

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FACTORS THAT  
CONTRIBUTE TO FIRST-GENERATION MINORITY COLLEGE STUDENTS'  
MOTIVATION IN BACHELOR'S DEGREE ATTAINMENT

by

Garry Anthony Mebane

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A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FACTORS THAT  
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APPROVED BY:

Sharon Michael-Chadwell, EdD., Committee Chair

James Eller, EdD Committee Member

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences that motivated and contributed to first-generation minority college student success (FGMCSS) at a university in the southeastern United States. This study involved 12 first-generation minority college students (FGMCS) enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. Bandura's social cognitive theory guided this research, which explains that the human learning process develops through social context. Research questions emerged from understanding the problem and purpose statements. The question guiding this research was: What are the experiences that motivate and contribute to FGMCS success at a university in the southeastern United States? Data was collected using interviews, focus groups, and journaling. Data analysis entailed using epoché, phenomenological reduction, and creative variation techniques to uncover and explore emergent themes. The data analysis revealed six distinct themes: difficulties in adjusting to college life, involvement in various groups and activities, determination to complete a degree, confidence in overcoming obstacles, lack of support, and emotional and resource assistance received, which emphasized the intricate interaction of motivation, assistance, and obstacles encountered by FGMCS. The findings also uncovered several complex factors that contribute to the success of FGMCS, such as the desire for personal and family improvement, even in the face of doubt and lack of support. Additional research is needed to investigate successful tactics and interventions that may help overcome the many obstacles experienced by first-generation minority college students, eventually leading to their successful completion of degrees and academic achievements.

*Keywords:* first-generation minority college student, social cognitive, motivation, self-efficacy, socioeconomic, career path development.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation first to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for the grace provided while traveling on this doctorate journey. To my dear mother, the late Mary Jane Mebane, who provided the foundation of a belief system built on faith, love, and trust. Who taught me the importance of hard work, the sacrifices of going the extra mile, and showing me the joy that was before her that she endured. To my darling wife, Bernice Jean Mebane, for her love, prayers, and moral support with words of encouragement. For her belief in my abilities to complete this journey and earn this doctorate. To my four children, Bonnie, Dale, Therita, and Michael, who have been the shining stars, who kept me encouraged and reminded of my purpose and provided hope that they will pursue their dreams and understand that they can accomplish anything that they set their minds to accomplish. And to all my grandchildren, sisters, brothers, and friends for their prayers and moral support.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Anonymous University (AU, pseudonym)

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)

Historically Black College or University (HBCU)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

First-Generation Minority Undergraduate College Students (FGMCS)

First-Generation Minority Undergraduate College Student Success (FGMCSS)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

There has been a significant increase in college enrollment in the twenty-first century, as economic and social changes have made postsecondary education essential. However, navigating college life is challenging for all students (Ilett, 2019). First-generation minority college students (FGMCS) face many barriers while pursuing a college degree (Causey et al., 2022). As a result, many of these students fail to complete their studies and reach their educational goals, a trend more noticeable among minority groups or students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). FGMCS students are likely to face a wide range of challenges, including a lack of higher education role models in their families, inadequate academic preparation, education, and lack of financial resources (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Factors such as inadequate financial resources and academic unpreparedness impede first-generation students' progress toward degree completion (Ilett, 2019). With these being a few challenges, it is essential to understand the social context in a higher education setting that supports student motivation to overcome the hurdles to complete their education.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences that motivated and contributed to first-generation minority college student success (FGMCSS) in undergraduate programs at a university in the southeastern United States. After briefly discussing the problem's background, the researcher explored the situation to self. Understanding the social and economic conditions that ensure FGMCS receive the needed motivation promotes effective learning as introduced within social cognition. Next, the research questions were presented with supporting explanations. Finally, terms pertinent to the study were provided.

## **Background**

The literature on first-generation minority college students is vast and can be viewed within three contexts. The contexts discussed are the historical, social, and theoretical realms. Each is presented in the following sections.

### **Historical Context**

The minority students whose parents did not obtain a four-year college degree were termed FGMCS and were thus the first in their immediate family to attend college (Pratt et al., 2019). As a result, the ratio of adults ages 25 and above with a postsecondary degree increased in the United States. Concurrently, the number of children with parents without a degree decreased. For example, Cataldi et al. (2018) reported that the number of adults over 25 years with a bachelor's degree increased from 21% to 33% between 1990 and 2015.

FGMCS have existed since the creation of postsecondary education, but the definition of a first-generation minority college student has varied from the original study of this group (Tate et al., 2015). President Truman presented to the Commission on Higher Education, referencing a divide regarding inequality among United States citizens, as more jobs required a college degree (Reuben & Perkins, 2007). The legislation presented by President Truman became the precursor to the United States federal government policy recognizing inequalities among college students (Reuben & Perkins, 2007). A few programs were established to address these inequalities, such as the TRIO program, to support low-income FGMCS with disabilities (Ilett, 2019). The Higher Education Act (1965) formed a more concrete definition of FGMCS, which is being the first in their family to go to college or having parents who could not earn a degree from a four-year college (Ilett, 2019). Adachi (1979) adopted a more rigid definition of FGMCS, which defined this type of student as not having a parent who had obtained a bachelor's degree (Nguyen &

Nguyen, 2018). Early in the research on FGMCS' college experiences, their challenges were identified as access, affordability, and instruction standards.

One fundamental problem impacting FGMCS is their status as the first in the family to enroll in college. Previous studies have demonstrated that limited family support in terms of guidance and counseling negatively affected FGMCS' academic outcomes (Davis et al., 2018; Ilett, 2019). Beasley and McClain (2020) also reported that family emotional support is beneficial for academic outcomes as it promotes psychological well-being and facilitates greater student engagement. Lack of family emotional support could negatively affect FGMCS' academic outcomes. Causey et al. (2022) also found that limited parental involvement was a key predictor of student academic success, with those who have maximum parental involvement reporting improved grades due to regular emotional, social, and financial support. Therefore, there is a lack of support in navigating the application, financial aid, and social integration processes based on their status (Ilett, 2019; Radwin et al., 2018). From earlier studies to the current status of FGMCS, there is still work to be done to support their successful college experiences.

### **Social Context**

First-generation minority college students experience diverse challenges in their pursuit of postsecondary education. One of the significant disadvantages of these students is the lack of college experiences from their parents, given their role in sharing valuable resources and information related to education, such as recommended tutors and scholarship that are key to continued learning. As a result, minority students often arrive at colleges underprepared, resulting in low academic performance (Tate et al., 2015). Moreover, minority students have socioeconomic and housing concerns, workplace-related issues, hurdles, and financial resources



that are not readily available to low-income families (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Family ties play a role in influencing the achievement of minority students (Bandura, 1986). McPherson and Arbelo-Marrero (2021) explained that achievement guilt might interfere with students' academic performance. Minority students' sense of achievement guilt has been linked to fear of leaving family behind in pursuing education. As a result, their reluctance to leave home may be too much for them to the extent that some decide to stay home or drop out of college.

