct instructor, academic development, sense of belonging, academic development

DEDICATION

To

My son, Daniel Grimes

Always my motivation and purpose.

"and she loved a little boy very, very much-
even more, than she loved herself."
-The Giving Tree

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I could not have done this without you all.

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT AND ADJUNCT INSRUCTOR RELATIONSHIPS

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List of Abbreviations

Urie Bronfenbrenner, Ecological Model; Process, Person, Context, and Time (PPTC)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Guiding Research Question (GQ)

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

General Education Development Test (GED)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In recent decades, increased attention has been placed on the decrease in retention and graduation rates in higher education institutions within the community college system (Sturgis, 2013). Due to the significant decrease, institutions are attempting to problem-solve how to address the core issues related to a student's lack of persistence and degree completion both academically and non-academically. Studies indicate that increased success rates may be based on the student's level of institutional commitment achieved by the student's level of institutional satisfaction, connection, and sense of belonging (Law et al., 2019). The student develops a sense of belonging when they feel cared about, respected, valued, and important to others on campus, specifically to faculty.

Positive institutional relationships with faculty and staff are the key influencers for successful cultural and organizational change, specifically in ways that benefit the academic development of the first-generation student (McClenney, 2014). These interactions encourage student persistence and serve as an important contributor to post-secondary success, student satisfaction, and improved grades. However, community colleges are experiencing limitations in the development of faculty-student relationships due to the increasing number of adjunct faculty members who are less available to students (Guthrie et al., 2019). It was hypothesized that the underdevelopment of adjunct faculty-student relationships is a possible connection between decreased first-generation student retention and graduation. The purpose of this research was to further examine the relationships between adjunct faculty members and first-generation students, as well as to explore the students' descriptions of the meaning behind developing these positive relationships to succeed academically.

Background

Social Background

Although past literature has extensively discussed the numerous benefits of campus student support programs and the faculty-student relationship (Felton & Lambert, 2020), the first-generation student retention and graduation rates at community college institutions are slipping. According to Lanahan (2021) the national community college enrollment has decreased for minority first-generation students by 29 percent. In a 2019 study with adult learners aged 22 to 59, only 20 percent of first-generation students completed a bachelor's degree, in most cases within six years, with a consistent pattern of second-generation students being twice as likely to complete their degree in the prescribed amount of time (Fry, 2021). Additionally, the study reflected first-generation students who attend a four-year institution rather than a two-year community college are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Fry, 2021). Past research considers factors in this decrease to include remote learning and financial issues (Lanahan, 2021), lack of guidance and campus support (Guthrie et al., 2019), and the student's lack of institutional satisfaction and sense of belonging (Law et al., 2019). However, it was hypothesized in this study that a possible explanation for decreased retention and graduation rates among first-generation students may be related to the level of student relationships with adjunct faculty members.

Historical Background

In recent years, due to financial strain, the community college system has relied on several non-tenure-track faculty members, referred to as adjunct faculty, to meet the needs of the institution at a reduced cost (Guthrie et al., 2019). Financially, the institution benefits from hiring adjunct faculty due to lower compensation and resource allocation. Adjunct faculty members allow for a flexible labor pool that serves as supplemental expertise for the tenure-track

faculty (Guthrie et al., 2019). On the downside, adjunct faculty members are often not included in the development of curriculum or strategies for student learning, are less available to students outside of the classroom, spend less time preparing for courses, and are less likely to use student-centered teaching methods (Guthrie et al., 2019). Adjunct faculty members are often assigned to teach gatekeeper courses, and these courses often have higher failure rates, creating a bottleneck for student enrollment and delayed graduation rates (Guthrie et al., 2019).

Theoretical Background

It was hypothesized that adjunct faculty play a key role in student success but are often given very little guidance, little access to and involvement with student success programs, and reduced interaction with the student population. Adjunct faculty are typically unaware of how and where the student can access success services. Due to these faculty members being predominantly subject-orientated in their relationship with an institution, little information is shared with adjunct faculty on services available to help students with disabilities, mental health issues, and/or other internal and external barriers experienced by the first-generation students (Guthrie et al., 2019).

As previously stated, a positive institutional relationship with faculty is a key influencer for the success and academic development of the first-generation student (McClenney, 2014). These relationships encourage student persistence and serve as key contributors to post-secondary success, student satisfaction, and improved grades. However, with an increase of limitations surrounding the promotion of positive faculty-student relationships at community college institutions (Guthrie et al., 2019), it is possible that first-generation students are not developing at the same level academically when compared to their second-generation peers. Although past and current literature provide a considerable amount of knowledge on the subject of student-faculty relationships and student success, not much is known of the relationships

between adjunct faculty members and first-generation students and how this relationship impacts the first-generation students' academic development.

Situation to Self

Although I would not identify myself as a first-generation student, I have been an adjunct faculty member for many years at both the community college and university levels. Throughout my years of teaching, I often worked with first-generation students while I served at a community college where this population of students is quite large. Beyond the classroom, I served at this same community college as a Success Coach, often addressing first-generation student barriers to academic success. These students experienced financial difficulties, work-life balance struggles, and a major learning curve concerning the higher educational system, amongst many other barriers. During my time as a coach, many students opened up to me about the difficulties they were experiencing when trying to communicate with, relate to, and trust faculty members on campus, specifically adjunct instructors. Adjunct instructors on community college campuses have become more common due to convenience and the fact that the college saves money by paying an instructor at a part-time rate. However, the adjunct instructor is not often located physically on campus, might only have an online presence, and is not as accessible as a full-time instructor the student might pass on the way to their next class. While first-generation students already struggle with adjusting to college tempo, language, and expectations, an inability to seek out an instructor for help can be a major barrier to their success. As a staff member in higher education, I have noticed that a common topic discussed among fellow staff is retention and graduation of students, but year after year institutions seem to see a reduction in these numbers, and programs are often created to ensure student success as well as improvement of these rates. After years of witnessing this cycle, I began to wonder if the increase of adjunct instructors has had an impact on the success of first-generation students. The relationship

between the adjunct instructor and the first-generation student became an important connection

to explore, and the institution's awareness of its significance was my motivation for this study.

This study was guided by a constructive paradigm and a philosophical assumption of

epistemology. The constructive paradigm focuses on identifying multiple values and

perspectives through the use of qualitative methods (Mertens, 2015); this paradigm allows the

collection of views and experiences of a group that is directly involved in a program or issue and

wants different things to achieve different outcomes (Mertens, 2015). With the epidemiological

assumption, the researcher interacted with the study participants to engage in meaningful dialog

and reelection to create knowledge (Mertens, 2015).

Problem Statement

Increased attention has been placed on the retention and graduation rates of students who

attend community college institutions (Sturgis, 2013). Each year these institutions spend time

and resources to address barriers to student success for the purpose of increasing student

persistence and degree completion. These interventions include the identification and

development of student-faculty relationships and examining how nurturing these relationships

leads to a higher level of student institutional commitment and satisfaction, peer connection, and

sense of belonging (Law et al., 2019). In a positive student-faculty relationship the student feels

cared about, respected, valued, and important to others while on campus. Although past research

speaks extensively about the importance of the student-faculty relationship (Felton & Lambert,

2020), little is discussed concerning the relationship between the two despite increasingly

growing populations in higher education, adjunct instructors, and first-generation students.

Adjunct faculty members are a continuously dominating population among faculty in the

community college system, as the institution has begun to rely heavily on several non-tenure-

track faculty members to meet the needs of the institution. They often have limited accessibility,

are less active on campus, and are unaware of the resources available to students (Guthrie et al., 2019). Additionally, they are less likely to use active learning pedagogies that support classroom interactions and are often not given work conditions that allow them to provide similar support to students as their full-time peers (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Along with this population growth, first-generation students are a large portion of students who choose to attend a community college when pursuing higher education (Aguilar-Smith & Gonzales, 2021). First-generation students experience unique difficulties making the transition into college culture, and a lack of connection and relationships with faculty can be a major barrier to success (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019).

Although there has been an increased amount of research discussing the student-faculty relationship's impact on student retention and degree completion, little research is available on the perspective of the first-generation student in this relationship and on how institutions can include adjunct faculty in a more intentional way, which could foster more effective engagement, increased student success, and increased academic persistence for the first-generation student.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how the first-generation student describes the meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct instructors at a community college and how this relationship influences their academic development and institutional sense of belonging. The first-generation student and adjunct faculty relationship was generally defined as the formal and informal contact between the student and the faculty member. The theory guiding this study was that of proximal process and campus ecology developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner's theory explores the importance of mutual accommodation and how the student's environment and relationships influence academic growth and a sense of belonging while attending a community college (Bonfenbrenner, 1979). Current

research discusses the need for institutions to pay careful attention to the first-year experience of students, including the transition into college and the importance of how these experiences shape a student's academic career, levels of motivation, learning, and institutional belonging (Felten & Lambert, 2020). The researcher was interested in these similar topics and wanted to examine them from the perspective of the unique population of first-generation students.

Research Questions

It was suggested by the researcher that including adjuncts in a more intentional way may allow for more effective engagement and increased student success, creating a positive impact on first-generation students' retention and graduation rates. However, understanding the perspective of the first-generation student regarding the development of this relationship was the first step. The present research study involved examining the meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct faculty for the first-generation student and how this impacts their academic development and sense of belonging at a higher education institution. This qualitative study was driven by the following research questions:

Central Research Question (CRQ): How does the first-generation college student describe the meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct faculty members for academic development?

 Guiding Research Question (GQ): How does the first-generation college student describe the sense of belonging at a higher education institution due to the relationship with the adjunct instructor?

Definitions

1. *First-generation students* - College students who are often the first of their families to navigate college; their parents/guardians have little to no college experience (PNPI, 2021).

2. *Adjunct Instructor* - Higher education faculty member hired under contract to teach a specific subject/course. These instructors may teach from 12 to 15 credit hours a semester at relatively low pay and no health/retirement benefits. The instructor may be on campus or online (Guerra, 2018).

3. *Student-Faculty relationship* - Formal and informal contact between student and educational faculty, promoting or hindering student development, motivation, involvement, well-being, and institutional commitment (Snijders et al., 2021).

4. *Sense of Belonging* - The feeling of security and support, sense of acceptance, attention and support from others, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Cherry, 2021).

5. *Academic Development* - The ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities during enrollment in an institution of higher education (Evans et al., 2010).

Summary

Increasing student retention and graduation rates has become a popular topic for higher education professionals in recent years. With time and money spent to develop programs, provide interventions, and create professional development courses, community college institutions seem to still be missing the mark. The importance of the development of student-faculty relationships is often discussed in books and encouraged at conferences, but the specific populations of first-generation students and adjunct instructors are not often addressed. These populations are frequently overlooked but are truly becoming the backbone of the community

college system. The purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of the first-generation student regarding interactions with, and development of a relationship with, adjunct instructors. The researcher desired to provide a space for first-generation students to share their perspectives on this matter, as well as encourage her adjunct faculty peers to consider why taking the extra time to develop relationships with students can impact their success far beyond their course enrollment.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to provide the reader with a theoretical framework discussing past and current research focused on the relationship aspect involved in a student's academic success within the higher education system. The first part of the chapter gives a brief description of a student's academic development and the importance of student-college partnerships. Next, the chapter discusses the ecological model, specifically campus ecology, and how a student's relationship with the institution and faculty influences their academic

development and perceived barriers to success. Lastly, a deeper dive into the faculty-student relationship is discussed, reflecting the importance of the specific populations of first-generation students and adjunct instructors and why it was imperative to examine this relationship further.

Theoretical Framework

Development is considered the positive growth process in which an individual becomes increasingly able to integrate and act on different experiences and influences (Evans et al., 2010), acquiring lasting changes in the way in which the individual perceives and interacts with their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The term *student development* is extensively used in student affairs practices at higher education institutions (Evans et al., 2010), addressing a complex system of relationships that affect multiple levels of a student's surrounding environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). Student developmental theories and research in past decades have examined the specific factors that either promote or hinder student development and influence its occurrence (Evans et al., 2010), specifically the interaction between the campus environment and the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Existing student development theories focus on intellectual growth, affect, and behavioral changes with the intent to encourage the partnership between campus staff and faculty in the enhancement of positive college student development outcomes (Evans et al., 2010).

Throughout the process of a student's transition into the college environment, the student experiences cycles of differentiation and integration, balancing support and encountering new challenges (Evans et al., 2010). It is suggested that first-generation students attending a community college experience unique challenges in these transitions, including ecological transitions due to the shifting of roles and settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Early developmental theories including Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory identified student development as a function of the person-

environment interactions (Evans et al., 2010). Identifying both explicit and implicit interactions is a critical mechanism of development (Guy-Evans, 2020). Social Learning Theory (1977) emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others (McLeod, 2016). Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) stresses the fundamental role of social interactions in the development of an individual's cognition (McLeod, 2020). The need for active engagement with the environment on campus, including with educators, for the growth of the student is often discussed within these theories (Evans et al., 2010). Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner was critical of early theories, claiming studies to be unidirectional—moving or operating in a single direction. Bronfenbrenner looked beyond the individual student development and into the deeper dynamic interactions the environment has on the developing individual; he also examined the influence the developing individual has on their environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). Bronfenbrenner introduced his theory of ecological systems in the late 1970s (Evans et al., 2010). The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) the environment and the events within have the most immediate and potent effect on an individual's development, and development occurs concurrently in two domains: perception and action. Active engagement and exposure to the environment, and the environment with the individual, encourages the development of internal mechanisms and external manifestations of growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, the ecological theory focuses on the development of two systems simultaneously—when one system undergoes a process of development, the other does as well (Bronfenbrenner 1979). To further understand

student development, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory brings attention to the importance of synergistic aspects of human development, as well as the importance of studying progressive and mutual accommodation (Mercon-Vargas et al., 2020), which includes the interactions between individuals and their environment that promote growth (Evans et al., 2010). For effective development, presence and participation are critical (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), including social interactions between settings, joint contribution, communication, and the existence of knowledge about the other in each setting. Bronfenbrenner's approach provides a way of understanding how a student's level of interaction with the campus environment can promote or hinder development (Evans et al., 2010). The ecological approach model is often integrated into student affairs, as it is a multifaced context for the development of the whole person (Evans et al., 2010). The ecological systems theory provides a holistic approach that is inclusive to the individual student (Guy-Evans, 2020) and their direct environment, as well as the social, cultural, and historical context in which they engage (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) the theory's emphasis is not on the traditional psychological processes of perception, motivation, thinking, and learning, but on the content. It focuses on what is perceived, desired, thought about, or acquired as knowledge, and ultimately how the nature of the psychological material changes as a function of a person's exposure to and interaction with the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory emphasizes the evolving nature and scope of perceived reality as it expands the student's awareness and active involvement with the physical and social campus environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The Ecological Model

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological research models address the interpersonal relations through which an individual interacts with their environment, the impact of the environment, and the form of interpersonal influence on the evolution of behaviors. The

environment has an influence on the development of the individual when there is mutual accommodation, the interaction between the individual and their environment is viewed as two-directional, and it is characterized by reciprocity, also referred to as a dyad relationship.

The four main components of change, as shown in Table 1, include the process, person, context, and time (PPTC) and the way in which they interact (Evans et al., 2010) with the individual nested in an arrangement of these structures (Guy-Evans, 2020). Bronfenbrenner suggested the interaction among these components either promoted or inhibited development (Evans et al., 2010). Below are explanations of the four components of PPTC as applied to the first-generation college student.

Process

The process component, the recurrent interactions between the individual and the environment, encompasses the theory of proximal processes (Evans et al., 2010) often referred to as the "engine of development" and the core concept of Bronfenbrenner's theory (Mercon-Vargas et al., 2020). Crawford and colleagues (2020) stated that proximal processing is the simultaneous transfer of energy and interaction between the developing student and the college environment. To achieve optimal development, the proximal process must increase competency or buffer dysfunction appropriately without overwhelming the developing student (Evans et al., 2010; Mercon-Vargas, et al., 2020). The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal process positively affect development systematically over an extended length of time as a joint function of characteristics of the developing individual and the environment in which the process is taking place (Mercon-Vargas et al., 2020). Effective proximal processes are not unidirectional; there must be influence from both directions (Mercon-Vargas et al., 2020).