Parents of first-generation minority college students fail when teaching their children the value of developing relationships in institutions, which is paramount to higher academic success. As a result, such students fail to appreciate the constitutionality of social capital (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Social capital is a set of shared values or resources that allows individuals to work together to effectively achieve a common purpose (Causey et al., 2022). Consequently, if FGMCS are not exposed to parental support in terms of counseling and advice, they fail to network and form college relationships with negative effects on their academic performance (Beasley & McClain, 2020). Parent involvement in navigating college life is essential for the success of the student because the more a parent can give advice on how to succeed in a higher academic setting (Causey et al., 2022). The more the student gains social capital, which is a major factor in their retention and degree completion (Beasley & McClain, 2020). Having this social capital results in human capital, strengthening communities and maybe their perception of college education as a whole, thus elevating higher education success in future generations (Jack, 2019; Stephens et al., 2014).

### **Theoretical Context**

According to the social cognitive theory or social learning theory by Bandura (1986), the learning process developed through social context provides reciprocal and dynamic interaction

among people. Based on this theory, minority students' motivation comes through their learning environment and imitation of fellow students' behaviors. The social cognitive theory explains differences in the number of effort students expend on learning activities according to the educational status of their predecessors (Beasley & McClain, 2020). It was based on the perception that people set goals based on their interpretation of accomplishments and prioritize them, which became their standard for evaluating their performances. These premises indicated that perceived self-efficacy determined the effort students expended on educational tasks (Tollefson, 2000).

Próspero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) argued that the chances for college students to succeed in higher education depend on one's ability to mobilize support. Extensive social cognitive theory research reveals that low-income and minority students struggle to access beneficial social capital (Verdin & Godwin, 2018). Social capital is the value derived from positive connections between people (Beasley & McClain, 2020). Students of color are constantly faced with the reality of their economic status at predominantly White institutions and are likely to face numerous unpleasant situations without faculty and administrators who understand their situation (Pratt et al., 2019). Stewart (2011) argued that faculty members and administrators of color can help minority students cope with the challenges of constantly facing stereotypical evaluations by members of other races who may not be aware of their struggles and backgrounds.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) provides a theoretical framework demonstrating motivational factors tied to an individual's needs and embedded in psychological aspects (Lester, 2013). Based on this theory, five tiers of human needs are included in the model that demonstrates how the needs of an individual change gradually as specific conditions are met (Maslow, 1943). It can be beneficial to use this model to understand students and ensure they

receive the appropriate motivational tools to develop their social relations and support their academic studies. Owolabi (2018) argued that retention in higher learning institutions is essential in the United States as the number of students dropping out of college continues to increase.

The social and dynamic aspects are present within the minority students' learning environment (Bandura, 1986). The social cognitive theory explains differences in minority students' efforts in learning activities. People set goals based on their accomplishments and failures, which became the standard for evaluating their performance. This premise indicates that the social cognitive theory and perceived self-efficacy beliefs are crucial to understanding the differences in effort expended on academics among first-generation students.

### **Situation to Self**

Understanding someone's ability starts with understanding how their actions produce the desired outcome (Maddox et al., 2019). Ryan and Deci (2020) suggested growth and development as actual outcomes of understanding and self-efficiency. In relation to the context of this study, this researcher recalled his senior year when he was offered a football scholarship to play for a small university. It was an opportunity to fulfill his dream of playing football at the next academic level. However, knowing his family's financial situation, with his mother being a single parent of eight, accepting this scholarship meant putting a weighty, unbearable burden upon the family. Since none of the researcher's family had gone to college, there was a lack of knowledge and understanding of the available resources to fund college.

The social environment in which this researcher grew up was that of sharecroppers, and everyone was expected to continue the family sharecropping tradition. The family's vision regarding education was completing high school and receiving a high school diploma. For the researcher's family, that was the highest level at which academic success was measured. So,

instead of attending college, this researcher decided to join the United States Army. It was not until his overseas tour in Korea that he took his first college course. At this point, he became the first-generation minority college student in his family.

The most challenging hurdle for the researcher when attending the first college course was developing social skills and relating with other cultures in a learning environment. According to social cognitive theory by Bandura (1986), the learning process developed through social context into providing reciprocal and dynamic interaction among people. Even though his mother taught him to have faith in God and that mankind was created in His image, there was a lack of understanding of self-concept, social relations, and group dynamics. Geary (2008) argued that there was a motivational gap between 'folk knowledge' (basic concepts that needed to be learned to function in a community under the present condition) and secondary knowledge (mainly academics that were learned only through books and school) Maslow's (1943).

Hierarchy of Needs ensured that students received the right motivational tools based on psychological aspects (Lester, 2013). Even though elements from several worldviews were available when developing a framework for this study, the transformative paradigm view fit this research study best. This paradigm centered around the philosophical assumption of social learning while pursuing analysis based on reality and knowledge (Mertens, 2010). The transformative framework, as epistemological and methodological, described the challenge to social order. The epistemological assumption allowed the researcher to be close to the participants.

In contrast, methodological assumptions support and shape the data collection and analysis through the participant's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) described the importance of common bonds that define qualitative research, including value,

wholeness, meaning, descriptions, formulating questions, and viewing experiences. The researcher's objective was to endorse a means to change people's lives through education positively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although this is a major social issue, there has been limited research on improving the college experiences of FGMCS. As such, many students face a psychological battle in ensuring they enroll and complete their education. Therefore, the findings of this study could help academicians and student affairs personnel to support students in navigating the hurdles they encounter in their college-going experiences and encourage them to complete their courses of study.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that first-generation minority college students continue to struggle with bachelor's degree completion as these students continue to underperform and drop out of college (Pratt et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Several studies show that among first-generation college students, there is a marked difference in graduation rates and time to completion. Graduation rates show that FGMCS graduate at a rate of less than half their second and third-generation college-going peers (RTI International, 2019). This group of students often come from low-income homes and find it challenging to navigate the college environment. They do not have parents they can turn to for advice or social networks they can depend upon for support in their college-going (Cataldi et al., 2018; Pratt et al., 2019).

Social and economic challenges among college students result in a lack of college completion. For example, Pratt et al. (2019) reported that first-generation minority college students are 71% more susceptible to college dropouts than students whose parents have a college degree. This trend has been attributed to the low level of self-motivation, limited socioeconomic resources, and a lack of knowledge on overcoming barriers while navigating the

college experience. Higher learning institutions, which fail to recognize the differences in access to social capital, make it difficult for FGMCS to succeed in college. Inadequate or lack of social capital is detrimental to these students' success as they are more likely to be socially and economically amalgamated into an institution (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Therefore, because FGMCS' parents cannot offer college life advice, they are left disadvantaged in forming supportive relationships at their institutions that support their persistence (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences that motivated and contributed to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success (FGMCS) at a university in the southeastern United States. The theory guiding this study was the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). This theory was supported by development, inherent power, and social up-gradation, which supported first-generation social cognitive learning education descriptions. Social relationships were resources that could develop and accumulate human capital (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). This theory relates to the case of first-generation minority college students who depended upon networks, relationships, social development, and well-being in educational contexts that supported their achievement.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is presented here in the context of theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives. The findings of this research study may create a shared awareness of social cognitive learning experiences among professionals who worked with FGMCS. This knowledge could be used to support FGMCS academic outcomes. Previous research addresses how first-generation minority college students suffer due to economic class differences (Rondini,

2015). Furthermore, the current study provided an understanding of the various issues affecting FGMCS. It also explained how teachers and parents support FGMCS students in overcoming challenges. The methodological approach was a valuable addition to the pool of literature that only recognized differences between first-generation minority college students and their peers.

### **Theoretical**

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory was employed to frame the study. The theory emphasizes students' motivational tools by evaluating the students' importance of social and dynamic aspects of leaving the environment (Bandura, 1986). The social cognitive theory explains the difference in the effort students expend on learning activities. Contributing to the social cognitive theory constructs are observing, categorizing, storage of knowledge, and self-efficacy. The self-efficacy beliefs outlined the social differences in academics among FGMCS and other students. These premises indicate that perceived self-efficacy determines students' efforts on educational tasks (Tollefson, 2000).

### **Empirical**

According to McCrea (2015), first-generation minority college students enroll in academic institutions with a high level of anxiety as they grapple with the experiences brought about by college attendance and the navigation of campus life. These anxieties are challenges to the success and persistence of FGMCS, which are different from their peers. The high level of anxiety is also attributed to how FGMCS realize that they represent a different type of student in the college culture and context.

Much of the literature has focused on a sense of belonging, the role of family, pre-college messaging that impacts self-efficacy, and academic readiness as important variables in first-generation minority college student success (Strayhorn, 2012; Vacarro & Newman, 2016).

FGMCS who feel connected and cared about in an institution are motivated to persist. This study aims to provide essential insights into approaches to adopt in the educational setting that provide a sense of equality for first-generation minority college students and their peers to support their motivation and academic well-being.

### **Practical**

The current study is significant given the opportunity to devise models for promoting interpersonal and psychosocial gains among college students. In this case, the current research will advance the insights made by Pike and Kuh (2006), who reported that learners from various backgrounds engaged in purposeful activities in the educational setting derived valuable interpersonal, cognitive, and psychosocial benefits. This highlights the need to promote the engagement of diverse students on campus.

The current study could help stakeholders, such as college faculty, staff, and administration who serve first-generation minority college students, understand how students handle self-efficacy and the level of effort they expend during their college experiences. Understanding college student challenges is an ongoing process, especially among students of diverse backgrounds. Studies such as this will support retention initiatives and overall student success (Sadowski et al., 2018). The self-efficacy beliefs outlined by the social cognitive theory are crucial to understanding the differences in effort expended on academics among the first-generation minority and other students and revealing the reasons for college drop-outs despite financial aid. It is a vital determinant of students' self-fulfillment, inculcation of thoughts, and achievement in high-skilled programs (Verdin & Godwin, 2018).



## **Research Questions**

Research questions emerged from the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). The following questions guide the research study:

### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences that motivate and contribute to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success at a university in the southeastern United States?

Based on the literature experiences and activities, high-impact practices increase student learning, engagement, acquisition, and storage of knowledge (Confrey et al., 2018). In addition, shared experiences regarding challenges can bring together students on campus through a constructed sense of community (Azmitia et al., 2018).

### **Sub-Question 1**

What are the college social, learning, and student engagement experiences that contribute to first-generation minority college student success?

First-generation minority college students work through social and academic challenges and should be supported by institutions creating support programs (Aruguete, 2017). The suggestion is that universities keep class sizes small, especially for first-generation minority college students, to reduce the delay of the cognitive learning process (Beattie & Thiele, 2016).

### **Sub-Question 2**

What are the college context experiences that support social learning and self-efficacy among first-generation minority undergraduate students?

Hébert (2018) focused on the strong sense of self-efficacy that promotes human accomplishment and well-being based on the high achievement levels of first-generation minority college students. Hébert (2018) noted that regardless of complex backgrounds, a person

with high efficacy views challenges as supposed to be mastered rather than threats to avoid. As a result, these people can recover from failure faster and are more likely to attribute failure to a lack of effort.

### **Sub-Question 3**

What experiences with peers, faculty, and administration do first-generation minority college students attribute to the development of behavior patterns that support their academic success?

Aruguete (2017) formed a qualitative study on first-year students' academic self-efficacy that supported the importance of first-generation minority college students' educational connectedness on campus. Thus, contributions to the academic success of first-generation minority college students' observed learning experiences are motivated by a sense of belonging through engagement (Azmitia et al., 2018).

### **Definitions**

1. *Academic Rigor* – This is explained from the student's perspective by academic workload, grading standard, level of difficulty, level of interest, and perceived relevance to future goals (Draeger et al., 2015).
2. *First-Generation Minority College Student* – Minority students with parents or guardians who have no college, some college, or do not have a four-year degree (Whitehead & Wright, 2016).
3. *Persistence* – The quality that allows a person to continue working toward a goal despite challenges they encounter (Tinto, 2017).
4. *Social Cognitive Theory* – An approach to human cognition motivation using self-efficacy of individual environment (Bandura, 1986).

5. *Self-Efficacy Theory* – An individual belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Tollefson, 2000),

### **Summary**

This chapter presented an overview of a study developed to describe the factors that motivate undergraduate FGMCS toward academic success. First-generation minority college students struggle with stressors contributing to their academic motivation and performance (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2020). This group often lacks social capital and networks to support how they navigate problems in the context of their degree pursuits, which often leads to their leaving college (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Understanding institutional behaviors that motivate and support the academic success of this group, despite obstacles, will support the development of strategies to succeed and persist in higher learning.

The lack of social capital and the lack of knowledge of how to develop networks that support them as FGMCS do not help with successful integration. Students with access and are connected to individuals or groups with degree experience benefit from the available social capital. Their interaction with peers, faculty, and administrators, or what some might call their social contracts, helps to guide and navigate the learning environment. Highly motivated and self-determined FGMCS are more likely to succeed in higher learning. This study was developed to understand further what motivates FGMCS toward academic success. Specifically, this study strove to identify the practices of institutions that contribute toward FGMCS academic success.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The purpose of the transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences that motivated and contributed to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success (FGMCS) at a university in the southeastern United States. The literature used in this study evaluated some of the obstacles and socio-economic factors that affected first-generation minority college students. This chapter offers an overview of the current literature on this subject. The discussion of the selected theories makes up the first section of the chapter. A synthesis of related literature is developed in the second section, with consideration of the motivation of first-generation minority college students, including self-concept, noting the strength and disposition of identity that motivated and encouraged success in higher learning institutions.