Person

According to Bronfenbrenner development takes place through the reciprocal interactions among the individual, their environment (Guy-Evans, 2020), and the attributes of the individual (Evans et al., 2010). Individual aspects such as emotional and psychological factors influence participation (Crawford et al., 2020), inducing or inhibiting dynamic dispositions toward the immediate environment and shining light on what is occurring in the how and what of the person-environment interaction (Evans et al., 2010). Evans and colleagues (2010) explain further that these attributes are called developmentally instigative characteristics. These characteristics influence how a student will experience an environment and how the environment will respond to the student (Evans et al., 2010). Additionally, understanding developmentally instigative characteristics helps explain differing college outcomes (Evans et al., 2010). Bronfenbrenner distinguished these individual characteristics into three types based on their capacity to influence the direction and power of proximal processes. The first is the demanding characteristic, eliciting immediate reaction and producing change based on those reactions. The second is the resource characteristic, based on the resources available to the individual. Lastly, the force characteristics are based on the individual's disposition and desire to change (Crawford et al., 2020).

Context

The context component is the main focus of the human ecology system model as the individual student is at the center with five levels of interrelated contexts, with one system's influence on development depending on its relationship with the others (Evans et al., 2010; Guy-Evans, 2020). These levels include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and time. Development occurs in these systems as the individual's developmentally instigative

characteristics either inhibit or promote reactions from their environment through proximal processes (Evans et al., 2010).

Microsystem. The complex interrelations within a student's immediate setting are referred to as the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem includes the activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the individual in their immediate environment (Evans et al., 2010) and the level in which the individual interacts or directly participates (Crawford et al., 2020). The environmental interconnections and their impact on the individual directly affect developmental growth. Potential components of a college student's microsystem include friend groups, roommates, class peers, family, and campus faculty members (Evans et al., 2010). Evans and colleagues (2010) further explain that microsystem interactions are additive and the effects of the interactions in one microsystem can either add to or subtract from the interactions of other microsystems. For example, the student-faculty interaction can either add or subtract from the effects of the student-family interactions (Evans et al., 2010).

Mesosystem. The mesosystem is focused on the synergistic energy that is created by the interaction of two or more microsystem settings containing the actively participating developing individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Evans et al., 2010). The mesosystem serves as the linkage between or among two or more settings in which the student interacts, influencing what happens in the student's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem may serve as a reinforcer, promoting positive development or creating inconsistent influences that provoke or inhibit development (Evans et al., 2010). Examples include student support services and family-school interactions. This system is formed and/or extended whenever the developing individual moves into a new setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Exosystem. Although the exosystem does not directly contain the developing individual as an active participant, the events occurring within it indirectly influence the individual's

environment through interactions with the microsystem (Crawford et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2010). Examples of the exosystem's impact on college students include tuition and financial aid policies, faculty curriculum committees, immigration and visa agencies, and other government policies (Evans et al., 2010).

Macrosystem. Lastly, the macrosystem is the interconnected system that manifests the overarching pattern of the micro-, meso-, and exosystem characteristics in each organization of culture and subculture, or other extended social institutions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Evans et al., 2010). The macrosystem contains the values, morals, and traditions of a particular culture (Crawford et al., 2020). According to Evans and colleagues (2010) these four levels are "inextricable, interactive, and complexly related (p.165)." For college students, this includes contextual beliefs influencing the whole system (Brown, 2014).

Time

The last element of the PPCT model is time. According to Bronfenbrenner time interacts with all other elements of the model, affecting the developmental influence of the proximal process (Evans et al., 2010). Mercon-Vargas and colleagues (2020) note that human development takes place through processes of increasingly complex reciprocal interactions occurring on a regular basis over an extended time period. The three levels of time outlined by Evans and colleagues (2010) include micro time (continuity and ongoing), meantime (periodicity across broad time intervals), and macro time (changing expectations and events, both within and across generations). For the proximal process to have a positive impact on a student's development it must be continuous, durable, and increasingly complex (Evans et al., 2010). Within the context model time is illustrated as the chronosystem (Evans et al., 2010), outlining significant life events and major transitions (Crawford et al., 2020).

Table 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (PPTC)

Component	
Process	Influence from both the first-generation student and the adjunct instructor to promote academic development.
Person	Influenced by the first-generation student's individual developmental characteristics, emotional and psychological factors.
	Demanding characteristics, resource characteristics, and force characteristics.
Context	A first-generation student is central, interactions between each level of the student's system impact development.
Microsystem	Student's immediate setting (family, class peers, friends, etc.)
Mesosystem	Interaction between two or more systems. ex: Student support services and family-school interactions.

Exosystem	Tuition and financial aid policies, faculty curriculum committees, immigration and visa agencies, and other government policies.
Macrosystem	Values, morals, and traditions the student's particular culture.
Time	Development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions, occurring on a regular basis over an extended period.

Campus Ecology

Bronfenbrenner's campus ecology theory can be applied to better understand college student experiences and development (Evans et al., 2010), bringing focus to the patterns of interactions between the individual and their microsystem (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). The campus ecology theory examines the relationship and the influence between the student and the campus environment, focusing specifically on the transactional relationship between students and their environment (Evans et al., 2010). According to the theory the quality of the student-environment interaction impacts the student's level of stability, development, and behavior based on personal characteristics and perceptions of their environment (Evans et al., 2010). Past research has highlighted the importance of the interaction and the support provided to students within their immediate environment while attending community college (Acevedo-Gi & Zerquera, 2016). Evans and colleagues (2010) further explain more recent studies are beginning to apply the developmental campus ecology theory to college interventions on multiple levels through policy, curriculum, and immediate contexts, encouraging the importance of campus educators providing an environment that holistically serves students. Application of the campus ecological theory is essential in the progress of developmental research regarding the immediate

and remote environments, as they are critical for the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the first-generational student (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Reciprocity between a first-generation student and faculty member cultivates the development of a dyad relationship, motivating students to persevere and engage in progressively more complex patterns of interactions, accelerating and encouraging the increase in complexity of the learning process (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Furthermore, the developmental impact of the dyad relationship increases as a direct function of the level of reciprocity, mutuality of positive feelings, and a gradual shift of balance of power in favor of the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) the successful formation of positive dyad relations produces the most developmental effects as it serves as a building block for the individual's microsystem, promoting the formation of larger interpersonal structures; this is an optimal situation for learning, motivation, perseverance, and resilience. The proximal processes assist instructors in the consideration of the student experience and provide vital information when considering various resources to address constraints students experience when navigating the community college programs intended to support them (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Instructors may apply this theory to better understand first-generation student experiences, social economic factors, and various systems (Guy-Evans, 2020). Positive relationships between first-generation students and instructors productively shape individual student development and empower students to be active in their learning, engage both academically and socially, and develop meaningful learning experiences to enable positive development (Guy-Evans, 2020). However, gaps have been identified in current research exploring the development of the first-generation student's relationship with adjunct instructors, and in how adjunct instructors perceive their role in student development.

Through the lens of the ecological theory and campus ecology theory, the interpersonal relationships the first-generation student develops with higher education faculty members impact how they experience their environment (i.e., college campus, institution), and this influences their behaviors, motivation, academic development, and sense of belonging. Even if the institution strives to provide resources and accommodation for first-generation student success, the student-faculty relationship has more influence on the development of the first-generation student, especially if the relationship promotes positive interaction between the student and faculty members and ultimately the institution. For these student-faculty relationships to develop positive interactions must occur consistently and over an extended period of time. Faculty members must be accessible to the student and understand how their roles as educators within the student's microsystem can influence the student's developmental growth while attending an institution (Evans et al., 2010).

Related Literature

There are many benefits to attending a community college, including increased course options and availability, smaller class sizes, affordability, and industry links in the community. However, the success rates among community college students are disparaging, specifically for students from marginalized groups.

In 2013, about 13 million students attended a community college, and only 28% of those students completed their degree within three years of attending an institution (Sturgis, 2013). In 2016 it was estimated that only 39% of community college students completed their degree within six years of attending an institution (Acevedo-Gill & Zerquera, 2016). Students who choose to attend a community college often plan to transfer to a four-year university. However, according to a study conducted by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University Teachers College, 81% of students attending a community college indicate

their intention to earn a bachelor's degree; only 33 % of those students indeed transferred to a

four-year institution. Out of the students who did transfer, only 42% completed their bachelor's

degree within six years (Levesque, 2018). College dropout rates result in time and resources

wasted by both the institution and the student, and the student faces dramatically reduced earning

potential in the workforce (Leveque, 2018).

Retention and graduation rates are at the forefront of the institutional leadership mind due

to the college's success being based on its student's academic performance and overall academic

retention. The success of students and the success of the higher education institution are

intertwined. Higher levels of retention and graduation rates bring both social and economic

benefits to the institution and impact institutional reputation, funding levels, and public

investments (Hagedorn, 2012). Additionally, students who leave an institution before completing

a degree can cost the institution thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition revenue and

replacement recruitment costs (Millea et al., 2018). Although community colleges may spend a

considerable amount of expenses on the identification and development of students in need of

academic aid, these institutions still seem to be falling short (Robbins, 2009).

High dropout rates are attributed to both personal and external factors. Factors include

academic unpreparedness, inability to adjust to college rigors, personal and family issues,

financial constraints, lack of guidance and mentoring, and additional external demands including

employment (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). The main reason for student discontinuation is

the lack of or inadequate internal campus support programs and policies within the higher

education institution (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Additionally, students choose to depart

from higher education due to the nature and quality of their interaction with the institution, its

staff, and its faculty members (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). The less a student feels

connected to their academic endeavors, the less likely they are to succeed (Millea et al., 2018).

To improve retention and graduation rates, action steps need to address three critical elements. These elements include the improvement of individual students' drive and motivation, accountability, and the development of a productive team of individuals on campus who are committed to the student's success (Florida State University, n.d.). Past suggested intervention has included the expansion of campus advisement services, structured programs for student development, success coaching, faculty mentoring, expansion of tutoring services, and special programs focused on non-traditional student populations (Florida State University, n.d.). However, little has been addressed regarding the adjunct faculty member's role in student success interventions.

First-Generation Students

Most students attending a community college are considered non-traditional. Community colleges enroll half of the United States' undergraduates, a large portion of those students being racial and ethnic minorities, disabled, first-generation, veterans, and working-class (Aguilar-Smith & Gonzales, 2021). Although the community college system attracts non-traditional students, not all institutions are fully equipped to ensure these students succeed. Retention, competition, and transfer rates are very low for marginalized and non-traditional students (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). A strong predictor of higher education success is the student's ability to transition into the college culture. Three factors that contribute to the inability to transition into the college culture include the influence of family and peers, failure to accept their role as college students, and failure to bond with the institution (Wibrowski et al., 2017). Non-traditional student populations may experience difficulties making these transitions due to external factors and circumstances. Students with inadequate preparation and educational backgrounds and who are experiencing financial constraints and other sociological factors are vulnerable to lower success rates (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019).

A student population highly impacted by this transition are students who are first-generational. First-generational college students typically are labeled as such due to the assumption their parents/caregivers have little to no experience navigating the academic, financial, and cultural barriers to higher education due to not attending an institution themselves (Dennon, 2020). First-generation students are often from lower socioeconomic communities and the first to attend higher education from their family of origin. According to Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019) first-generation college students tend to have significantly lower SAT scores and lower grade point averages, and are less academically prepared while attending high school. First-generation students are less likely to have access to high school academic counselors, college preparatory coursework, and information about applying to college and obtaining financial aid. Even if these students have access to academic counselors, the counselor may lack resources and be less prepared to provide adequate counseling due to their high school's socioeconomic disadvantage (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have fewer opportunities to succeed in college and are often disproportionately represented in campus interventions and developmental courses. First-generation students are more likely to drop out of higher education and less likely to obtain a degree in a timely matter (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). During the past 50 years, nearly half of the students that entered a two- or four-year institution withdrew without obtaining a degree. It is estimated that 50% of these students were traditionally disadvantaged. Traditionally disadvantaged groups include students from a low socioeconomic status, first-generation, and underprepared students (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019).

First-generational students have different needs and expectations and are considered academically vulnerable compared to traditional students. These students have less familial and social support, higher levels of stress, and are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic

and minority backgrounds (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). During the transition from high school to college the student encounters major developmental milestones. The first-generation student becomes more independent and is exposed to various people and environments that are much different from their family of origin, and they must learn how to navigate new relationships and social expectations (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). First-generation students experience the stressors associated with this transition as challenging and are often in need of developmental education, additional tutoring, academic support, mentoring, and additional services to ensure academic success. First-generational students report lower levels of self-confidence in academic preparation and lower expectations for their college GPA, academic abilities, and self-concept (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019).

Additionally, these students experience psychological barriers. First-generation students struggle with navigating new emotional experiences, identity management, self-perceptions, and motivation issues (Jury et al., 2017). First-generation students are less likely to interact with their peers and instructors and feel uncomfortable in the college setting. These students experience difficulties navigating college life and typically do not perform at their fullest potential (Jury et al., 2017). Due to the student's feeling of disconnection, they are often reluctant to reach out for help for fear of appearing academically weaker than their peers, having low self-awareness, or fear that it will bring attention to their socioeconomic differences. Additionally, these students experience achievement guilt regarding their family of origin which increases levels of depression, post-traumatic stress, life dissatisfaction, and rates of single-event traumatic stress (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017).

<div align="center">Student Success Barriers</div>

Institution Structural Barriers

Despite the external barriers that may prevent students from succeeding at a two-year college, institutional barriers are also present. Structural barriers within the community college system make it difficult for first-generation students to achieve their goals. According to Levesque (2018) the students in the community college system experience far more structural barriers than students in traditional four-year institutions.

A common barrier is the "cafeteria model" of unlimited choices in courses and programs with a lack of structure and guidance. This model makes it difficult for students to identify clear pathways starting from enrollment to degree completion or transfer. This increases the student's risk of getting off track and spending more time and resources than necessary. Community college program requirements and options are often unclear, and the students are not provided with saliant guidance and support to make informed decisions (Levesque, 2018).

Additional institutional obstacles include a lack of guidance, inaccurate placement exams, and unclear financial aid applications (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Community colleges often do not have enough advising resources to support new and continuing first-generation students when navigating the complex college environment. According to Levesque (2016) at some institutions the number of student academic advisors is staggeringly low, and it is estimated that the ratio is one advisor per 800 to 1200 students. Also, due to many majors at a community college being focused on preparing the student to enter a specific work field, if an advisor is not familiar with the career pathway, the student might receive limited or inaccurate information. Additionally, due to the lack of advisors, first-generation students are not afforded the attention or time needed to work with an advisor to develop long-term plans, set goals, or receive a full orientation of college life and how to navigate it. Due to the orientations being brief, or unavailable, students often do not learn about the registration process, college programs,

careers, transfer pathways, or how to navigate and locate campus support systems (Levesque, 2016).

Campus Relationship Barriers

Social factors play a major role in a student's college experience, both with peers and faculty members. According to Maunder (2017) attachment to peers and instructors is the strongest predictor of university adjustment, successful transitions, subsequent retention, and feelings of institutional belonging. Maunder (2017) further explains that students who withdraw early from a higher education institution experience a mismatch between expectations and reality related to social interactions on campus. Lack of positive social interactions with peers contributes to a student's isolation, loneliness, difficulty adjusting, and attrition (Maunder, 2017). The student may not feel valued, accepted, connected, or attached to their learning environment. Additionally, the student-faculty relationship is essential for the student's motivation, overall well-being, intellectual commitment, and achievement (Morrison, 2021). Actively engaged, positive student-faculty relationships promote student happiness, higher levels of self-worth, and degree competition (Thiele, 2016). Without these relationships, the student may lack persistence, identity construction, the ability to navigate instructional procedures, and academic efficacy (Thiele, 2016). According to Thiele (2016) even a single interaction with one faculty member can strongly influence a student for years to come. Meaningful social involvement provides the student with valuable social and emotional support during major periods of adjustment (Maunder, 2017), especially for first-generation students. With a deficiency in stable interpersonal attachments, the student experiences lower levels of security and increased anxiety and uncertainty (Maunder, 2017). Ultimately, unpleasant social experiences may impact the student's feelings toward the institution and create apprehension that translates into critical attitudes (Maunder, 2017; Thiele, 2016) affecting their motivation.

Student Motivation Barriers

Encountering structural and relationship barriers can lead to another layer of interpersonal barriers—motivation. A student's motivational construct includes both intrinsic and extrinsic elements and is heavily impacted by task value, the student's perceived control over learning, and the development of self-efficacy. According to Becker (2017) students who believe their learning ability is fixed tend to have more testing anxiety, value their academic tasks less, perceive a lower level of control in their learning, and maintain lower self-efficacy. Although a student may have previous positive expectations for success, this motivation can be sabotaged by negative experiences, unaddressed external barriers, and a lack of knowledge and guidance within the higher education institution. Furthermore, students experience a motivational barrier when they feel as though their coursework does not connect with their lives or future goals. Students choose to invest time and resources into classes, and it becomes disheartening and difficult to remain motivated and persistent if they are unaware of the destination and the pathway to get there (Becker, 2017). This becomes a motivational barrier when the student develops low expectancy and low value while encountering the high cost of their educational experience (Becker, 2017). Motivation can positively affect student outcomes, long-term interest in a subject, and academic performance. Cultivating student motivation ensures optimal engagement, confidence, and a reason to engage in positive behaviors.

According to Kitchen and colleagues (2021) it is up to the institution's faculty and program coordinators to develop strategies and interventions that help build a student's academic confidence and develop self-efficacy, ultimately leading to the student's ability to achieve their academic goals. Additionally, according to Becker (2017), students thrive when they are given the "what, how, and why" in their learning environment. This can be achieved by providing clear

guided pathways and structured program requirements, extensive advisement support, student

support services, student-focused instruction, and focused developmental education. However,

students who are first-generational and have limited knowledge of higher education institutions

are less likely to be aware of the resources available, or how to access these resources, and are

hesitant to seek assistance. Deutschland (2019) suggests that these students may need extra

motivation to reach out to support services. Proactive advisement structures have been shown to

be beneficial for first-generational students, as they combine both prescriptive and

developmental advisement focused on major and career goals, college adjustment, academic

planning, and strategizing to ensure academic success (Kitchen et al., 2021).

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is the sense of security, support, acceptance, attention, inclusion,

and identity for a member within a certain group (Cherry, 2021). In terms of higher education,

having a sense of belonging encompasses the feeling of being "at home" and feeling supported

by the institution (Herpen et al., 2019). Transitioning into higher education can be a challenge

for some students. The student is learning a new environment, building new relationships, and

growing into a new role (van Herpen et al., 2020). According to van Herpen nd colleagues

(2020) transitioning students encounter new concerns, developing relationships with peers and

faculty, and a sense of belonging. The importance of whether the student develops a sense of

belonging at an institution of higher education influences a student's decision to leave an

institution when experiencing difficulties adapting to their new environment (van Herpen et al.,

2020). When a student does not feel as though they belong at the institution, they are less likely

to be motivated, reach out for help, take advantage of learning opportunities, or attempt to

develop relationships with peers and faculty (van Herpen et al., 2020). When a sense of

belonging is developed and present, the students experience higher levels of satisfaction overall,

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perform better in their classes, and have a stronger commitment to graduate (van Herpen et al., 2020). Because of the first-generation transitions to college with a unique set of challenges impacting their first-year experiences, developing a sense of belonging through their relationship with faculty is critical.

Student Success Interventions

Although institution administrators cannot fully control external contributing factors that may impact a student's success, the institution can help shape and foster positive attributes using non-academic interventions (Millea et al., 2018). According to Karp (2016) the four key mechanisms to encourage positive student outcomes include creating social relationships with peers and instructors, clarifying the students' aspirations, and enhancing student commitment by developing college know-how and making college life more feasible. Furthermore, Fernandez and colleagues (2017) state that the prominent component of refocusing on student success is the redesign and implementation of holistic advising and mentoring. Advising the student holistically allows the institution to address internal and external barriers to promote lifelong learning and empower students to make sound academic, professional, and personal decisions (Fernandez et al., 2017). Non-academic interventions focus on the development of students' non-cognitive skills, including mindset, learning strategies, and social skills (Karp, 2016). The development of non-cognitive skills allows students to manage multiple priorities, improve communication skills, develop self-efficacy and self-direction, and learn how to effectively set goals and problem-solve.

Students are more likely to remain at a higher education institution if they feel as though the administration and faculty show interest in and care for their individual needs (Miller, 2019). By helping students identify their needs and refine their learning experiences, faculty can help the students experience an increase in confidence, locus of control, self-regulation, and soft

skills, causing a long-term effect on persistence and institutional retention. Karp (2016) suggests that regular meetings among faculty and other success advocates on campus enable institutions to identify struggling students and connect those students to needed services in a timely manner.

Improving engagement through social interactions and campus engagement helps support students in academic integration, classroom dynamics, and learning communities (Miller, 2019). The more integrated the student is with the institutional community, the more likely they are to engage with faculty, and the more likely they are to persist (Miller, 2019). According to Trolian and Parker (2020) frequent faculty-student interactions are considered the most important factor in student motivation, involvement, and success.

Faculty-student mentoring relationships are a key influence on the student's sense of belonging and their level of persistence (Law et al., 2019). Within the mentoring relationship the faculty mentor is available to provide the student mentee with "knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge and support" to foster the student's personal development (Law et al, 2019, p.400). Furthermore, campus mentoring programs that target first-generational students increase academic performance, transitioning success, and the student's comfortability at the institutions. Although research discusses the role of full-time faculty and staff on campus serving as mentors, little has been mentioned on the role of adjunct faculty members in a faculty-student mentoring relationship.

Faculty-Student Relationships

Faculty play a major role in the increase of student perception of the value of their coursework and cause a powerful positive effect on a student's institutional expectations. Most undergraduate students rely on faculty members as their primary point of contact with the institution (Trolian et al., 2016). Outside of the classroom, campus academic programs that promote student success are more effective when dedicated faculty members are included

(Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Students interact with faculty members to seek guidance on course selection, assignment clarity, career-related advice, and research.

Faculty members serve as cultural agents at an individual level for a student attempting to establish a connection to an institution (Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Campus collective cultural agents consist of the student's peer group, campus organizations, and cultural centers. The patterns of interactions among the student's microsystem (peers, advisors, and faculty) can create a positive impact, cultivating a holistic support system for the student. However, as an individual-level cultural agent, the faculty member serves as a guide to assist students in the navigation of campus culture and transitions in and outside of the classroom (Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

According to Trolian and colleagues (2016) students who interact with faculty members in and outside of the classroom experience an enhancement in learning and higher rates of overall success in college. Both formal and informal interactions are positively associated with the increased development of cognitive skills, intellectual growth, attainment, and career choice (Trolian et al., 2021). Effective formal interactions, such as positive teaching behaviors and practices within the classroom, promote several college outcomes. These practices include contact between faculty and student, active learning practices, prompt feedback, clear communication on course expectations, and respect for diverse forms of learning (Trolian & Parker, 2020). Informal interactions allow faculty members to provide more than just curriculum-specific support, serving as a connection to other resources (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Such informal contact with faculty has been shown to increase cognitive gains and orientation, degree aspirations, and overall student satisfaction. Increases in student satisfaction lead to an increase in the student's institutional commitment and orientation toward lifelong learning (Deutschland, 2019). In turn, the level of loyalty to the institution is reflected

in the student's attitudes and behaviors (Snijders, 2020). The level of faculty-student interactions may serve as a predictor of a student's academic motivation, the development of academic self-concept, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, cognitive gains, and academic achievement (Trolian et al., 2016). These integrations include specific encounters comprised of communication and social exchanges between the student and faculty member regarding academic progress, mentoring, and discussion of possible barriers. According to Trolian and colleagues (2021) first-generation students report that faculty members were the most influential in their future careers even when compared to familial support. Positive faculty-student interactions are likely to occur when the faculty member is approachable, accessible, responsive to student concerns, displays a caring attitude, is willing to offer career guidance, is active on campus, and encourages institutional connectedness.

According to Snijder (2020) faculty-student relationships consist of five dimensions. These dimensions include the student's trust in the faculty member's honesty, trust in the faculty member's benevolence, the student's affective conflict and commitment, and the student's overall satisfaction with faculty performance. Additionally, the more interest a faculty member shows in the student's background the greater the likelihood of developing an established and trusting relationship that provides individualized validation and encouragement to pursue academic goals (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016).

Faculty participation on campus increases their motivation for teaching and helps them to develop a positive attitude toward students. When faculty members are engaged in administrative decision-making and the development of student success programs, their job satisfaction increases as do their interactions with campus staff and students (Miller, 2019). Furthermore, according to Miller (2019), studies show that an increase in faculty job satisfaction increases student retention rates.

Outside of the classroom, faculty mentoring also positively correlates with a student's college adjustment, increase in grades, development of persistence, and clearly defined academic goals (Law, 2019). Faculty members can assume the role of a coach to help improve student accountability, encourage students to reach lasting and functional learning goals, and assist them to become workforce-ready (Taylor, 2016). Through this process, the faculty member feels more connected to the campus community, desires to participate in developing stronger teaching skills, and becomes more involved in the pursuit of student success and satisfaction. This allows for an increase in institutionalizing collaboration and a reduction in institutional barriers experienced by first-generation college students (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016).

Adjunct Faculty-Student Relationships

As previously mentioned, in recent years research has been conducted to explore more deeply the faculty-student relationship and the possible impact on a student's success while attending community college. However, due to financial strain, the community college system has begun to rely heavily on several non-tenure-track faculty members, referred to as adjunct faculty, to meet the needs of the institution at a reduced cost (Guthrie et al., 2019). Financially, the institution benefits greatly from hiring adjunct faculty due to lower compensation and lower resource allocation for professional development. Additionally, adjuncts allow for a flexible labor pool and supplemental expertise of the tenure-track faculty (Guthrie et al., 2019). Adjunct faculty members are continuously growing to be a more dominant population on the community college campus. However, along with this population growth, there is an increasing gap in research discussing the importance of developing a positive relationship between adjunct faculty members and first-generation students and its impact on student success rates.

Traditional adjunct instructor hiring involves recruitment based primarily on subject discipline, minimal requirements on course preparation, minimal mentoring, unclear or

unavailable personal and professional development, and limited 'teaching only' compensation (Guthrie et al., 2019). Adjunct faculty members are not often included in the development of curricula or strategies for student learning. They are less available to students, interact less frequently, spend less time preparing for courses, and are less likely to use student-centered teaching methods (Guthrie et al., 2019). Unfortunately, despite the disconnect adjunct faculty members have with students, adjunct faculty are often assigned first semester and subject introductory courses with higher failure rates, creating an early-on issue for student enrollment and delayed graduation rates, specifically for first-generational students (Guthrie et al., 2019).

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Summary

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It was proposed by the researcher that adjunct faculty play a major role in student success but are often given very little guidance, little access to and involvement with student success programs, and reduced interaction with the student population. Although institutions may provide an adjunct faculty orientation to guide learning practices, institutional policy, and available programs, these workshops are often optional, and compensation is not provided. Professional development opportunities may also be available to adjunct faculty; however, funding and grants may not be as accessible as they are to full-time faculty and the adjunct may not have the dedicated time to participate due to often maintaining additional employment responsibilities outside of the institution. Lastly, adjunct faculty members are predominantly subject-orientated in their relationship with an institution, and little information is shared with adjunct faculty on services available to help students with disabilities, mental health issues, and/or other internal and external barriers. Adjunct faculty typically are unaware of how and where the student can access these services (Guthrie et al., 2019). Little research is available in the discussion of how to include adjunct faculty in a more intentional way to allow for effective engagement, increased student success, and a positive impact on first-generation students'

retention and graduation rates. The purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of the first-generation student regarding interacting with and developing a relationship with adjunct instructors.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

It was suggested that the inclusion of adjunct faculty members in an intentional way may allow for effective engagement and increased student success, creating a positive impact on first-generation students' retention and graduation rates. However, first-generation students are not often asked directly to share their perspectives in this arena. The purpose of this study was to further examine the first-generation student's perspective on their relationship with adjunct

instructors and whether this relationship impacts their academic development, level of perseverance, and sense of belonging in higher education.

Design

This study incorporated a qualitative research design to bring meaning to the research findings from the perspective of the research participants while being centered on interpretation and situated in a specific context (Holley & Harris, 2019). Because the research questions called for the identification of factors that influence an outcome, the futility of an intervention, and the understanding of the best predictors of outcomes, a qualitative approach served best in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Utilizing the phenomenology of the qualitative research theoretical lens allowed for a transformative perspective that shaped and provided a call for action or change (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology attempts to build the essence of an experience from its participants through open-ended observation and in-depth exploratory interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These experiences were examined as they occurred and on their terms, rather than according to predefined theoretical categories (Smith & Nizza, 2022). To provide interpretations and descriptions of the phenomenology topic, the present study was conducted as an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) qualitative method in the form of exploratory interviews.

The IPA qualitative methodology allows the researcher to interpret the meaning of the lived experience of the research participants (Alase, 2017) in the context of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA as a qualitative methodology was introduced as an operational way of incorporating theoretical ideas of the experimental and experiential presence of psychology in research (Smith et al., 2022). In the early years, IPA was utilized primarily in health psychology and has since been applied to clinical and counseling fields, education, and social psychology fields (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is described as psychology research in the real

world due to its core interest being human predicament and how people engage with their world (Smith et al., 2022). Participants are considered experiential experts in the topic under investigation (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA is participant-orientated research approach that allows the participant to express themselves in a way they see fit without distortion and/or persecution (Alase, 2017), allowing the experience to be examined in detail and from the point of view of the person who experienced it to elicit rich description; this allows the researcher to capture emotions and examine how the individual understood and made sense of an experience (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This method is more comprehensive than a traditional qualitative method, as it is committed to examining how the participants make sense of major life events, allowing sensitivity and understanding felt in words (Alase, 2017) while illuminating ambiguity and tensions in the individual's reaction to experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). It is concerned with how the ordinary, everyday experience becomes 'an experience' of importance to a person, allowing reflection and engagement in 'hot cognition' in an attempt to make sense of it (Smith et al., 2022). IPA examines the first and second-order experiences of the participant (Alase, 2017). The first order is the activity, and the second order is the mental and afflictive responses to that activity, i.e., remembering, regretting, desiring, etc. (Alase, 2017). Such a method allows for a holistic account of the issue, involving the reports of multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in the situation, and fostering the ability to sketch a larger picture (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Following the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the entire student population at the participating community college was invited to complete a closed and open-ended item screener requiring yes/no and descriptive responses based on the research questions. Potential participants were provided with perimeters of the definition of a first-generation student and adjunct instructor but were asked to provide their definition of both to establish self-

identification with the study. Students who were determined as qualified based on their

responses were then invited to participate in an individualized exploratory interview for deeper

discussion. Interview questions were based on current literature with possible modification of

questions based on incorporating new information gained through data collection (Holley &

Harris, 2019).

Research Questions

This qualitative study was driven by the following exploratory research questions:

Central Research Question

How does the first-generation college student describe the meaning of developing a

relationship with adjunct faculty members for academic development?

Guiding Research Question

How does the first-generation college student describe their sense of belonging at a

higher education institution due to the relationship with the adjunct instructor?