Parental support and social, cultural, and human capital were issues raised and required attention to deliberate on first-generation minority college students and their education. A synthesis of understanding related literature evolves in the second section, considering first-generation minority college students' academic self-efficacy, noting family support experiences, inappropriate study skills and behavior, and an uncondusive study environment. The topics, including the sense of belonging, outcome expectation, intrinsic motivation, and institutional motivation, were also included during the research on first-generation minority college students and their academic issues. Upon reviewing the literature, a gap emerged, creating a need for a focused student.

## Theoretical Framework

### Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

The social cognitive theory explains the differences in the effort students spend on learning activities. It is based on the perception that people set goals based on their interpretations of previous accomplishments and failures and prioritize those goals, which become personal standards for evaluating their performance (Bandura, 2001). These premises indicate that perceived self-efficacy determines students' effort on educational tasks (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Those who perceive tasks as difficult are less likely to consider expending most of their time on them, as they believe the demands exceed their capabilities. The self-efficacy beliefs outlined by the social cognitive theory are crucial to understanding the differences in effort expended on academics among the FGMCS and other students. According to social cognitive theory, students are motivated by incorporating reciprocal models, environmental influences, and dynamic practices (Bandura, 2001; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Gibbons et al. (2019) argued that the chances for college students to succeed in higher education depend on their ability to mobilize support. While social networks influence one's college experiences, other factors are crucial to success in higher education.

Social networks help people associate with relationships in social and emotional contexts. The main components of social capital deal with leveraging relationships, social resources, exchanges, and trustworthiness of social networks that bind individuals together and develop expectations of reciprocity (Halpern, 2005). The need for other interventions indicates the limitations of developing integrated programs based on social cognitive theory. Próspero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) identify academic integration as a crucial variable to academic success.

On the other hand, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are barriers to academic success associated with lower grades (Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Their study indicates that many students fail to attain high academic grades due to extrinsic motivation. Those students perceiving their courses as a barrier to realizing their financial goals are likely to participate in activities that limit their time for academics. They may engage in money-generating activities rather than study for a better future. Institutions should understand the realities of first-generation students and implement college-preparatory programs while supporting the multiple obligations of first-generation minority college students (Bowman et al., 2018). The absence of longitudinal studies on students' progress from high school to higher learning makes it difficult to identify gaps in the existing higher education preparatory programs.

The theoretical framework for this study influenced the development of research questions, and the methodology developed in Chapter Three served as the lens through which the concept of FGMCS' motivation to attain a bachelor's degree was viewed. As explained above, the theoretical framework illuminated the topic under investigation in the context of theories and literature (Ravitch & Rigan, 2016). In developing this study, Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning theory was used to guide the context in which first-generation college students' environment and social context impacted their learning experiences. A student's self-perception about their abilities and capabilities also influences their perception of their self-efficacy, impacting first-generation minority college students' academic efforts (Tollefson, 2000). These intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors affect academic outcomes in higher education.

### **Related Literature**

Previous research studies show that first-generation minority college students need assistance before and during college (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). FGMCS can build an

understanding of shared experiences and the realization of the hurdles faced by other students who are the same type (Azmitia et al., 2018). Therefore, studying the common behavioral and psychological traits of FGMCS, like self-concepts, self-efficacy, parental support, and intrinsic, extrinsic, and institutional motivation, is imperative. Understanding these characteristics is necessary for developing a conducive environment for such students. It is essential to broaden the overview of FGMCS by understanding minority college students' self-concept (Causey et al., 2022). The motivation and encouragement of FGMCS' college faculty and administrators are crucial for a student's academic progress and motivation, leading to the deterioration of self-esteem and spirit to pursue a higher degree (Mortimer & Well, 2009).

Although the FGMCS traditionally struggles to transition into college and persist successfully, some students exhibit unique strengths and dispositions of their identity that motivate them to succeed in higher learning institutions. These unique strengths and tendencies include being emotionally motivated, self-sufficient, and responsible (Tate et al., 2015). These aspects of the FGMCS' self-concept explain why some minority students succeed in higher learning while others struggle. The study indicates that developing a student's self-concept can enhance their chances of succeeding and persisting in higher education.

### **Other Related Theories**

Several schools of thought are combined to provide the foundation for a line of inquiry that uses human experience, social effect, and academic success to explain the peculiarities of human conduct (Leng, 2020). Several related theories are discussed in this section. Those theories are: (a) social constructivist theory, (b) Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning theory, (c) Skinner's (1953) theory of cooperative learning, and (d) Bandura's (1977) social learning theory.

### ***Social Constructivist Theory***

As Vygotsky and Cole (1978) explained, the social constructivist theory is directly relevant to the research on the factors influencing first-generation minority college students' motivation to pursue a bachelor's degree. Vygotsky believed that human development depended on the fundamentals of society and the interactions that took place within it (Sitlington, 2017). This implies that the strength of the first-generation minority students' social ties is an essential factor in their level of motivation. On the other hand, the theory of operant conditioning by Skinner (1953) asserted that behavior may be changed through rewards and punishments, which is also relevant to this study. This may have a detrimental effect on a child's intellectual, social, and emotional development.

Negative stereotypes and cultural labeling are also daily occurrences for the participants in this study, which may have long-term effects on their feelings or mental well-being and sense of who they are as individuals (Stangor et al., 2022). Therefore, even though J.B. Watson (2017) and Pavlov (1949) researched aspects of the human psyche and the conscious mind, B.F. Skinner (1953) is most well-known for his contributions to human behavior research. According to Drasgow (2010), the psychologist Skinner (1953) spent a significant portion of his career attempting to comprehend human behavior. Behaviorists are also interested in how individuals react to diverse stimuli in various settings and circumstances.

### **Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory**

According to Bandura (1986), the first human development process is the environment, when an individual develops and relates to others and adopts their behaviors. Media greatly expands upon the range of behavior patterns. Television exerts a significant influence on individuals of all ages, as demonstrated by Bandura (1986). In contemporary television, various



digital platforms, such as streaming and networks, are added as modeling sources for individuals. The most popular social networks used are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, mainly by young people, without excluding other age groups.

The second human development process is retention, which indicates that it will not be appropriate if an individual carefully observes behavior and quickly forgets that behavior (Bandura, 1986). The information an individual receives must be encoded and stored in his memory, achieved through symbols (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Some behaviors are retained through a system of mental images, especially when the activity or behavior to be imitated is challenging to describe in words or when motor skills are performed that require mechanical repetition of processes and decisions (Bandura, 1986). Apart from symbols, language provides another coding system. An individual can replicate behaviors and activities to transform the information into a list of steps to follow (Bandura, 1986). For example, you can carry out manual procedures if you can remember which step is before another (Causey et al., 2022). This concept is illustrated in the learning of trades such as masonry, carpentry, blacksmithing, or farmers who intend to plant, care for, manage, and harvest a specific crop. It is through images and words that individuals review their learning (Chang et al., 2020).