Participants and Setting

This study was conducted within a single community college institution located in the

Southeastern region of the United States during the fall semester of the school year. The total

current student enrollment of the institution is over 12,000 students; in 2020 the institutional

graduation rate was 17% and the retention rate was 55% (Univstats, 2021). With a total of 798

faculty employed, 485 are adjunct faculty members (College Factual, n.d.). Volunteer

participants for the study were required to be current first-generation students at the identified

institution and were required to complete the initial screener A sample of six participants was

purposefully selected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) amongst the eligible first-generation students

who completed the screening questionnaire to participate in a series of individual structured

interviews with the researcher. A small sample was utilized to allow the development of six

individual viewpoints, along with the development of subsequent micro-analysis of similarities and differences across the cases (Smith et al., 2022). If need be, snowball sampling was utilized to ensure the number of desired participants was met. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method that utilized current participants in the recruitment of other potential participants (Glen, 2022). Throughout the study, data were collected in the participant's natural setting with qualitative interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants via Zoom. Each participant was invited to participate in the interview in a setting where they felt safe and comfortable.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, professional association standards were examined, college approval was requested and obtained through the Institutional Review Board, and negotiations for publication authorship were made (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During the Fall 2023 semester, permission to conduct the research study was obtained through the Senior Administrative offices of the institution. The purpose of the study was disclosed along with the identification of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualifying screening questions (Appendix B) and interview questions (Appendix C) were made available and reviewed by the Senior Administrative office at the college. Additionally, the researcher and institution determined an agreed-upon incentive for participating students. The researcher assessed any potential risk to the participants during the study, including physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal harm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once permission was granted and the Institutional Review Board (IBR) request was approved, invitations for eligible participants were sent out. An announcement (Appendix A) regarding the need for qualifying interview participation was sent out to all current students via the institution's organizational electronic mailing system. The announcement consisted of the purpose of the study, how the data would be

used, qualifying participation requirements, a link to a qualifying screening questionnaire, a

confidentiality agreement (Appendix D), and participation incentive details (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). Eligible participants were provided with an informed consent form (Appendix

D) explaining participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw without penalty

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The informed consent form consisted of the identification of the

researcher, the sponsoring institution, the purpose of the study, the benefits of participating, the

risks to the participant, and guaranteed confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Identifying

information collected was limited to the student's preferred email address and the total number

of years attending the institution. Actual names, class(es), and instructor name (s) were assigned

pseudonyms or generic descriptors to avoid participant identification. Students who chose to

participate and met participation criteria based on the completed qualification screening

questionnaire were then notified by email of their selection to participate in the study. A total of

six qualifying participants were selected to meet with the researcher for individual interviews for

an inclusive and direct discussion. These participants received an email outlining meeting

expectation, questions for discussion, and information regarding meeting date, time, and

location. An additional informed consent and confidentiality form was completed, allowing for

additional identifying information to be collected including the participant's identity, voice, and

video recording. The researcher then conducted a 45–60-minute interview via Zoom. The

interview was semi-structured, discussing the previously answered screening questions as well as

an additional 10-15 open discussion questions based on the research (Creswell & Creswell,

2018). The interview protocol of questions is available in Appendix C. Leading questions were

avoided. The researcher withheld sharing personal impressions and adhered to questions stated

in the interview protocol (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview session was recorded upon

receiving consent received from the participants, and the researcher took detailed notes

throughout the interview. Following the interview the recordings were transcribed, and the

researcher utilized thematic analysis to examine the data from both the survey and focus group to

develop common themes in response to the research questions (Anwar, 2018). Upon completion

of the study, all students who participated in the interview process received the designated

incentive. Ethical considerations throughout both the qualification screening and individual

interviewing phase of the study included permission to access/contact the student via email,

consent for voluntary participation, confidentiality of both screening questionnaire and interview,

and dissemination of the findings sent to the institution and study participants. The privacy and

anonymity of the participant were respected in every phase of the study (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a qualifying screener which was administered online via

SurveyMonkey.com. Five open-ended questions were included in the survey for students to

respond to in short-answer formatting (Appendix B).

The survey took approximately 20-25 mins to complete. Each question addressed the

student's understanding of the first-generation and adjunct faculty definitions based on provided

definitions and self-identification. Participants were provided with definitions of the first-

generation student and adjunct faculty to ensure that screened participants were within the scope

of the study. However, interested participants were asked to respond based on their own

definitions and perceptions of their identity as first-generation students and the identification of

adjunct instructors. The researcher analyzed the screening results for qualifying students to

include in the interview phase of the study. Before the individual interviews, participants were

provided with questions and themes up for discussion. The individual interviews were

conducted via Zoom with exploratory open-ended questions discussing the screening results and

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other additional questions related to the research questions. The exploratory interview questions encouraged participants to report/reflect on stories, describe the essence of their experiences, provide meaning, and seek further understanding from the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although the discussion was fluid and narrative in nature, the questions remained fixed and grounded in the literature.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed the collected dataset in the form of written screening responses and interview transcripts was thematically analyzed. The qualitative dataset was used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning regarding the first-generation student's perspectives and attitudes towards adjunct instructors, along with their perceptions of the impact their relationship with these instructors has on their academic development and sense of belonging. The thematic analysis of data reflected common themes and topics utilized in both the screening and interview results in response to the proposed research question (Anwar, 2018). A close line-by-line analysis of the claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant was conducted (Smith et al., 2022). The first step in the analysis was to become familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Once the researcher was familiar with the data, phenomenological theming was then used to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way. These themes were descriptive, with most sub-themes associated with a preliminary theme, although some sub-themes were associated with multiple preliminary themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The selection of themes and patterns was dependent on the research question and the interest of the researcher (Anwar, 2018). Identification of patterns emphasized both convergence and divergence, commonality, and nuance both in singles and across multiple cases (Smith et al., 2022).

The dataset was analyzed for the prevalence of themes and the creation of tentative, preliminary findings. Next, the preliminary findings were refined to specific elements and codifications to help organize the data, and eventually clustered into groups to form themes (Anwar, 2018). These sub-themes were then extracted, separated, and classified based on similarities into clusters that were titled as themes. Larger clusters attained the status of main themes, while smaller clusters attained the status of sub-themes. All themes were analyzed for suitability, diversity, and compatibility with the research questions (Anwar, 2018), and overlapping themes were merged for data to be more coherent and compact. Further analysis of the themes was completed in the final stage. The researcher analyzed each theme's description, context, function, interpretation, and relationship to the research questions (Anwar, 2018), providing text samples from the screening responses and interview transcript to develop a framework illustrating the relationship between the experiential themes (Smith et al., 2022). Upon data analysis completion, participants were invited to also review the interview transcripts and themes for insight and feedback on findings. The analysis was interpreted with an action agenda in hopes of bringing awareness and policy changes to the institution and the community college system (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research findings and publication copies were then shared with participants and the institution. Data were communicated in clear, straightforward, and appropriate language that avoided disclosing information which may harm participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Proof of compliance with ethical standards, lack of conflict of interest, and ownership of data from the study was provided (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data in the form of video and voice recording, screener results, participant identifying information, and all other materials were stored properly and will remain for three years (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Appropriate credit to researchers, participants, and advisors was given (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Validity

This qualitative research study was conducted utilizing the phenomenological approach, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach focuses on the community of lived experiences in a particular group (Chambers, 2013). The group of first-generation students selected to participate in this research had first-hand knowledge and experience regarding the research questions. Through the process of a phenomenological approach, the researcher constructed a universal meaning of the shared experiences and a profound understanding of the responses to the research questions (Chambers, 2013). The validity of the study was fully based on the perceived truth of the participants. The researcher disclosed the purpose of the research and its procedures to all participants throughout every phase of the study. Participants may have known one another, as they were all students enrolled at the same institution; however, all participants were informed of this possibility before participation and were required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Participants in the study were involved in the analysis phase, allowing them to review the interview transcripts and themes. All information gathered throughout the study was available to the participants to review for any needed clarification or correction to limit error. The validity strategies that were utilized to assess the accuracy of findings included triangulating different sources to build coherent justification, member checking with participants to ensure they felt the data was accurate, and providing a self-reflection of the researcher about the research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, the researcher was mindful of any potential ethical issues that could have occurred. Ethical considerations within this research study included voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, communication with participants regarding any potential harm, and results communication.

Summary

Past research studies have addressed the faculty-student relationship and how it influences student perseverance in higher education. However, studies have yet to address the specific populations of first-generation students and adjunct instructors. The drive of this study was to shed more light on the importance of the relationship students have with adjunct faculty members and examine how these instructors can be utilized more intentionally. With an increased need to address effective student engagement, success, retention, and graduation rates, perhaps a closer examination of the first-generation student's perspective on their relationships with adjunct instructors and their level of sense of belonging in higher education will open other avenues of reform.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how the first-generation student describes the meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct instructors at a community college and how this relationship influences their academic development and institutional sense of belonging. The theory of ecological systems, specifically the ecological model and campus ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), was utilized to guide this study. The following sections address the process of data collection, the description of participants, and the emerged themes and sub-themes, providing personalized descriptions on the significance of the adjunct instructor and first-generation student relationship.

Data Analysis

A qualifying screener was administered online via SurveyMonkey.com (Appendix B). All students at the institution were sent a link to the screener via their student email address. The email requested participants who were enrolled at the institution for a minimum of one semester and identified as first-generation students. The screener consisted of five open-ended questions allowing "yes" or "no" responses as well as questions for students to respond to in short-answer format. Participants were provided with definitions of the first-generation student, adjunct

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faculty, student-faculty relationships, and academic development to ensure screened participants were within the scope of the study.

The survey took approximately 20 mins for each student to complete. Each question addressed the student's understanding of the first-generation student, adjunct faculty, student-faculty relationships, and academic development based on provided definitions and self-identification. Participants were also asked to respond based on their definitions and perceptions of their identity as first-generation students and the identification of adjunct instructors. The screening results were then analyzed to identify qualified students to include in the interview phase of the study. Selected participants were contacted directly via email informing them of their eligibility. Eligible students who agreed to participate in the interview phase of the study were sent a consent form (Appendix D) to review and sign before scheduling an interview date and time. Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom with exploratory open-ended questions discussing the screening results, along with additional questions related to the research topic (Appendix C). The interview questions encouraged participants to report/reflect on stories, describe the essence of their experiences, and provide meaning to their experiences.

A qualitative dataset was utilized to identify and interpret patterns of meaning regarding the first-generation student's perspectives and attitudes towards adjunct instructors, along with their perceptions of the impact their relationship with these instructors has on their academic development and sense of belonging. Once an interview was completed the voice recording was transcribed by the researcher. After all the interviews were completed and transcribed, the collected dataset was organized and thematically analyzed. A line-by-line analysis of the claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant was conducted. The first step in the analysis included reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Once the researcher was familiar with the data, themes were used to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way. Themes

were categorized into broader descriptive sub-themes, with most associated with a preliminary

theme, although some sub-themes were associated with multiple themes. The dataset was

analyzed for the commonness of themes and the creation of preliminary findings. Preliminary

findings were then refined to specific elements and codifications to organize the data and cluster

it into groups to form themes. Data were then extracted, separated, and classified based on

similarities into clusters that were labeled as themes. Larger clusters were identified as

preliminary themes, while smaller clusters were identified as sub-themes. All themes were

analyzed for suitability, diversity, and compatibility with the research questions, and overlapping

themes were merged for data to be more coherent and compact. Within the final stage, further

analysis of the themes were completed, as the researcher then further analyzed each theme's

description, context, function, interpretation, and relationship to the research questions. Text

samples were provided from the screening responses and interview transcript in order to develop

a framework illustrating the relationship between the experiential themes (Smith, Flowers &

Larkin, 2022). Identification of patterns included convergence and divergence, commonality,

and distinction both in singles and across multiple cases.

Upon data analysis competition, participants were asked to review the transcript and

themes from their individual interview for insight and any additional feedback on the findings.

All information gathered throughout the study was made available to the participants for review,

and for any needed clarification or adjustment to limit error.

Participants

A total of six participants were selected to participate in the study after being recruited

based on responses they provided in a qualification screener. Pseudonyms were utilized in data

collection and theme development to disguise the identity of the participants and to ensure

confidentiality. The commonalities of the participants that were precursors to their inclusion in

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the study included the following elements. All six participants attended the same community

college in the Southeastern region of the United States for a minimum of one semester. All

participants identified as first-generation students. All participants reported completing a

course(s) at the community college that was taught by an adjunct instructor.

It was the desire of the researcher to better understand the experience of first-generation

students and their unique perspectives on relationship development with adjunct instructors. The

following section includes a vignette of each participant, including their background information

and their firsthand experiences of being a first-generation student.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Major	Length of Enrollment	Additional Demographics
SW	Female	Associate in art, Teacher Preparation	2 years	Married, Mother, Works Full Time.
LR	Female	Licensed Practical Nurse	4 years (not continuously enrolled)	Married, Mother, Army Reservist
MM	Female	Criminal Justice	Multiple semesters of enrollment.	Mother
MD	Male	Electrician	1 semester	Married, Active Duty Army
JS	Female	Speech Pathology	4 years (continuous enrollment)	Married, Mother, continued education
AH	Female	Medical Billing/Coding	Multiple semesters of enrollment.	Lives with family

SW. SW is female and married with a four-year-old son. SW reported that she identified

as a first-generation student. She stated that her mother completed one or two college courses

after graduating high school but never completed a degree. SW's father did not progress past middle school. SW stated her father ended up leaving school to help in the family business. She has two older brothers; one has been incarcerated her entire life and the other has not attended higher education. SW mentioned she is the only one in her immediate family with the "drive to go back to school or to get an education." She has been continuously enrolled at the selected community college since January 2021. While attending the institution, SW works about 38 hours a week at a local vape shop and her husband works full-time at a steel plant as a welder. SW expressed the pressure of school, work, and having a young child can be overwhelming. At the time of the interview, SW was completing her last semester and was graduating with her associate in arts, Teaching Preparation. SW desires to continue her education at the local four-year university, majoring in Teacher Education Secondary English, to achieve her goal to become a high school English teacher. SW shared with me that her dream of being an English teacher was inspired by her 11th-grade English teacher. She expressed that her English teacher "changed her life" and she wants to also change the lives of kids like herself.

During the interview, SW was friendly and happy to be participating. SW described her time at the institution as a "typical school experience." She stated that during her time at the institution she made many friends, joined an Honor Society, and developed relationships with faculty and staff. SW stated:

> I mean really for the most part it was a wonderful experience, you know? I did make friends along the way. I joined the Honor Society, and I am a member of the executive board of NSLS, so I did enjoy that….I had some amazing classes, I loved them.

SW expressed that initially when she began attending the institution she felt stressed and overwhelmed. Yet despite these feelings, SW was motivated and excited to be the first of her family to complete a degree and be an example for her young son.

LR. Previously Active Duty Army, and current Reservist, LR is a wife and mother brought to the east coast from the West by the military. LR lives far from her immediate family and feels isolated from her support systems. LR has been attending the institution on and off for four years. She identifies as a first-generation student because she is the first in her immediate family to attend a degree program or diploma program after high school. Due to her and her husband's military obligations, she has had to take a pause on classes and/or has been forced to change pathways. LR expressed her desire to complete nursing school, but she has not had the time or stability to do so. She was attempting to pursue an associate degree in nursing (AND); however, her husband recently received military orders, causing LR to settle for the Practical Nurse (LPN) program. LR stated that she has "always enjoyed healthcare" and while in the military she served as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). She is currently in the process of applying to a four-year university located near her husband's new duty station. If she is not accepted into the institution's nursing program, she plans to attend a community college to complete her ADN while working as an LPN.

During the interview, LR put full attention and thought into her response to each question. She continuously expressed how she appreciates the diversity among other students and faculty at the participating community college. She stated she was surprised by the number of programs offered and resources available to students in the smaller institution. Transitioning from active-duty military to a college student had its challenges for LR. She shared:

> It's not as structured for sure, and I knew it was going to be that way—but it is always
> hard when it's all self-driven, you know? The biggest thing that hit me is just how much I
> have to push on my own.

MM. Similar to the previously mentioned participants, MM is a mother and has three children. While MM's mother attended the same institution she is attending, her mother did not

graduate but encouraged MM to persist in completing her degree. After MM graduated high school, she was accepted into four-year universities but struggled to gain financial assistance. MM attempted to join the military but was deemed medically disqualified. Her mom then encouraged her to attend the local community college. MM has encountered numerous circumstances that have caused roadblocks in her education goals. She has had multiple semesters of enrollment with brief breaks in between to care for her children and disabled mother. MM first attended the community college in 2010. Shortly after beginning school, she discovered she was pregnant with her first child. After she had her daughter, MM experienced health issues and chose to withdraw from school. She attended an online institution briefly before pausing school again to take care of her sick mother. When MM decided to return to the community college, she had reached her lifetime limit for her Pell Grant and needed to find an associate degree that would utilize all of her previously completed classes to save her money and time. MM expressed her desire to be a physical therapy assistant but feels the obligations to her kids and mother would not allow her to complete clinical. She chose to pursue her associates in criminal justice and completed her degree a month prior to our interview. MM will be the first of her three siblings to earn a college degree. MM is hoping to find employment that will pay for her to complete her four-year degree in criminal justice and allow her to serve as a probation officer. If her education is not funded by her employer or another third party, MM stated she will likely not continue her education.