The third process is motor reproduction. The two previous processes are on a purely cognitive level. Instead, the third process involves converting symbolic representations into specific actions (Bandura, 1986). Moving from what is observed to practice, at this point, the individual faces trial and error situations. According to Bandura (1986), it is difficult for an individual not to make mistakes when practicing what he has learned mentally. Therefore, an individual must refine or adjust what he has observed with attention and symbolically encoded.

Finally, the fourth process is motivation. This process allows an individual to select what she or he has learned with what he or she is interested in imitating (Bandura, 1986). It also allows them to discard what does not represent an advantage or what is socially punished. In this process, the consequences of the acts are judged, either because the individual experienced them and was able to objectify the consequences of the actions or because he learned the consequences through observation or dialogue with others who experienced and learned the consequences of those acts. The four processes described proposed that the interrelation of three elements explains human behavior: (a) personal cognitive factors, (b) behaviors, and (c) the environment. Bandura (1986) calls this the triadic reciprocity model, describing how each element conditions the other two. In this way, Bandura breaks with the psychological tradition that sought to explain human behavior, conditioned only by environmental factors without considering the possibility of agency.

### ***Skinner's Theory of Cooperative Learning***

A significant proportion of Skinner's (1953) research on classroom-related behaviors was carried out within the paradigm of operant psychology. This was the case for the majority of his studies. He defined his study of human behavior by employing a three-way contingency consisting of an antecedent stimulus, an action, and an outcome (Kelland, 2010). He used this to explain his findings. So, when these things come together, they make a place for learning. The research outcomes also indicate that first-generation minority undergraduate college students tend to be significantly led by their peer groups. This has led to a practice of cooperative learning among first-generation minority undergraduate college students, which may lead to improvements in their academic performance (Franklin, 2019).

In Skinner's (1953) theory of cooperative learning, the group of students working together to learn becomes the stimulus, which affects students' behavior and leads to a more positive learning outcome. It is essential to determine whether this strategy successfully reaches students by analyzing their academic performance. If the students are successfully grouped, it will be possible to build learning strategies that enable students to become both self-motivated and positive motivating elements for one another. Then, Skinner (1953) researched the dichotomy between determinism and free will. According to Skinner (1953), the ideas of determinism and consciousness are not interchangeable (Franklin, 2019). On the other hand, consciousness contends that people are free to make their own decisions, while determinism asserts that people react directly to the circumstances in which they find themselves (Kotchoubey, 2018). Education is not an exception to the rule because many negative photos, tales, and perceptions revolve around minority communities.

### ***Bandura's Social Learning Theory***

The constructivist hypothesis is another theory strongly tied to how students' feelings and the environment they are immersed in influence their results. The experiences that students have in their lives, the environment in which they live, and the things they are exposed to in the outside world all contribute to forming their views (Kurt, 2021). Both Bandura's (1986) social learning theory and this idea are related because they are both about how people's experiences affect how they think and what they do in the future. Furthermore, the social cognitive learning theory by Bandura (1986) revealed that social cognitive is the learning process developed through social context to provide reciprocal and dynamic interaction among people. Based on this theory, students become motivated through the learning environment and imitate their fellow

student's behaviors (Lamorte, 2019). The theory emphasizes students' motivation by elevating the importance of social and dynamic aspects present within the student's learning environment.

According to Salter et al. (2018), overt racism has been replaced in today's society by more covert and unconscious kinds of racism that are facilitated by social media. As a result of the ongoing challenges faced by first-generation minority college students inside the educational system, it would seem that determinism often prevails over free choice in this context. According to Bandura (1986), having confidence in one's ability to accomplish one's aims is one of the most critical factors contributing to success. The research findings show that having a robust sense of self-efficacy may make it easier for them to accomplish their goals and develop a positive picture of themselves. Thus, when students are encouraged to take on better work-related responsibilities when they are at home, it may lead to a reduction in the accomplishment gaps that exist between individual student objectives.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students**

According to Dynarski (2016), a person is considered a first-generation minority college student if they are the first member of the family to get a postsecondary degree (such as a bachelor's degree) or a high school diploma. The U.S. Department of Education recognized that the first generation of students includes those whose parents did not complete college and those whose parents did attend but did not complete it (Lowry, 2017). Many academics use the term "First-Generation Minority College Students" to describe students whose parents have never attended college. Shumaker and Wood (2016) revealed that people who are the first in their immediate family to attend college are often thought of as first-generation minority college students (FGMCS). However, numerous theories have been proposed regarding who qualifies as

a first-generation minority college student. FGMCS stem from a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, which is a significant feature of the school.

According to NCES (2019), approximately 36% of FGMCS are from minority populations, with 53% Hispanic, 43% Native American, and 41% African American. Based on these findings, the FGMCS student body has a smaller proportion of white and Asian students. According to the Anne Arundel Community College (AACC), most FGMCS exhibit the following characteristics: Many FGMCS students work full-time or part-time to satisfy their financial requirements while attending college since they are not of typical college age because some have been out of school for some time. For these students, the educational process entails significant time and financial strains. Some FGMCS take on a lighter course load to better manage their time between employment, family, and school. Much of the material on FGMCS has the features of the AACC (Shumaker & Wood, 2016).

FGMCS are also more often seen in minority and low-income households. Much attention has been paid to students of color and those from low-income families since they are at greater risk of dropping out (Davis et al., 2018). A lack of parental involvement, a low socioeconomic level, and inadequate academic preparation make minority and low-income students more likely to struggle academically (Manzoni & Streib, 2018). This phenomenon provides insights into how FGMCS may thrive in their academic pursuits and suggests support and mentoring programs that should be established.

Besides, more than half of all undergraduates at public universities in the United States attend community colleges (Stebbleton et al., 2014). According to data from the Pell Institute, the number of low-income students attending U.S. colleges and universities annually reaches about

5.5 million. Three-quarters of FGMCS begin their college career in for-profit or two-year schools, but only half of the non-FGMCS do the same (Evans, 2016).

Furthermore, FGMCS can complete their degrees more conveniently and cost-effectively by enrolling in community colleges. Aulck and West (2017) assert that FGMCS students who attend four-year institutions are more likely to drop out of college than those who attend two-year institutions. Nonetheless, local communities benefit from trained labor that would otherwise be unavailable through public community colleges (Phillippe, 2016). Also, rural residents who may otherwise be unable to find work benefit significantly from the existence of community institutions. Similarly, students and taxpayers profit greatly from community colleges because they produce highly skilled workers and provide substantial financial assistance (Evans, 2016). However, high school graduation is not enough for a person to make more money than someone who gets a bachelor's degree. Dika and D'Amico (2016) revealed that individuals with merely a high school diploma were shown to have an average earning advantage over those with an associate degree. In their study, Dika and D'Amico (2016) suggested that women and men with just a high school diploma had higher earnings premiums of 21% and 13%, respectively. The average return on public investment for an associate's degree was 2.5 times greater than the return on student loan debt. Overall, community colleges in the United States are suitable for the economy of the areas they serve and those who go there.