MM expressed both positive and negative experiences while attending community college. She expressed in detail her frustrations with individual faculty members, as well as her appreciation for faculty members that supported and encouraged her. MM stated that although it was difficult to return to school, at her most recent enrollment she was "more vocal about what I needed and what I wanted." MM said what kept her motivated was her desire to fulfill her

mother's wish and to "let my kids know, even though you start something you go back and finish it."

MD. While serving as active-duty Army, MD is taking advantage of the electrician program offered by the community college for military members who reenlist and desire to learn a new trade. MD is a 32-year-old male and married, attending the institution full time. MD stated that no one in his family has attended college and most have not completed high school and/or a GED. MD and his wife just recently bought their first home and spend their free time renovating. His wife also attended the community college, pursuing the paramedic program. MD attended the community college in a previous semester, pursuing business, but quickly realized the pathway was not for him. MD took advantage of the unique program that allows active-duty military members to attend the institution full time, rather than reporting on base, for six months. He stated that he fully enjoys the electrician program, learning practical skills, and developing relationships with the faculty members. Throughout the interview, MD spoke highly of the faculty members he encountered while completing the electrician program. He states the instructors are knowledgeable in what they are teaching and take time to assist students in and outside of the classroom. MD repeatedly told me how much his instructors have shown care and understanding to him and his cohort members. He mentioned that initially attending college was a scary experience for him. MD faced a military-to-civilian cultural transition, along with feelings of self-doubt, being "really nervous and…scared about overloading myself…. just not having…the motivation to read and do the assignments and stuff." MD was concerned with not having someone to turn to for information and felt the need to figure a majority of things out on his own. At the time of the interview, MD was unsure of what he will pursue next. He has not decided if he wants to continue his education, remain in the Army, or choose to separate from the

military and enter the civilian workforce. MD is interested in completing a four-year degree but is unsure of what he would major in.

      JS. JS is a 37-year-old female who was the first in her family to complete a college degree. Her mother is a foreigner and her father served as active-duty army throughout her childhood. JS is now married and has two children of her own. Her family owns multiple local businesses and a majority of the members of her immediate and extended family work in these businesses. JS graduated from the selected community college in 2010, and she attended the institution for four years consecutively. When asked why she selected to attend the institution she stated that she did not have the GPA to attend a university, which was her ultimate goal. She determined the community college was more feasible, local, and cost-effective. JS stated that she was unsure what to major in when she started college, leading to her extended enrollment at the institution. She stated, "I initially went for nursing, and then I went for….but I never got into these programs, then I went for dental hygiene and then I went for physical therapy back to nursing, and then I went to speech." Eventually, she selected the associates in speech pathology due to the influence of a friend. After graduation, JS entered the workforce and continued her education with a bachelor's in psychology and her master's in speech pathology. JS described the community college as diverse with plenty of options and avenues to different programs. JS shared she was terrified initially navigating college on her own, but it became very important to her to be the first in her family to accomplish college. Overall, she stated, "I felt like the classes were great, the professors were good."

      AH. During the time of the interview, AH was in her last semester of classes at the community college. She was completing her second associate degree, majoring in medical billing and coding. She has already completed an associate in general education. AH is the first of her family to attend college, and she mentioned that college was "never really talked about" in

her home growing up. However, because of her college accomplishments, her two sisters have also chosen to pursue higher education and are graduating alongside her. AH has attended the institution on and off for a few years. She has completed courses at another community college institution and returned. She chose to complete a second associate as a steppingstone to her long-term goal of nursing. She is hoping to attend a local university due to the offer of free tuition. She additionally plans to look at institutions outside of the state to major in her desired program. Unlike her fellow participants, AH expressed more of a negative experience attending the institution. Socially she did not feel supported, and she struggled to find a personal connection with the institution. AH felt as though she needed to develop new levels of autonomy in navigating the college culture and ensure she was successful at the institution.

Results

The resulting themes from this study were categorized into preliminary themes and sub-themes, followed by a synthesis of the themes to describe the experience and development of the first-generation students in college because of the relationships they have with adjunct instructors. Phenomenological theming symbolizes data through two specific prompts: what something is and what something means. This allows the researcher to explore the participant's world beliefs, perspectives, constructs, identity development, and emotional experience (Saldana, 2021). The preliminary themes included (a) the Identity of the First-Generation College Student (b) Interactions with Adjunct Instructors (c) Positive Student-Adjunct Faculty Relationships (d) a Sense of Belonging, and (e) Suggestions for the Institution. The sub-themes focused on the participant's lived experiences including (a) Feelings Around College Transitioning (b) Positive and Negative Interactions with Adjunct Instructors (c) Relationship Forming Barriers (d) Relationship Impact on Overall Academic Development, and (e) Relationship Impact on Sense of Belonging.

Research Questions

This qualitative study was driven by the following exploratory research questions:

CRQ: How does the first-generation college student describe the meaning of developing a

relationship with adjunct faculty members for academic development?

GQ: How does the first-generation college student describe the sense of belonging at a higher

education institution due to the relationship with the adjunct instructor?

Table 3

Textural and Structural Themes Based on Research Question

Preliminary Themes	Subtheme	RQ	R Question Description
1. Identity of the First-Generation Student	(a) Feelings Around College Transitioning	GQ	Belonging
2. Interactions with Adjunct Instructors	(b) Positive and Negative Interactions with Adjunct Instructors	CRQ	Relationship
3. Positive Student-Adjunct Faculty Relationships	(c) Relationship Forming Barriers	CRQ	Relationship
4. Sense of Belonging	(d) Relationship Impact on Overall Academic Development	CRQ, GQ	Development Belonging
	(e) Relationship Impact on Sense of Belonging.	GQ	Belonging
5. Suggestions for the Institution		CRQ, GQ	Development Belonging

Theme One: Identity of the First-Generation College Student

First-generational college students typically are labeled as such due to the assumption

their parents/caregivers have little to no experience navigating the academic, financial, and

cultural barriers of higher education from not attending an institution themselves (Dennon,

2020). Selected participants were asked to self-define why they identify as first-generation

college students. Unanimously, all participants stated they identify in this category of students

because they are the first of their families to attend college and/or complete a college degree.

Although some of the participants stated their parents and/or siblings had enrolled in college-

level courses, they were the first to complete a degree. AH stated that college was rarely

discussed in her home growing up and attending was not a priority for both her immediate and

extended family members. MD stated that most of his immediate and extended family have not

completed high school or a General Education Development Test (GED).

Feelings Around College Transitioning

While transitioning into college, the first-generation student encounters major

developmental milestones. The student is forced to become more independent; they are exposed

to various people and environments, and they must learn how to navigate new relationships and

social expectations of the institution. First-generation students report lower levels of self-

confidence in academic preparation and lower expectations for their college GPA, their academic

abilities, and self-concept (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Additionally, first-generation

students experience unique psychological barriers, such as navigating new emotional

experiences, identity management, self-perceptions, and motivation issues (Jury et al., 2017).

First-generation students are less likely to interact with their peers and instructors and feel

uncomfortable in the college setting. The students may feel disconnected from the institution,

have lower self-awareness, and are often reluctant to reach out for help.

To address the guiding research question, participants were asked to share how they first

felt when attending college for the first time. SW shared that she was stressed due to the

adjustments requiring her to rely on her husband to provide for their family. MD was concerned

about the transition from active-duty military to being full-time in the classroom. He stated he

was worried he would be the oldest in the classroom at 32; he was unsure if he would fit into the college culture, was nervous he was possibly overloading himself, and worried he would lack the motivation required. Like MD, LR faced the transition from active-duty military to a full-time student, as well as transitioning to being a mom of a newborn. She said she was overwhelmed and unsure of herself. Although JS transitioned from high school into college, she stated that initially she was "terrified." She felt as though she had no guidance during the transition. Like JS, AH described the transition as overwhelming due to a lack of guidance and resources in both high school and her first semester of college. Positive emotions shared by the participants included excitement for being the first to attend college and motivation to make family members and children proud of their accomplishments.

When the participants were asked to describe what it was like to transition into college, they expressed unique challenges they faced based on their personal experiences. SW stated that she experienced a cultural shock returning to school as an adult learner for the first time. She stated she had to work hard to refocus her mindset and purpose for attending college. She began to view herself as being in a position to support her peers. MM voiced transitioning from high school to college, saying, "I mentally wasn't there." She felt underprepared for college, and she struggled with shifting her mindset and expectations. She stated she felt as though she "lacked maturity" for college. The lack of guidance provided by the institution and parents/guardians contributed to the issues of transitioning for JS and AH. Both voiced they were "very frustrated" and the transition was "challenging in the sense that I had no guidance of how to do things" and "through the whole process I didn't have support from my family, so it was challenging overall to do it independently as a young adult." The lack of structure in college culture was a challenge for LR and MD to overcome when transitioning. Both had to overcome adjusting to being "self-driven" and learn how to "push on my own."

Second-generation students are students whose parents/guardians have completed a degree. Second-generation students often have insight and develop skills to help them in their transition into college. The participants were asked to describe in their own words the difference between a first-generation student's and a second-generation student's transition. SW stated she feels as though the first generation has a more stressful transition due to the lack of knowledge on what to expect and limited "insider information." LR feels as though second-generation students may receive more encouragement from their families to attend college. Both LR and AH stated that first-generation students tend to have a lack of direction when first starting college. They each stated that first-generation students are often not aware of what they should do to be successful or even what they should major in to reach their desired careers. First-generation students often do not receive the same level of family support according to JS, and MM added they are often not taught the tools needed to "combat weaknesses." Often the learning process is "self-led" with the first-generation student figuring much of it out on their own. JS stated that the first-generation student transition tends to be hard because "you're kind of laying that own foundation yourself." SW echoed these thoughts when she stated:

I feel like [the first-generation student's transition] could be a lot more stressful because they just don't know what to expect, so someone whose parents have went through college, you know, they can have a little bit of an insight. Your parents saying 'well this is what you need to expect, this is where you need to go, this is what you need to do, this is how you need to act' whereas the first-generation student do not have that insider information. You're basically going in blind and you're walking around not knowing what to do.

The identity of the participants shifted from the beginning of their educational journeys when compared to the completion of their degrees. The participants were examples of resilience

despite their circumstances early on in attending the institution. Although the participants all experienced stressful transitions into the institution, they each uniquely developed strengths either on their own or with the help of the institution to ensure their personal success.

Theme Two: Interactions with Adjunct Instructors

Participants were asked to describe in their own words how they knew their instructor was an adjunct instructor. Although some participants mentioned being told directly by the instructor through course introductions or some form of self-identification, most assumed their instructors were adjuncts. Sadly, their assumptions were based on the limited and/or lack of communication the instructor had with the student. SW and JS said they assumed their instructor was an adjunct due to classes and communication being online, office hours not being offered or being very limited, and the fact that the instructor was teaching a very limited number of courses. A continuous theme amongst the participants was the delayed response times to emails sent to the instructor and the adjunct instructor's lack of campus resource knowledge. Other participants, such as MM and MD, assumed their instructors were adjunct due to the programs they are enrolled in and the prevalence of adjuncts at the institution.

Surprisingly, when asked to describe the major difference between an adjunct instructor and a full-time instructor at the institution, the participants had a range of responses. SW stated she felt as though "sometimes adjuncts were a little bit easier to work with" and "someone full-time, that was a little harder to get ahold of them." MM disclosed she felt that an adjunct instructor is "more understanding than a full-time" because an adjunct instructor is also dealing with "everyday life." MM stated:

Adjunct instructors are more understanding, and when I needed help, they gave me the

help. If I needed more time, I got more time without being penalized. If I needed to come

see them, I could make an appointment and they were there for the appointment. I think

they were more organized than a full-time teacher.

JS stated that adjunct instructors tend to be "nicer and kind of more open", the pace of their

course is more manageable, and the adjunct instructor is friendlier.

Since most adjunct instructors were online, the participants were unable to identify a

major difference in the teaching styles of an adjunct instructor when compared to a full-time

instructor. However, MD stated there is a "major difference" between experiencing an adjunct

instructor online and face-to-face instruction. He explained that the adjuncts who teach face-to-

face instruction are dedicated and motivated to teach, while online instructors have limited

interactions and connections with their students. Like MD, LR stated the noticeable difference

between a full-time instructor and an adjunct instructor is that the full-time instructor tends to be

more "hands on", their courses are "more in-depth", and class preparation differences are

noticeable. AH further explained that she feels as though adjunct instructors are "less connected

to the school…they're less involved with students, they don't care about the students, they're just

there."

Communication with an adjunct instructor and the instructor's accessibility were

common issues among the participants. However, when asked if a first-generation student would

feel comfortable contacting their instructor the participants shared experiences of attempting to

do so and the result. SW stated that if a first-generation student can initiate a conversation with

an adjunct instructor, "it makes a world of a difference. I think just having a student put forth

that extra foot, I think the teacher is much more willing to work with the student than a student

who never asks any questions."

She continued by saying, "During the first semester, first-gen students would be a little

more timid about emailing instructors. Just because at first, you know, we don't know what

we're supposed to communicate." Although participants like MM feel as though they were able to communicate effectively with their adjunct instructors, participants like LR and AH felt as though they were dismissed or they were "bugging" their instructor, and ultimately they felt their difference in opinion caused a communication barrier for the remainder of the course. MD added most first-generation students tend to figure things out on their own by stating:

> I feel like, if you're the first-generation and you're a real go-getter, you might be the one to question and let me clear this up for myself because you had to be that person that went out and did these things on your own. Versus, you know, somebody that's had successful parents that went through school, you know, you kind of skirt along maybe.

When discussing adjunct accessibility, all participants identified electronic mail communication as the main form of accessibility when enrolled in a class taught by an adjunct instructor. Although email was the main form of communication participants like MM felt as though the adjunct instructors were delayed in communication and that this ultimately served as a barrier in a relationship with an instructor. Similar to MM, AH felt as though adjunct instructors were slower to grade and provide assignment feedback. LR described her experience with working with an adjunct instructor, stating she felt as though her instructor "wasn't given the opportunities the full timers were and a lot of time she wanted to do more, but she couldn't, she wanted to know the answers, but she didn't." AH stated she feels as though because of the limited accessibility to adjunct instructors, first-generation students have to "learn to be self-resourceful" when they are unable to find assistance.

Theme Three: Positive Student-Faculty Relationships

As discussed in Chapter Two the student-faculty relationship is essential for the student's motivation, overall well-being, intellectual commitment, and achievement (Morrison, 2021). Active engagement in a positive student-faculty relationship promotes student happiness, higher

levels of self-worth, and degree competition (Thiele, 2016). Without these relationships, the student may lack persistence, identity construction, the ability to navigate instructional procedures, and academic efficacy (Thiele, 2016). According to Thiele (2016), even a single interaction with one faculty member can strongly influence a student for years to come. Meaningful social involvement provides the student with valuable social and emotional support during major periods of adjustment (Maunder, 2017), especially for first-generation students.

Positive and Negative Interactions with Adjunct Instructors

When asked to describe a positive student-faculty relationship in their own words, participants provided responses that were unique to them and their individual experience as first-generation students. SW stated a positive relationship between a student and adjunct instructor included the instructor being accessible via email or on the phone whenever necessary. The instructor should be supportive and helpful, open to communicating and offering feedback. Likewise, MD felt as though a positive student-faculty relationship would include the willingness of the instructor to discuss course material and answer questions, to encourage advanced thinking and open discussion. LR added the importance of problem-solving and the instructor's willingness to resolve conflicts. JS, MM, and AH noted an instructor who is open, flexible, friendly, and provides a safe space for students would be necessary for the development of a positive student-faculty relationship.

The participants were asked if they have ever attempted to develop a relationship with an adjunct faculty instructor in the past. SW and LR stated it was much easier to develop a relationship with an adjunct instructor who was face-to-face. MM and MD stated they develop and maintain relationships with their instructors by staying after class, asking for help if needed, and taking advantage of office hours or time outside of class the instructor might offer to students. Both JS and AH mentioned not feeling the need to develop a relationship with their

instructors outside of the classroom. JS said she "would not go to office hours, I would not unless it was necessary or seek just conversational moments with my instructors—no." When JS was asked why she may refrain from speaking to her instructors outside of the classroom, she mentioned "I don't know, I guess that's just my personality type. Like I didn't want to cross that line because they were authority figures because they were the teacher." AH stated that in the past she has made connections with instructors, mainly through common interests outside of the classroom. AH however mentioned she would likely not attempt to contact an instructor for help for fear of her "question to be considered stupid" by the instructor.