Despite the obvious economic advantages of a college certificate or degree, rural FGCS enrollment rates are also lower than urban FGMCS enrollment rates (Trostel, 2017). This correlates with rural first-generation children's common educational goals and lower enrollment levels (Evans, 2016). Nevertheless, for low-income FGMCS, academic preparedness is lower,

and socioeconomic impediments are more significant than in metropolitan areas (Warren et al., 2016).

### **Self-Concept of First-Generation Minority College Students**

Self-concept describes how an individual perceives their ability and attributes. Jansen et al. (2015) suggested that self-concept is an essential component of student motivation and is instrumental in shaping the levels of motivation experienced by the student. High-performing first-generation minority college students rely on their self-concept to be successful. Pulliam and Gonzalez (2018) asserted that students' self-concept forces them to improve their performance by dedicating time to academic improvement. The impact of the student's self-concept extends beyond aspects such as student motivation. For example, it plays a vital role in decisions made during the course selection process (Luna, 2018).

The student's self-concept often drives decisions made to select courses that can be difficult. Understanding whether the individual can tackle a subject with relative ease becomes a vital driving force behind decisions made by a first-generation minority college student. Luna (2018) found that first-generation minority students often attain low grade point averages during their first semester in college, are more likely to drop out, and often have work commitments that become more important to them than their college courses. According to Luna (2018), students' course choices influence their feelings about their capabilities. Students with a higher perception of their abilities are likelier to choose a more challenging course than those with a low self-concept. Beasley and McClain (2020) affirm the perspective developed by Luna (2018) by showing that a first-generation minority student's self-concept indirectly impacts the student's academic engagement and performance. Based on the literature, it is generally accepted that self-concept impacted the educational decisions made by first-generation minority students.

This study is intended to help broaden the overview of FGMCS by shedding light on minority college students' experiences and motivation in the college context, which is influenced by their self-concept and engagement (Causey et al., 2022). The motivation and encouragement of FGMCS' college faculty and administration can offset negative academic experiences. These negative experiences deteriorate self-esteem and a student's willingness to pursue a college degree (Mortimer & Well, 2009). Although FGMCS traditionally struggle to transition into college and persist successfully, some exhibit unique strengths and dispositions of their identity that motivate them to succeed in higher learning institutions. This group's unique strengths include being stern, emotionally motivated, evaluated, self-sufficient, responsible, and adaptable (Causey et al., 2022; Tate et al., 2015). These aspects of the FGMCS' self-concept may explain why some minority students succeed in higher learning while others struggle. Past research shows that supporting a student's self-concept can enhance the chances of succeeding and persisting in higher education.

### **Challenges of First-Generation Minority College Students**

College students are often forced to deal with different challenges while pursuing degrees. However, for first-generation minority students, the problems are often complex. Chang et al. (2020) indicate that FGMCS deal with a lack of finances, academic issues, and personal problems worsened by the inherent differences between the college environment and their family setting. In addition, the intrinsic differences in ideology between minority students and students from privileged backgrounds are often the source of many problems (Chang et al., 2020). For FGMCS, the new experience differs from their everyday experiences, and there is often a misalignment between their cultural values and the norms of the university. For example, middle-class norms emphasized by most universities include autonomy, self-expression, and the



desire to create one's path. The norms developed by the student are often mismatched with factors that the university promotes about the community (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021). This tension between what is expected from a college student and the first-generation college student experience often causes challenges for the student, resulting in a lower grade point average and increased difficulty in completing complex academic tasks.

Research on the experiences of first-generation college students from minority communities shows higher attrition rates than college students from non-minority groups. Moreover, studies show that first-generation college students from minority communities tend to have problems selecting a major and following curricular guidelines and, as a result, often perform poorly in their education. Schwartz et al. (2018) show that the differences in academic performance between minority and non-minority students become apparent as early as the end of the first semester. First-generation students from minority communities also tend to report more extraordinary experiences of exclusion in college, adversely affecting the students' performance. Developing social networks is one way to combat low grades and attrition. Social networks include peer guidance, information sharing, and support for student assimilation into college life (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

Stress is a problem that most first-generation students from minority communities must contend with every day. Research shows that first-generation students from minority communities are forced to develop coping mechanisms to handle higher education pressure and challenges effectively (Goldman et al., 2017). Students who cannot create effective coping mechanisms are often forced to drop out of school. Nonetheless, Becker et al. (2017) illustrated that most universities strive to create programs to help students cope with these challenges effectively. Azmitia et al. (2018) asserted that first-generation college students from minority

communities are forced to develop resilience, which is necessary to ensure the successful negotiation of everyday activities in school.

Access to resources can be a problem for most first-generation students from minority students. Garriott et al. (2017) used the example of students pursuing engineering courses to show that most first-generation students from minority communities pursuing college education have trouble accessing resources while off campus. Most students in this category come from communities with limited resources. The limited resources often affect the level of performance recorded by the students in such situations. Becker et al. (2017) showed that universities attempt to create a system that could help improve their ability to retain students from minority communities. However, such attempts often fail because they do not make enough effort to reform their system and address the systemic institutional problems of students in such situations. Addressing the issues by providing accessible services to the student is necessary for success.

### **Student Attrition Concerns**

One of the issues in higher education in the United States is student attrition. Owolabi (2018) argued that retention of students in higher learning institutions is an issue in the country as the number of students dropping out of college keeps increasing. Many students leave college without completing their degrees and accumulating substantial student loans (Owolabi, 2018). These issues indicate that many students face barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education (Garriott et al., 2015). The current situation suggests that access to higher education is not enough for students relying on the federal government and other sources of support to succeed (Nichols & Islas, 2016). A key area of investigation in this current research is the influence of the need to belong as the motivation of first-generation minority college students

who pursue a high degree of education (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Verdin and Godwin (2018) found a sense of belonging as a crucial determinant of first-generation students' experiences; it is a vital determinant of the student's academic self-efficacy, institutional integration, and achievement in high-skill programs (Verdin & Godwin, 2018). The concept is crucial to understanding the factors that result in college dropouts in the country despite access to financial aid for first-generation minority college students.

Based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, the increased sensitivity of FGMCS' potential plays a role in an individual's success. Chen (2017) identifies life roles associated with adulthood as potential barriers to adult learners' participation in higher education. However, the tenets of the adult learning theory indicate the possible sources of motivation for non-traditional learners. The concept identifies adult learners as self-directed individuals boasting extensive experience, displaying a readiness to learn, and being task-motivated (Chen, 2017). These principles demonstrate that investigations utilizing the theory are crucial to understanding the sources of motivation for adult learners to inform the design of interventions targeting minority students lacking in self-motivation.

### **Experiences of First-Generation Minority College Students**

First-generation minority college students are confronted with several challenges that make their tenure at the university inherently different from those of other demographics. Once the student is enrolled at the university, the university is expected to ensure that they stay in school until they graduate. Motives obtained when analyzing the experience of FGMCS include the perception of FGMCS regarding the impact of the degree (Adams & McBrayer, 2020).

First-generation minority college students face every day needs and challenges. For example, Adams and McBrayer (2020) illustrated that FGMCS come from low-income families,

deal with issues related to being an ethnic minority, and are often less prepared academically to deal with college. Furthermore, such students often feel marginalized and are forced to deal with more significant cultural difficulties. Research also shows that such students are forced to deal with poor grade point averages and are reported to show poor academic engagement (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). All these issues are part of the student's daily experience in college and inherently affect how well the student performs.

Racism and discrimination are part of the experience for most FGMCS. Ellis et al. (2019) illustrate that racial microaggressions and micro-affirmation are a constant in most students' experiences from minority communities. As most students classified under the group under study are from African American communities, Hispanic, and other immigrant communities, the students are often forced to deal with microinsults and microinvalidations. According to Ellis et al. (2019), students must deal with micro-support, micro-compliments, and micro-validations. Changes in how students are addressed can be accomplished through changes in the communication approach adopted on the campuses. Every day, discriminatory conduct towards students from different racial backgrounds can make most students in college negative. Ellis et al. (2019) affirm that the adverse effects of racial abuse include a negative impact on the individual's mental and physical and an increase in stress.

Microaggressions occur in everyday settings where a victim experiences innocuous and explicit discriminatory communication. The victim is usually an individual from a racially and socioeconomically marginalized community. Microaggressions can be intentional or unintentional. They communicate hostile, derogatory, negative slights, resulting in a harmful and unpleasant experience (Ellis et al., 2019). Different categories of microaggression confront first-generation minority college students. For instance, micro-assaults describe deliberate and

conscious derogatory communication that conveys hurt and is intended to demean the victim. Micro-insults describe critical and insensitive information regarding the individual's heritage. Micro-validations are used to nullify students' experiences from minority communities (Ellis et al., 2019). Despite these experiences, students from racial minority communities are expected to perform well in their educational pursuits, which is often tricky. Huynh (2019) illustrated that mentorship can be crucial in helping first-generation minority college students deal with the challenges that arise from their daily experiences on college campuses. However, very little has been done to actualize such plans. For example, Chang et al. (2020) asserted that students from minority communities struggle with financial aid and other factors presented by the cultural mismatch between them and their new environment. Mentorship is required to help the student address such factors.

### **The Success of First-Generation Minority College Students**

Despite the challenges experienced by FGMCS during their time on college campuses, students from this demographic have successfully pursued their educational pursuits. Holcombe and Kezar (2020) illustrated that adopting comprehensive and integrated programs that combine different interventions and create a seamless learning environment for graduate students helps ensure better performance levels. In their study, Holcombe and Kezar (2020) used several California State University campuses, with the study results illustrating the benefits of a comprehensive program that effectively improves the student's situation. Such programs work because they ensure they can access services they readily require during the learning process. For example, students can access mentors easily. In addition, the resources are available to the students and, when utilized effectively, ensure that the student can succeed.

Institutional apparatus plays a vital role in the success of first-generation minority students on college campuses. Kim et al. (2020) noted that access to the factors that led to the success of FGMCS, illustrating that institutional apparatus, such as the competence of the faculty, played an important role in how successful a student could become. The institutional agents are integral in imparting the students the required knowledge to cope with the challenges that arise from everyday interaction on college campuses. FGMCS in schools where the faculty is interested in providing the required knowledge to be successful are likely to produce more successful students compared to other institutions (Kim et al., 2020). Change and improvement in the knowledge resource at most campuses effectively ensure that more students are successful in their pursuits.

Examining factors that predict the performance levels of FGMCS shows a need to consider the pre-university experience and the FGMCS. Aruguete (2017) indicated that Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model could be used to predict the performance and persistence of first-generation minority college students. The students' success from this demographic is often dependent on several factors, such as the university environment and social and academic integration. Colleges with excellent academic integration can improve performance as first-generation minority students are exposed to adequate research experience, tutor services are readily available, and faculty involvement in student development is promoted (Aruguete, 2017). Social integration helps ensure that the student develops better friendships with their peers and that life at the college would be generally enjoyable. Unwanted experiences that come with racial discrimination are easily avoided in such a context. On the other hand, poor academic integration at colleges leads to low performance levels for FGMCS, leading to high dropout rates (Aruguete, 2017).

FGMCS have needs like any other individual within society. It becomes apparent that the student needs an environment where they can develop as individuals and be empowered to develop their skills. In addition, students need to be protected from racial abuse. Therefore, the university can increase awareness of the importance of treating non-white students with the dignity that any student deserves. Most universities are ensuring that the environments they develop are friendly and promote the success of first-generation minority students.

### **Parental Support of First-Generation Minority College Students**

Differences in the experiences and success of first-generation and continuing-generation college students demonstrate that social-cognitive learning is crucial to higher learning success. The continuing generation students have numerous contacts who have earned a college degree and access to individuals in careers they aspire to, which is an advantage over first-generation college students (Nichols & Islas, 2016; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Even though social cognitive learning is necessary for all students to succeed in higher education, their educational background determines the type of support they can access or enjoy. Nichols and Islas (2016) find that continuing-generation students earn higher grade point averages than their first-generation counterparts by the end of the first year of college.

Students whose parents have college degrees benefit from high parental involvement in their education and accessing support networks (Bui & Rush, 2016; Ishitani, 2006). Such parents are more likely to know about their children's typical day, understand how to navigate college processes, and support their children in meeting academic obligations. Toutkoushian et al. (2021) indicated that college-educated parents have a better knowledge of higher learning benefits and can share that knowledge with their children. Their children benefit from the parents' access to

social and cultural capital that supports their academic endeavors (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017; Toutkoushian et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the FGMCS does not access social cognitive skills at the same levels as non-first-generation college students (Garriott et al., 2015). Institutions of higher learning that fail to recognize the differences in access to social learning make it difficult for first-generation minority college students to succeed (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Inadequacy or lack of opportunities for social learning is detrimental to their success as they are more likely to be socially and academically isolated in an institution (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Consequently, many of the FGMCS fail to complete their college education (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). These findings indicate that the continuing generation students have a better chance of succeeding in higher learning because they have access to social capital, unlike their first-generation peers.