When discussing whether or not an adjunct instructor ever attempted to develop a relationship with the participant a majority shared their personal experience of an adjunct that took the extra steps to support them. LR restated she felt as though her adjunct instructor:

> Does go out of the way to make relationships with the students and cares about what's going on. Because she takes the time to identify the good things that you are doing, appropriately address bad things and she takes the time to figure out what's going on with us.

Relationship Forming Barriers

Barriers encountered by the participants that were identified in the lack of relationship development consistently returned to whether the adjunct instructor was online or face-to-face during instruction. SW and LR stated they "find it easier to talk and develop a relationship face-to-face with someone" and they feel as though with an online instructor "you put in the work, it's graded, and there is not any personal communication there." Additionally, online communication was a barrier mentioned by MM and MD as it can be limited if the student only communicates with the adjunct instructor and if the adjunct has a delay in email communication and/or Blackboard feedback. JS and AH contributed unique perspectives on possible barriers to

developing a relationship with adjunct instructors. JS stated that although a face-to-face course

allows for a "sense of community in the classroom" and "open conversation", she felt as though

past instructors were not open to communication and she "couldn't say anything without it being

shameful"; she said she "oftentimes found it difficult with teachers or the professors that had like

that ego, that attitude about like, it's almost like a God complex." AH expressed that a barrier

she encounters regarding developing a relationship with an adjunct instructor is her thought

processes and anxieties. She stated that she didn't "care" to develop a relationship and she is

successful in her courses because she understands the subject matter and completes her

assignments on time.

Relationship Impact on Academic Development.

To address both the central and guiding research questions, participants were asked if

they feel as though the relationships they have or have had in their past with their adjunct

instructors have an impact on their overall student development. SW said she feels "if you have

a better relationship with instructors, it makes the class a lot easier." She added:

> If you're not comfortable with a teacher it's really hard to ask questions but if you are
>
> comfortable around them if you know you have your type of communication, you
>
> understand one another, it's really easy to talk to them about stuff.

When asked further if this comfortability allowed for a student to perform better in

courses, SW responded "Yes, definitely!" LR agreed, stating that "a student's more than just

class work, you know? It's interacting and learning from different people. Taking the

opportunity to learn from the entire experience." MM and MD shared experiences of how an

adjunct instructor had encouraged them to remain persistent in their academic goals. MM stated,

"I wanted to give up this last semester" and an instructor listened to her concerns, asked how he

could help, and allowed her extra time on assignments in his class. MM felt she was

experiencing difficulties on her own and her instructors didn't understand, but the relationship with this individual instructor encouraged and motivated her to continue to work hard and learn to advocate for herself. MD stated the relationship between an instructor and a student is "like a mirror effect, if they don't care, I'm not going to care that much either. But they (his instructors) do care." He continued by stating he "respects them, I want them to see me do good, you know? They're excellent teachers too so if I made a mistake that would almost make them question themselves, and I don't want that either." JS gives credit to a past adjunct instructor for her continued education. She states that she found the instructor to be "very encouraging" and the relationship she has with the instructor encouraged her to continue her education and completion of her bachelor's degree in psychology. AH mentioned a positive relationship with an instructor may make "the entire experience fun and cool" but she does not feel the need to develop relationships with instructors to succeed.

Theme Four: Sense of Belonging

For this study, a sense of belonging in higher education was defined as the feeling of security and support, a sense of acceptance, attention and support from others, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Cherry, 2021). The participants had varied responses when asked to describe their sense of belonging at a higher education institution concerning the guiding research question. SW stated that she always felt as though school has been her "area" and "just being there again, it's kind of like coming home." SW stated she was "really sad to be leaving" and that she is "definitely going to miss it." Likewise, MM felt a sense of pride in attending the institution, and she said she "bought all the gear, and wears it everywhere." When she is asked about the institution she attended, she is proud to share because she put "blood, sweat and tears" into getting herself to this level of success. JS and MD felt as though they were embraced by the institution, the diversity of students and instructors was comforting to both

participants, and they felt participation and interaction with peers were encouraged and helped them feel as though they belonged. MD stated he looks forward to going to class and seeing the instructors and peers. LR expressed she was appreciative of the institution but selected to attend it based on convenience and accessibility. LR restated she did not feel much of a connection to the institution, simply because of the temporary timeline of attending and long-term future military plans. AH shared she did not feel a sense of belonging at the institution. She stated the institution did not bring her "joy" and felt as though the institution did not provide spaces for her to feel safe, "hang out, socialize and enjoy being there." She mentioned she would rather "get in and get out" and did not feel the need to belong. She stated she is "there for a degree."

Relationship Impact on Sense of Belonging

The majority of participants agreed that a positive relationship between students and adjunct instructors impacted their sense of belonging at the higher education institution. MM shared that a positive relationship allowed her to feel more comfortable, accepted, and not afraid to make a mistake. She shared:

> Yes because they make it a lot more comfortable, easier to, it's easier to do well in class when you feel accepted in there, in that class. Do well, it's easier for me because if you're not afraid to fail, if you're not afraid of like the repercussions of failure or doing something wrong, and you know that the retraining for it isn't going to be the end of the world you're more willing to learn and make that, that failure and learn from it.

MM continued by stating that an adjunct has encouraged her and pushed her to believe in herself. She stated it makes a world of difference when a "teacher can see your progress" and identifies your strengths. After successful completion of the course, MM stated she went to visit her adjunct instructor and told him "'if it wasn't for your encouraging words and you really pushing me and believing in me because at that moment I really was, I really wanted to give up."

Although MD, LR, and JS had similar responses, AH expressed the opposite. AH felt regardless of the relationships she had formed with an adjunct instructor, she felt as though she did not belong to the institution as a whole. She stated,

> Yeah I don't feel connected I mean there's no point if I don't feel connected I don't really belong there, I'm only there to get a degree I'm not there to….[the institution] does not bring joy it just brings education and money.

Outside of her relationship with her instructors, AH felt as though she did not belong to the institution due to "it's just not a very welcoming place."

Theme Five: Suggestions for the Institution

Participants were asked to share any suggestions they may have for the institution to increase adjunct instructor engagement and increase a first-generation student's sense of belonging at the institution. SW suggested strongly encouraging the institution to assign adjunct instructors mainly face-to-face courses. If this was not possible, SW feels as though weekly video meetings with the adjunct instructor should be incorporated with online classes. This would allow the students to get to know their instructor and ask questions. SW added that increased involvement with adjunct instructors would assist students in building confidence and learning how to communicate issues they are encountering in courses. MD agreed having an open time to log in to meet with the instructor via Zoom or another platform would be beneficial in assisting students in developing an understanding of materials, especially courses that require a hands-on explanation of the material. JS agreed that the more engagement opportunities were offered, the higher chances of a positive outcome of student success. JS stated that adjuncts with a positive personality and who are "down to earth" and "easy to talk to" allow her to feel comfortable speaking up and asking questions. Although she mentioned that not all students may be interested in this engagement, the instructor showing initiative speaks volumes. LR

echoed the same opinion. She felt as though weekly engagement for online courses could be helpful but worries adjunct instructors may see it as a form of "micromanaging" and if it is a forced requirement the adjunct might already be offering a meeting time because they care or wish to connect. LR stated:

> If they're going to care about what's going on with their students and their time, they're going to do it regardless of being required to do it...Just adding another thing on the plate is going to make the instructors that care a little less able to care and instructors that don't care…. won't.

LR stated also that the engagement needs to be "natural."

MD suggested requiring adjunct instructors to have clearly outlined timelines for communication and engagement. For example, outside of one weekly meeting for online courses, MD would like them to have a set response time for emails (ex: Mondays 8:00-10:00 a.m., instructor responds to emails) and required standing office hours for both in-person and online instructors.

AH felt as though adjunct instructors already view their role at the institution as a "side gig" and if they wish to add in weekly meetings for online courses, she feels as though it may be helpful for another student but she will likely not attend. AH would like to see adjunct instructors more devoted and engaged with the institution.

An additional suggestion for the institution added by LR included providing adjuncts with better tools and training. LR emphasized she feels if adjunct instructors were provided with the same tools and training as full-time instructors, the adjuncts would be able to provide better solutions, resources to students, and advisement on their major and future career choices. LR stated that campus collaboration is very important, and allowing the adjunct instructor similar opportunities would encourage engagement, ultimately benefiting the students.

Participants expressed the difference they felt in the classroom when it was clear the adjunct cared for them and their success, and participants noted when adjuncts went the extra mile to provide them with tools—both personal and academically—outside of the required course material.

Summary

Participants were selected for this study based on their responses to self-identifying questions. Selected participants identified as first-generation students who have been enrolled in one or more courses with an adjunct instructor at a local community college. Participants were asked to share their unique experiences as first-generation students and how their relationships with these instructors impacted their student development. A majority of participants felt a sense of fear and uncertainty when first attending the institution. Often having to adapt and learn new skills to succeed, all participants provided the researcher with insight into the resiliency of the first-generation student. Participants shared both positive and negative interactions with adjunct and full-time instructors, stating lack of communication and engagement in online courses is a core issue. This lack of engagement served as a main barrier to developing positive relationships and in some cases hindered the student's sense of belonging. Increased engagement is a suggested solution offered amongst the participants; however, they prefer it to be genuine and natural, not as a mandatory task for the adjunct. Ultimately the first-generation student wished to feel cared for and for the importance of their education to not only matter to them but also to their instructor.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This phenomenological study aimed to explore how the first-generation student describes the meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct instructors at a community college and how this relationship influences their academic development and institutional sense of belonging. The theory guiding this study was that of proximal process and campus ecology developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner's theory explores the importance of mutual accommodation and how the student's environment and relationships influence academic growth and a sense of belonging while attending a community college (Bonfenbrenner, 1979). The relevance of focusing on the first-generation student is to take current research discussing the need for institutions to pay careful attention to the first-year experience of students one step further. Current research discusses the transitions into college and the importance of how these experiences shape a student's academic career, levels of motivation, learning, and belonging (Felton & Lambert, 2020). The researcher was interested in these similar topics but from the perspective of the unique population of the first-generation student.

It was suggested by the researcher that including adjuncts in a more intentional way may allow for effective engagement and increased student success, creating a positive impact on first-generation students' retention and graduation rates. However, understanding the perspective of the first-generation student regarding the development of this relationship is the first step. This study further examined the first-generation student's unique meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct faculty member and how this impacts their academic development and sense of belonging at a higher education institution. This chapter discusses the following: (a) summary of findings, (b) discussion, (c) implications, (d) limitations, and (f) recommendations for the future.

Summary of Findings

The summary of findings is presented by briefly answering both the central and guiding research questions that directed this study. The research questions were intended to explore and describe the phenomenon of how a first-generation student perceives their relationship(s) with an adjunct instructor and the impact this relationship has/had on their academic development and sense of institutional belonging.

Central Research Question

How does the first-generation college student describe the meaning of developing a relationship with adjunct faculty members for academic development?

A consistent definition of self-identification as a first-generation college student amongst the participants involved being the first of their family to attend an institution of higher education and complete a degree. Although some participants disclosed their parents or other siblings have enrolled/attended a higher education institution, these family members either did not complete their degree/diploma, or their family members are completing their degree/diploma after the participant completes theirs.

Participants described their transition to college as a major developmental milestone that forced them to become more independent and exposed them to various people, new environments, and institutional expectations. Participants experienced high levels of stress, low self-esteem and confidence, and overwhelm. Participants also shared feelings of pride and excitement to be the first to attend college and shared a hope to serve as an example of motivation for their other family members.

The descriptions of the relationships with adjunct instructors as a first-generation student were inconsistent among the participants, with some statements aligning with research while other statements did not. Most participants agreed with prior research stating that adjunct faculty members are less available to students, interact less frequently, spend less time preparing for

courses, and are less likely to use student-centered teaching methods (Guthrie et al., 2019).

Participants stated that courses taught by a full-time faculty member (a) are more in-depth with

instruction, (b) the instructor is more 'hands-on,' and (c) full-time faculty members are available

on campus with set office hours. However, the participants also stated adjunct instructors are (a)

easier to get ahold of, (b) more understanding, nicer, friendlier, and open to communication,

willing to be flexible, (c) the pace of courses is more manageable, and (d) instructors provided

more diversity and different perspectives in the course. Negative feedback included (a) delays in

communication for both full-time and adjunct instructors, (b) adjunct instructors having

additional responsibilities outside of the institution that may take priority, (c) course instruction

being taught online with limited connection with the adjunct instructor, (d) adjunct instructors

not offering office hours, and (e) adjunct instructors not being connected to the institution, being

less involved and not attempting to connect with students.

Each participant varied in how they viewed the importance of developing a relationship

with their adjunct instructor. The data reflected much of this inconsistency was due to the

participants' personal preferences and past interactions with instructors (both full-time and

adjunct) at the higher education institution. However, all participants stated that communication

was a major barrier to developing a relationship with an adjunct instructor. Although

participants stated they felt their instructor was friendly and likely open to communication, as a

first-generation student they were unsure of how to communicate with the instructor, especially

if the course was online. Participants shared that first-generation students may be too timid to

reach out to their instructor on their own or feel pressured to navigate and "figure things out on

their own." When the relationship with the adjunct was positive, participants stated they felt

empowered to reach out and communicate; however, when the relationship was negative, the

participants felt as though they were an inconvenience, dismissed and even discriminated against.

Participants stated that a positive relationship with an adjunct instructor (a) made the course easier, (b) made the student feel comfortable, (c) increased their confidence and understanding in the course, (d) opened lines of communication between the student and instructor, (e) encouraged additional learning, specifically from the adjunct's personal experiences, (f) increased student motivation and resilience, and (g) encouraged continued education after graduation.

Guiding Research Question

How does the first-generation college student describe the sense of belonging at a higher education institution due to the relationship with the adjunct instructor?

For this study, an institutional sense of belonging was defined as the feeling of security and support, a sense of acceptance, attention and support from others, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Cherry, 2021). The participants were provided with this definition at the beginning of the interview and were asked to define the term in their own words. Participants stated a sense of belonging at the institution meant having (a) a positive attitude and sense of pride while attending the institution and achieving their degree/diploma, (b) the institution encouraging connection with open communication/discussion and opportunities to learn from others and participate beyond the classroom, (c) available and accessible campus resources, (d) the institution aligning with personal values and the student's purpose for attending, and (e) the institution providing a sense of safety and acceptance.

All but one participant stated they felt as though they belong at the institution they attended due to the relationships they formed with peers, faculty members, and campus staff. One participant disclosed she did not feel as though she belonged due to a lack of organizations,

clubs, and allies for her specific group. Participants were asked to provide insight into the

benefits of increased adjunct engagement along with possible suggestions for improvement. The

participants agreed that an increased amount of adjunct instructor engagement would benefit the

first-generation student's sense of belonging greatly. Participants suggested the following

solutions: (a) if the course is online, weekly virtual meetings with the adjunct instructor for

students to get to know the adjunct and ask questions, (b) designated "office hours" and

scheduled email response times to ensure availability and consistency, and (c) more adjunct

instructor campus engagement when possible. Participants stressed that the increase in

engagement needs to be genuine and not a requirement that may be seen by the adjunct instructor

as micromanagement. The participants were very clear in expressing the importance of an

adjunct truly caring for their success as a student versus doing things out of obligation or treating

their role as an instructor as a "side gig."

Additional Suggestions for the Institution

Participants were asked to provide further suggestions for the institution to consider when

looking to increase the academic development and sense of belonging for the first-generation

student. In response, participants stressed the importance of providing guidance and tools for

first-generation students entering the institution. Participants expressed the frustration and

confusion they experienced when transitioning to the institution, often stating they felt they

needed to navigate the process independently. Participants would like to be provided with tools

that help them learn to communicate with their instructors and express honestly the doubts, fears,

and insecurities they are experiencing. Additionally, they desire these feelings to be met with

understanding, open communication, and consistency from both the adjunct instructor and the

institution as a whole. Lastly, participants stressed the importance of the adjunct instructor's role

at the institutions. Participants would like to see adjunct instructors be more devoted to the

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institution, even if teaching online, express pride for the institution, and increase engagement

with students. Additionally, participants noted the need for adjunct instructors to be included in

the same training/professional development as full-time instructors and for the adjunct to possess

the same tools, resources, and advisement skills to assist students.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study findings in relationship to the

theoretical framework and related literature from Chapter Two (Table 1). In the previous

literature review the ecological model, specifically campus ecology, was discussed along with

related literature describing how a student's relationship with a higher education institution and

its faculty influences academic development. Additionally, the unique populations of the first-

generation student and the adjunct instructor were explored.

Theoretical Framework

The term 'student development' is extensively used in student affairs practices at higher

education institutions (Evans et al., 2010), addressing the complex system of relationships that

affect multiple levels of a student's surrounding environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). Past research

addressing student developmental theories has examined the factors that either promoted or

hindered student development and the influence that occurred (Evans et al., 2010), specifically

within the interaction between the campus environment and the individual student

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Throughout the process of a student's transition into the college

environment, the student experiences cycles of differentiation and integration, balancing support

and encountering new challenges (Evans et al., 2010). During this study, participants expressed

exclusive and often multiple transitioning challenges they faced when first enrolling at the

institution. Participants described the need to develop independence, the exposure to new people

and environments, and the need to learn how to navigate and meet the expectations of the

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institution. Studies suggest that first-generation students attending a community college experience unique challenges in these transitions, including ecological transitions due to the shifting of roles and settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). All participants indicated the need for role shifts in their families and households for them to attend the institution. Participants described learning to rely on spouses and parents to take care of children and/or provide for the home while they pursued their degrees. Other participants expressed the importance of extended family support while attending higher education, whether it be financial, emotional, or as a source of motivation.

Urie Bronfenbrenner was critical of early developmental theories discussed in Chapter Two, claiming these theories to be 'unidirectional' moving or operating in a single direction. Bronfenbrenner theory of ecological systems looked beyond the individual student development and into the deeper dynamic of how the interactions of the environment have an influence on a developing individual, and the influence the individual has on their environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the environment and the events within it have the most immediate and potent effect on an individual's development. This development occurs concurrently in two domains: perception and action. Most of the participants described their overall experience at the institution as a positive one. However, all participants indicated the environment of the institution did in fact impact their development as a student. Participants that felt as though the impact was a positive one described their transition as challenging, yet they were able to develop self-motivation, locate resources, and obtain skills to ensure they were successful. For effective development, presence and participation is critical (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), including social interactions between settings, joint contribution, communication, and the existence of knowledge in each setting about the other. Numerous times the participants indicated the significant difference between taking a course online versus in person and the

importance of face-to-face interactions with an instructor to develop comfortability and confidence in a course. Whether the instructor was full-time or adjunct, attending a course in person allowed for social interactions, classroom discussions, diverse perspectives, and the development of communication skills. The more the participants were exposed to these interactions, the more the participants felt comfortable approaching an instructor, asking for help, and addressing concerns if needed. The participants stated they performed better in courses they felt included in, and the more an instructor demonstrated care for their academic progress, the more the student cared.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the four main components of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model include the process, person, context, and time (PPTC) and the interactions among the components (Evans et al., 2010), with the individual (student) central in an arrangement of these structures (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Process

The process component consists of the recurring interactions between the student and the institution. This component also encompasses the theory of proximal processes (Evans et al., 2010) which is also referred to as the "engine of development" (Mercon-Vargas et al., 2020). Proximal processing is the simultaneous transfer of energy and interaction between the developing student and the college environment (Crawford et al., 2020). The results of the study reflected the need for recurring interactions between the first-generation student and the adjunct instructor. As mentioned, many adjunct instructors teach online courses and are often not available on campus for the student to access. Additionally, participants stated numerous times that lack of communication served as a barrier because they were unsure of when they would receive a response back from the adjunct instructor simply because they were aware the adjunct

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does not dedicate the full workday to the institution, and often the only form of communication was via email.

Person

The possibility of reciprocal interactions between the first-generation student and the adjunct instructor also depends on the interactions an individual has with their environment. Individual aspects, such as emotional and psychological factors, influence participation (Crawford et al., 2020). Because first-generation students are the first among their immediate family to attend an institution of higher education, oftentimes they are unaware of the culture and even the "language" of the institution. Participants expressed they felt pressured to "push on my own" when first enrolling at the institution. This included the enrollment process issues related to courses and how/when to appropriately communicate with their instructors. Interestingly, although most participants shared similar perspectives, each had a unique level of "attachment" to the institution based on their personal emotional and psychological factors. It was noted these factors were often correlated with the attempt or lack of attempt to develop relationships with their adjunct instructors.

Context

The context component consists of five levels that influence the development of the student. These levels include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and time. The microsystem consists of the activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the individual in their immediate environment (Evans et al., 2010) and the level in which the individual interacts or directly participates (Crawford et al., 2020). This could include the student's friend groups, class peers, family members, and campus staff/faculty. The interactions within the microsystem can impact the interactions within the other systems. The mesosystem focuses on the synergetic energy between two or more microsystem settings that the student is

actively participating in. This system serves as a reinforcer to promote positive development when consistent or inhibit development when inconsistent (Evans et al., 2010). This includes the support of family members and student services on campus providing resources to first-generation students. The exosystem was not directly discussed in this study; however, some participants mentioned the interactions with this microsystem as an influence on their success at the institution. The exosystem consists of tuition, financial aid policies, and other government policies. The macrosystem is the interconnected system that assists in understanding the culture and subcultures that influence a first-generation student's values, morals, and traditions which may impact their ability to develop a relationship with an adjunct instructor (Crawford et al., 2020).

Time

Lastly, time is an important element of the PPCT model. According to Bronfenbrenner time interacts with all other elements of the model, affecting the developmental influence of the proximal process (Evans et al., 2010). According to Mercon-Vargas and colleagues (2020) human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions occurring regularly over an extended period. Participants expressed that a barrier to developing positive relationships with adjunct instructors is the limited amount of time being enrolled at the institution. Often adjuncts are teaching courses at the institution for 8-week semesters and do not have office hours, and students typically attend the institution for only two years to complete the degree program and either transfer to a university or move on to the workforce. Many of the participants viewed the institution as a stepping-stone to a long-term goal and did not feel the need to become "attached" to the institution while attending.

Campus Ecology

Bronfenbrenner's theory of campus ecology focuses specifically on the relationship between the student and the environment of the institution and the influence this relationship has on both the student and the institution. Bronfenbrenner described this relationship as transactional, with the quality of the student-environment interaction impacting the student's level of stability, development, and behavior based on personal characteristics and perceptions of their environment (Evans et al., 2010).

Past research has highlighted the importance of the interaction and the support provided to students within the institution (Acevedo-Gi & Zerquera, 2016). More recent studies have applied the developmental campus ecology theory to college interventions on multiple levels through policy, curriculum, and immediate contexts, encouraging the importance of campus educators providing an environment that holistically serves students (Evans et al., 2010). Successful formation of a positive dyad relationship between the student and faculty member produces increased developmental effects; this serves as a building block for the individual's microsystem, promoting the formation of larger interpersonal structures, an optimal situation for learning, motivation, perseverance, and resilience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Most participants agreed that a positive relationship between students and adjunct instructors impacted their sense of belonging at the institution, cultivating feelings of comfort, and acceptance. When the environment is encouraging, the student increases their ability to "believe in" themselves. Another participant stated it makes a world of difference when a "teacher can see your progress" and identifies a student's strengths in and out of the classroom.

Positive relationships among first-generation students and instructors productively shape individual student development, empowering the student to be active in their learning, engage both academically and socially, and develop meaningful learning experiences to enable positive development (Guy-Evans, 2020). Increased proximal processes assist instructors in the

consideration of the student experience and provide vital information when considering various resources to address constraints a first-generation student experiences when navigating the community college programs intended to support them (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016).

How The Study Extends the Theory Informing The Topic

The proximal process discussed in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is the simultaneous transfer of energy and interaction between the developing student and the college environment. This process includes complex reciprocal interactions, occurring regularly over an extended period. For the proximal process to have a positive impact on a student's development it must be continuous, durable, and increasingly complex (Evans et al., 2010). This positive impact was evident for participants that had consistent access to their adjunct instructor. The participant develops trust in their adjunct instructor, comfortability, and confidence in their interactions. Lacking or limited interactions led to the participants feeling intimidated and as if they were not a priority for their instructor.

How This Study Confirms or Corroborates Previous Research

Previous research indicated student dropout rates in higher education institutions, especially community colleges, are attributed to factors including academic unpreparedness, inability to adjust to college rigors, personal and family issues, financial constraints, lack of guidance and mentoring, and additional external demands including employment (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Most of the participants in this study were non-traditional adult learners that are married and have children of their own. Additionally, only one of the participants remained consistently enrolled and graduated in two years, although she did not attend the institution directly out of high school. All participants indicated they experienced a lack of or very minimal guidance when first enrolling at the institution.

First-generation students also choose to depart from higher education due to the nature and quality of their interaction with the institution (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Participants in past studies have reported feeling less likely to succeed when they felt less connected to their academic endeavors (Millea et al., 2018). Participants in this study confirmed these previous studies and research. The participants felt cared for and that their academic success was a priority for their instructor, and they performed better in courses and felt motivated to continue.

Previous research also discusses a strong predictor of higher education success being the first-generation student's ability to transition into the college culture. Three factors that contribute to the inability to transition into the college culture include the influence of family and peers, failure to accept their role as college students, and failure to bond with the institution (Wibrowski et al., 2017). Past research has identified that first-generational students have different needs and expectations and are considered academically vulnerable compared to traditional students due to having less familial and social support, higher levels of stress, and being more likely to come from lower socioeconomic and minority backgrounds (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). During the transition from high school to college the first-generation student encounters major developmental milestones, gaining independence, exposure to various people and environments, and navigating new relationships and social expectations (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017).

First-generation students also experience psychological barriers while struggling with navigating new emotional experiences, identity management, self-perceptions, and motivation issues (Jury et al., 2017). Participants expressed the uncertainty of fitting into the college culture, the nervousness about overloading themselves, and the lack of motivation required. Most participants reported feeling overwhelmed and unsure of themselves, "terrified" due to

limited guidance and resources during the transition. Positive emotions shared by the participants included excitement for being the first to attend college and motivation to make family members and children proud of their accomplishments.

First-generation students feel more uncomfortable in the college setting and are less likely to interact with their peers and instructors. These students experience difficulties navigating college life and typically do not perform at their fullest potential (Jury et al., 2017). Although some participants stated they develop and maintain relationships with their instructors by staying after class, asking for help if needed, and taking advantage of office hours or time outside of class the instructor might offer to students, some participants mentioned not feeling the need to develop a relationship with their instructors outside of the classroom. Participants stated they would likely not go to office hours unless it was necessary. When asked why the participants may refrain from speaking to her instructors outside of the classroom, participants mentioned they worried it may cross a line since adjunct instructors were authority figures. Another participant, as previously mentioned, said she would likely not attempt to contact an instructor for help for fear of her "question being considered stupid" by the instructor.

How The Study Diverged from or Extended Previous Research

Many of the findings in this study corroborated results of past research, while additional findings diverged from or extended these previous studies**.** Previous research has discussed at length the limited interactions between a student and an adjunct instructor at a community college. According to Guthrie and colleagues (2019) adjunct faculty members are less available to students, interact less frequently, spend less time preparing for courses, and are less likely to use student-centered teaching methods. Unfortunately, despite the noted disconnect, adjunct faculty are often assigned courses with higher failure rates, impacting retention and delayed graduation rates (Guthrie et al., 2019). Participants confirmed findings in past research, noting

limited communication, lack of in-person interaction, and inconsistencies with faculty training. Most participants stated if their adjunct instructor taught an online course, they did not feel as connected to the instructor as they do with an instructor who is face-to-face. Additionally, it was obvious to the participants that an adjunct instructor was not provided with the same level of training (class development and campus resources) as a full-time instructor.

The result of the study slightly diverges from and extends previous research discussing student success in regards to the relationship with an adjunct instructor versus a full-time instructor. Participants expressed the major difference between an adjunct instructor and a full-time instructor at the institution was the level of personability of the adjunct. Most participants described their adjunct instructors as caring people who identified their strengths, were supportive, and were more prepared/knowledgeable in the area they were teaching. Participants described their adjunct instructor, when compared to a full-time instructor, as having a positive personality, being "down to earth" and "easy to talk to", allowing them to feel comfortable speaking up and asking questions. The only two consistent complaints regarding adjunct instructors from the participants included email response times and the fact that courses with these instructors were mainly online, limiting another form of communication.

Novel Contribution to the Field

Most participants agreed that a positive relationship between students and adjunct instructors impacted their sense of belonging at the institution. The participants experienced increased comfort, acceptance, and the ability to learn. A positive student-faculty relationship is one that includes an adjunct who is encouraging the student to believe in themselves. An adjunct instructor who can identify the student's progress and identifies their strengths, whether in person or online, "makes a world of a difference" for the student. Participants appreciated the time and

efforts the adjunct instructors who taught their course invested in them; however, they felt strongly about the need to develop relationships with their instructors, even online.

This study has added novel contribution to the previous body of literature, including providing (a) an understanding of the first-generation student's unique perspective, in their own words, (b) identifying areas of improvement to increase communication between the student and instructor, and (c) bringing awareness to adjunct limitations, such as training and/or courses being online, and encouraging the institution to fill these gaps.

Past research discusses at length the student success barriers experienced by the first-generation student based on data collected for retention and graduation purposes (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Levesque, 2018; Maunder, 2017; Thiele, 2016). This study collected the unique perspective of the first-generation student, allowing the student to share their struggles and sources of motivation. Speaking with the participants directly contributed greatly to the field of higher education and reflects the importance of understanding each student holistically as a unique individual when discussing the need to increase student success.

Although past research mentioned the limited communication between students and an instructor as being a barrier, the participants expounded on their perceptions. Lack of communication for the first-generation student meant feelings of not being valued, being isolated, and feeling confused. Participants struggled with adjusting, developing the motivation and confidence they needed to be successful, and felt little to no connection to the institution. When open and consistent communication was offered, the participants felt more comfortable, confident, and ultimately performed better in their courses. As mentioned previously, past research indicate the importance of the faculty-student mentoring relationships, stating it is a key influence on the student's sense of belonging and their level of persistence (Law et al., 2019).

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This relationship provides the student with tools and support they need to foster personal development (Law et al, 2019).

As mentioned previously, past research addresses the convenience of hiring non-tenured faculty member to teach courses at a reduced cost. However, adjunct faculty members are not often included in the development of curricula or strategies for student learning, have unclear or unavailable personal and professional development, and are not provided with the same resources as a full-time faculty member (Guthrie et al., 2019). Participants in this study shared the lack of equal training and resources is obvious. Participants noticed that their adjunct instructors often were not aware of campus resources, and although they may have wanted to help a student, the adjunct was unsure of how due to disconnection from campus and not being provided the same information as a full-time instructor.

Implications

Implications for this study were directly identified by its participants. Participants were asked to share any suggestions they may have for the institution to increase adjunct instructor engagement and increase a first-generation student's sense of belonging at the institution. Participants strongly encouraged the institution to (a) assign adjunct instructors mainly face-to-face courses, and if this was not possible due to the adjuncts being out of the local area, (b) implement weekly video meetings (via Zoom) with the adjunct instructor that should be incorporated with online classes, (c) require adjunct instructors to have clearly outlined timelines for communication and engagement, and (d) provide adjuncts with the same tools and training as full-time instructors in order for the adjunct instructors to be able to provide better solutions and resources to students.

Empirical Implications

Results of this study reflected the barriers the participants encounter while attending a higher education institution. As discussed in Chapter Two, structural barriers within the community college system make it difficult for first-generation students to achieve their goals, often with students in the community college system experience far more structural barriers than students in traditional four-year institutions (Levesque, 2018). These barriers include lack of guidance, limited advising resources, and limited and maybe even inaccurate information. First-generation students may not receive the full attention or time they need to develop long-term plans, set goals, or receive the full orientation of college and how to navigate it (Levesque, 2016). Participants expressed the overwhelming uncertainty they first felt when attending the institution. They felt pressured to figure out much of the admission and enrollment process on their own, and even once they were in courses, if they had an adjunct instructor (especially online), the adjunct was limited in the resources and guidance they could provide when related to the campus.

Social factors contribute to the first-generation college student's experiences and success. According to Maunder (2017) attachment to instructors is the strongest predictor of university adjustment, successful transitions, subsequent retention, and feelings of institutional belonging. When students feel attached to their learning environment, they feel valued and accepted, overall increasing their motivation, well-being , intellectual commitment, and achievement (Morrison, 2021). The participants described a positive student-faculty relationship was one that made them feel comfortable to ask for help, communicate issues, and be met with understanding and care. Although most of the students were able to describe a positive relationship with an adjunct instructor at the institution, overall the participants mentioned the barriers to developing a relationship as being limited to no communication, lack of in person interaction, and the adjuncts' disconnection to the campus.

A sense of belonging in higher education allows for the first-generation student to feel secure, supported, accepted, and included, and helps them to form an identity within the institution. Transitioning into an institution for the first-generation student is uniquely challenging as they are adjusting to a new experience, meeting diverse people and world perspectives, dealing with self-doubt, and finding where they fit in. The importance of whether the student develops a sense of belonging at an institution of higher education influences a student's decision to leave an institution when experiencing difficulties adapting to their new environment (van Herpen et al., 2020). When the first-generation student does not feel as though they belong, they are less likely to be motivated, reach out for help, take advantage of learning opportunities, and attempt to develop a relationship with their adjunct instructor. During the interviews with the participants, it was clear there was a correlation between their level of belonging and their relationships with their adjunct faculty members. Participants who described their adjunct instructors as caring, available, and resourceful also described the institution positively, one they were sad to leave once they graduated. Participants who had more of a negative experience with an adjunct instructor had more of a negative perspective of the institution, disclosing they did not feel safe or accepted at the institution.

Theoretical Implications

As discussed in Chapter Two, Bronfenbrenner's campus ecology theory has been applied to past studies in hopes of understanding the experience and development of the student and how patterns of interactions between the student and their microsystem promote this development (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Evans et al., 2010). This transactional relationship between student and instructor impacts the student's level of stability, development, and behavior based on personal characteristics and perceptions of their environment (Evans et al., 2010). Although past studies have explored utilizing this theory to develop interventions through policy,

curriculum, and immediate context, this study encourages a closer look at the first-generation student's direct environment. Although it is understandable to both the participants and researcher that not all adjunct instructors can teach courses in person on campus, the participants expressed strongly the preference for face-to-face courses, especially within the first semester of college. If this is not possible, the participants desire consistent and reliable communication with their instructor. Participants would like to have the option to meet with their adjunct instructor once a week if the course they are enrolled in is online. This would allow the students an opportunity to get to know their instructor, feel comfortable asking questions, build self-confidence, develop the ability to communicate issues they are encountering in courses, and a deeper understanding of materials, especially in courses that require a hands-on explanation of the material. Other participants felt as though weekly engagement for online courses could be helpful but worry adjunct instructors may see it as a form of "micromanaging" and they would prefer the engagement to be "natural."

.Participants also suggested adjunct instructors have a scheduled time during the weekday to respond to emails to ensure they will receive the help/answers they need within a reasonable time frame. For example, they suggested it would be helpful to have a set response time for emails (ex: Mondays 8:00-10:00 a.m., instructor responds to emails) and required standing office hours for both in-person and online instructors.

Lastly, participants felt as if allowing the adjunct instructor similar opportunities as a full-time instructor would encourage engagement, ultimately benefiting the students. Participants felt as though adjunct instructors, whether online or on campus, should be required to complete/participate in the same trainings as full-time instructors. The quality of the courses and knowledge of the instructor should be the same whether the instructor serves full-time or part-time to ensure students are receiving a quality education and assistance when needed.

Practical Implications

Prior to completing this study, the researcher was somewhat aware of the uniqueness of the first-generation student. Statistically, as previous research would suggest, the first-generation student is not always as successful at an institution of higher education when compared to a student who may be a second, third, or even fourth generation student. What might not seem like a hurdle to a student who comes from a legacy of higher education could be the barrier that keeps a first-generation student from being successful. Participants in this study were open, honest, and eager to share their experiences in higher education and speak up for themselves and other students on how to overcome these barriers. The barrier that was often repeated among the participants was lack of communication, both due to the limited availability of the adjunct instructors and the participants' lack confidence to reach out for help. Although some participants learned to adapt and overcome, other participants struggled with uncertainty, feeling as though they were a burden, and may not have retained or completed their goal of graduating in two years. An increase in adjunct presence on campus, inclusion in professional development, and trainings focused on resources available on campus is suggested. Including adjuncts in a more intentional way may allow for effective engagement and increased student success, creating a positive impact on first-generation students' retention and graduation rates.

Limitations

The limitations that may impact the validity and reliability of the study were identified as (a) researcher skills, (b) accurate description of the phenomenon, (c) interview shortcomings, (d) potential biases, and (e) successful transcription and coding. The validity of the study was dependent on the collection and analysis of data during and following participant interviews. Limitations included the extent in which the findings reflected an accurate description of the recollections of participant experiences and the representations of the experiences by my efforts.

Interviews were carefully conducted utilizing qualitative interview strategies suggested by

Creswell and Creswell (2018) to overcome limitations. To avoid themes emerging based on

personal understanding, perceptions, and potential biases, the researcher utilized Interpretive

Phenomenological Analysis, allowing her to interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of the

research participants (Alase, 2017).

Additional limitations on validity that would impact the transferability of the study

include (a) the geographic location of the site, (b) the self-identification of the participant, (c) the

successful identification of adjunct instructors, (d) the participant selection process, and (e) the

number of participants selected.

A single community college in the United States participated in this study. All

participants attended the same institution. Identification of the participants as experiencing the

phenomenon was reliant on the participants' perceptions and personal definitions of the first-

generation student, the adjunct-instructor, and academic development, which may limit the

validity and reliability of the study. Participants were selected based on the answers they

provided in response to the voluntary potential participant screener. A mass email was sent to all

active students on campus explaining the study, its purpose, and the category of participants

needed for the study. Participants completed this screener and the researcher reviewed their

responses to determine who would be invited to participate. The total number of participants in

this study was six—the minimum suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018). A small sample

was utilized to allow the development of six individual viewpoints, along with the development

of subsequent micro-analysis of similarities and differences across the cases (Smith et al., 2022).

Delimitations

The delimitations in this study included the requirement for participants to be first-

generation students, and the student-faculty relationship being discussed was limited to

relationships with part-time or adjunct instructors at the single community college. The importance of these boundaries being in place for this study was to ensure validity and consistency of the participants and their experiences. Additionally, the boundaries allowed for the researcher to clearly distinguish between what to include and exclude from the data to ensure it was relevant to the research goal and purpose of the study.

Future Recommendations

Recommendations for future studies on this topic include specific focus on individual ethnic groups and races. Although the participants range in ethnicity and race, this study did not focus on or discuss how the participant's individual ethnicity/race may play a part in their perceptions and/or barrier to forming positive relationships with adjunct faculty members.

An additional recommendation for future studies includes a quantitative study exploring the success/failure rates among first-generation students at a community college when courses are taught by an adjunct instructor rather than a full-time instructor.

Summary

Increasing student retention and graduation rates has become a popular topic for higher education professionals in recent years. With time and money spent to develop programs, provide interventions, and create professional development courses, community college institutions seem to still be missing the mark. The importance of the development of student-faculty relationships is often discussed in books and encouraged at conferences, but the specific populations of first-generation students and adjunct instructors are not often addressed. These populations are often overlooked but are truly becoming the backbone of the community college system. The purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of the first-generation student regarding interacting with and developing a relationship with adjunct instructors. The

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researcher desired to utilize this study to provide a space for first-generation students to share their perspectives on this matter as well as encourage adjunct faculty to consider why taking the extra time to develop relationships with students can impact their success far beyond their course enrollment.

Study participants were selected for this study based on their responses to self-identifying questions indicating they were first-generation students who had been enrolled in one or more courses with an adjunct faculty member as the instructor at a local community college. Participants were asked to share their unique experiences as first-generation students and how their relationships with these instructors impacted their student development. Participants shared both positive and negative interactions with adjunct instructors, stating lack of communication and engagement in online courses is a core issue. This lack of engagement served as a main barrier to developing positive relationships and in some cases hindered the student's sense of belonging. Increased engagement was a suggested solution amongst the participants; however, participants preferred it to be genuine and natural, not as a mandatory task for the adjunct. Ultimately the first-generation student wished to feel cared for and for the importance of their education to matter not only to them but also to their instructor.

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APPENDIX A
Participant Request Electronic Mail Announcement

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Melissa Greenlee and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. For my dissertation, I am examining the student-faculty relationship among first-generation students and adjunct instructors and how this relationship impacts the student's academic development.

A first-generational college student is often the first of their families to navigate college and their parents/guardians have little to no college experience.

Adjunct Instructors are higher education faculty members hired under contract to teach a specific subject/course. These instructors are part-time instructors, that may teach on-campus or online

You are receiving this email because you are a current student at Fayetteville Technical Community College. If you identify as a first-generation student, I am inviting you to participate in this research study to assist me in gaining an understanding of the meaning of student-faculty relationships and their impact on your academic development and institutional sense of belonging.

The following screener will require approximately 20-25 minutes to complete. Students who complete the screener and qualify based on answers provided will be asked to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview There is no compensation for responding nor is there any known risk in the competition of the screener. However, participants in the semi-structured interview will be compensated for their time and assistance in the study with a $20 Visa Gift Card.

If you choose to participate in this study, please utilize the link below, answer all questions as honestly as possible, and return the completed screener promptly. Completion and return of the screener will indicate your willingness to participate in this study. Once I receive notification of the competition, I will contact you directly to set up a day/time for your interview.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/J98PWCH

Participation is strictly voluntary, and you may refuse to participate at any time.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in my educational endeavors. The data collected will provide useful information regarding first-generational students and adjunct instructors and how this relationship impacts the student's academic development and institutional sense of belonging.

If you require additional information or have questions, please contact me at the email listed below.

APPENDIX B
Participant Qualifying Screener

Are you 18 years or older?

☐   Yes
☐   No

Are you a current student at a Community College?

☐   Yes
☐   No

If yes, how long have you attended the institution?

A first-generational college student is defined as a student *who is often the first of their families to navigate college, their parents/guardians have little to no college experience.*

Do you identify as a first-generational college student?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, please explain why you identify as a first-generational college student.

Adjunct instructors are defined as higher education faculty members hired under contract to teach a specific subject/course. These instructors teach part-time and may be on campus or online.

While attending the Community College have you taken a course taught by an adjunct instructor?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, please list the semester, course name, and how you know the instructor was an adjunct.

A student-faculty relationship is defined as formal and/or informal contact between student and educational faculty, promoting or hindering student development, motivation, involvement, well-being, and institutional commitment.

Academic development is defined as a student's grows, progresses, and/or increase in developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education.

How do you define your academic development?

Name:
Classification:
Student Email

APPENDIX C
Phenomenological Study Interview Schedule

Thank you for being willing to participate in this semi-structured one-on-one interview. The purpose of this interview is to explore the student-faculty relationship between first-generation students and adjunct instructors and its impact on the student's academic development and institutional sense of belonging. I will ask you several questions related to the previously stated research questions. This interview will take about 45-60 minutes. I will be visually/audio recording this interview and you can stop this interview at any time. Do you have any questions?

Throughout the interview, the following terms will be utilized. We will quickly review the definitions of these terms to ensure the validity of the study and equal understanding of the participant and interviewer.

- *First-generation students* - College students who are often the first of their families to navigate college; their parents/guardians have little to no college experience (PNPI, 2021).

- *Adjunct Instructor -* Higher education faculty member hired under contract to teach a specific subject/course. The instructor may be on campus or online (Guerra, 2018).

- *Student-Faculty relationship -* Formal and informal contact between student and educational faculty, promoting or hindering student development, motivation, involvement, well-being, and institutional commitment (Snijders et al., 2021).

- *Sense of Belonging -* The feeling of security and support, sense of acceptance, attention, and support from others, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Cherry, 2021).

- *Academic Development -* The ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education (Evans et al., 2010).

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.

   a. What are some things you enjoy doing outside of class?

   b. Can you tell me a little about your home life?

2. How long have you attended FTCC?

3. What made you choose to attend FTCC?

4. What are you majoring in at FTCC?

   a. Why did you choose this major? Did anything/anyone influence this major choice?

   b. What are your plans after attending FTCC? Job search or transferring to a four-year university?

   c. How would you describe your experience so far at FTCC?

5. How well are you performing academically at FTCC? Grades? Completing coursework? Time management, etc.?

6. You self-identified in the qualifying screener that you consider yourself to be a first-generation student. Can you please describe to me what the term first-generation student means to you?

7. Can you describe how you first felt about attending college as a first-generation student?

    a. Did you transition directly from high school to college?

    b. How would you describe your transition into college?

    c. Can you describe how this transition might be a little more challenging for first-generation students in comparison to another student that may not be first-generation?

8. In the qualifying screener, you self-identified as being enrolled in a course taught by an adjunct instructor. Can you describe to me in your own words how you know your instructor was an adjunct?

    a. Did the instructor identify themselves as an adjunct?

    b. How would you describe the major differences between a full-time instructor and an adjunct instructor?

    c. Have you had more positive or negative interactions with an adjunct instructor?

        i. Can you describe your interactions with an adjunct instructor?

9. How would you describe a positive faculty-student relationship?

    a. Have you attempted to develop a relationship with your instructors in the past? How?

    b. Has an adjunct instructor attempted to develop a relationship with you? How?

    c. In what ways was the adjunct instructor accessible to you?

    d. What are some barriers you have encountered when attempting to develop a relationship with an adjunct instructor?

    e. Does relationship development look different when the course is online versus in person?

10. Do you feel as though the relationship you have with your instructors influences your overall student development? Please describe how.

11. How would you describe a sense of belonging at a higher education institution?

    a. Do you feel as though you belong at FTCC? Why or why not?

    b. Do you feel as though the relationships, or lack of relationship, you have with adjunct instructors impacts your sense of belonging at FTCC? Why or why not?

    c. Are there other reasons you may not feel a sense of belonging at FTCC?

12. What are your thoughts on increased adjunct instructor engagement?

    a. Do you feel as though increased adjunct instructor engagement would improve your academic development and sense of belonging? Why or why not?

13. What are your final thoughts regarding adjunct instructors and your experiences being their students?

14. What suggestions would you make to the institution regarding adjunct instructors and first-generation student relationship development?

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Meaning of First-Generation Students and Adjunct Faculty Relationships in Higher Education
Principal Investigator: Melissa Greenlee, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and must be a currently enrolled student at a community college, and have attended the institution for a minimum of one semester. Participants must identify as first-generation student and have completed a course at that college taught by an adjunct instructor. The definitions below are the criteria to determine eligibility.

A first-generational college student is often the first of their families to navigate college and their parents/guardians have little to no college experience.

Adjunct Instructors are higher education faculty members hired under contract to teach a specific subject/course. These instructors are part-time instructors, that may teach on-campus or online

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the student-faculty relationship between first-generation students and adjunct instructors and its impact on the student's academic development and institutional sense of belonging.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Qualifying participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. It should take approximately 45-60 mins to complete the interview. Interviews will be video or audio recorded for the researcher's review and transcribing.
2. Participants will be able to review the interview transcripts and themes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include bringing awareness of the importance of the relationship student have with an adjunct faculty member and how these instructors can be utilized more intentionally. With an increased need to address effective student engagement, success, retention, and graduation rates, perhaps a closer examination of the first-generation student's perspective on their relationship with adjunct instructors and their level of sense of belonging in higher education will open other avenues of reform.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Paper files will be stored in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all paper files will be shredded.
- Interviews will be video or audio-recorded for the researcher's review and transcribing. The recording will be downloaded on a password-protected computer and transcribed verbatim. The visual/audio recording and electronic transcripts will be kept for 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. There is no compensation for responding to the qualifying screener. However, participants who are invited and complete the semi-structured interview will be compensated for their time and assistance in the study with a $20 Visa Gift Card. Compensation will be provided directly to the participant after the procedure is complete.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as an adjunct instructor at Fayetteville Technical Community College. To limit potential or perceived conflicts all participants will be informed of all the researcher's campus roles/positions and past courses taught. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Fayetteville Technical Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Melissa Greenlee. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at greenlem@faytechcc.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Todd Schultz, at tschultz13@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT AND ADJUNCT INSRUCTOR RELATIONSHIPS

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____ Printed Subject Name

_____ Signature & Date