Having a parent with a college education background has been found to be crucial in access to networks that support student academic achievement (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Evidence in this area of research shows that parental social capital influences college enrollment and success during the first year of higher learning (Garriott et al., 2015; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017; Toutkoushian et al., 2021). College-educated parents transmit a status advantage to their children, which supports their college education.

Ryan and Deci (2020) argued that parental involvement in their child's educational decisions can facilitate or inhibit access to high-achieving institutions. Parents' informal personal ties are helpful for FGMCS. Those personal networks can be particularly meaningful, as first-generation students require guidance from other individuals with experience to navigate the obstacles of transitioning into higher learning. Friends and family with college experience can



support FGMCS with letters of recommendation, providing insight into the application process and providing motivation in tackling the transition process.

Research on FGMCS also shows that this group tends to stay close to home for college, which can influence continuous enrollment because of completing family obligations (McCrea, 2015). Some college students have to find employment to help support their families or are responsible for younger siblings. This impacts the attention they place on college studies and limits the type of institutions and programs they have access to. This is worrying as they indicate that first-generation minority college students who stay away from institutions that offer bachelor's programs are less likely to pursue such options (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Thus, while social capital is important in the college-going process, it does not offer adequate motivation for minority students to continue their studies (Garriott et al., 2015). There are other barriers to FGMCS, especially if a student is an immigrant (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017).

While parents and guardians are crucial to accessing and using social capital, their importance is not limited to this resource, especially for immigrant students attempting to transition into a foreign country. A study conducted in the Canadian context indicates that parents and guardians are crucial sources of support as they provide shelter, open bank accounts, help with health and social insurance cards, and are a source of connection with their ethnic communities (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Links to ethnic communities are crucial in obtaining practical support for immigrant students. Research indicates a need for ethnic group-specific interventions to improve students' chances of persisting and succeeding in college (Swecker et al., 2013). The education and government sectors should invest in programs that help students transition into higher education based on their needs. Nonetheless, parental support is crucial to a successful transition to and persistence in higher education.

### **Academic Self-Efficacy of First-Generation Minority College Students**

To navigate obstacles and barriers first-generation minority college students encounter requires academic self-efficacy. The idea of self-fulfillment in education refers to the belief that the person can meet goals and academic targets (Miller et al., 2021). Potential college success barriers include family responsibilities, inappropriate study skills and behaviors, and uncondusive study environments (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Sinacore and Lerner (2013) identify other barriers to transitioning into higher education as differences in curriculum, teaching methods, and instruction language. Students transiting into entirely different education systems struggle to cope as they must acquire basic skills to succeed in academic institutions (Verdin & Godwin, 2018). Some studies indicate that students are aware of their lower expectations of higher learning success while still in high school (Gibbons & Borders, 2010).

Prospective FGMCS experience numerous obstacles to succeeding in higher learning, more so than their non-first-generation counterparts (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). The barriers identified include a lack of college-educated role models, college-planning assistance, and a lack of interest in higher education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). These barriers reinforce the importance of social capital and other forms of support for students preparing for higher learning. While the barriers to transiting to college indicate a need for a combination of support systems, investing in helping students develop academic self-efficacy can assist students in persevering and overcoming the obstacles to academic success. (Garriott et al., 2015; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017).

Concerted efforts to prepare prospective first-generation students are vital as self-efficacy is a crucial determinant of students' higher learning intentions. The potential means of improving the students' self-efficacy include encouraging and assisting students in identifying study spaces

on campus, initiating conversations about balancing academics and home responsibilities, and informing them of available support services to meet their educational and social needs (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Ortega (2018) indicates that mentorship and peer support supplement first-generation students' experiences and have the potential to motivate them to set higher personal goals. Exposure to and engagement with graduate students also improves the academic experiences of first-generation undergraduate students.

Van Herpen et al. (2020) found that a four-day intervention intended to ease the transition of first-year students into institutions of higher learning enhanced the students' formal interactions with faculty members and formal and informal peer interactions. Participation in the intervention positively influenced the grades of the first course and first-year cumulative GPA (Van Herpen et al., 2020). These findings indicate that institutions and faculty members have a role in successfully assisting first-generation students' transition into higher learning. They demonstrate the necessity of effective transition programs and interventions that increase student performance, especially in their initial years of higher education.

### **Sense of Belonging of First-Generation Minority College Students**

A sense of belonging is a crucial determinant of successful social integration at institutions of higher learning and influences student retention. Booker (2016) defined a sense of belonging as feelings of relatedness in the context of an institution. Pratt et al. (2019) argued that first-generation minority college students tend to feel disconnected from the social structure of the universities they attend. While they understand the degree of effort required to establish social ties on campus, they fear that the transition could alienate them from previously established social support systems such as their families. Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) asserted that first-generation students report experiencing guilt in pursuing higher education

while their family members have not had the same opportunities. Minority students report higher guilt than their Caucasian counterparts, and students experiencing family financial struggles reported higher levels of guilt than those leaving their families in relatively better conditions to pursue higher education (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

Consequently, first-generation minority college students struggle to fit into the learning environment than their non-first-generation peers. The struggles associated with fitting into the university environment are negatively associated with college retention (Pratt et al., 2019). The affected students develop intentions of dropping out of college due to their failure to cope with and perceptions of family struggles. The importance of belongingness to the success of first-generation college learners reveals a link between a sense of belonging and academic persistence (Oseguera & Rhee, 2010). Verdin and Godwin (2018) argued that an individual's feeling of belonging is consistent with interest and persistence in college. These findings indicate that first-generation students are likely to drop out of academic programs when they fail to experience belongingness. The impact of a sense of belongingness on students' perseverance in overcoming challenges associated with their degree program demonstrates that support programs can assist learners in gaining confidence in their abilities.

Booker (2016) identified professors as crucial determinants of a student's sense of belonging; their interest and engagement with students support course retention. Accessibility and availability of professors outside of class hours for consultation and help with course content is a motivator for a student to continue with a course (Booker, 2016). These findings demonstrate that professors are well-positioned to influence learners' sense of belonging to promote retention of minority students.

### **Beliefs Regarding Degree Expectations of First-Generation Minority College Students**

Evaluation of result-oriented ideas and beliefs of students may be of the most importance for first-generation minority college students (Dickinson et al., 2017). The impact of self-efficacy on students' interest in higher learning and the need for targeted interventions to prepare prospective college students suggests that outcome expectations influence their decisions. Garriott et al. (2015) indicate that college outcome expectations mediate the association between available support and academic satisfaction. The finding suggests that students perceiving positive outcomes such as life satisfaction following enrollment into college are more likely to progress with their education.

The availability of environmental supports, such as peers and faculty members, increases the students' perception of self-efficacy (Garriott et al., 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Hackett and Byars (1996) discussed the impact of socialization and intermingling on African Americans and the resulting career-relevant learning experiences to which they are exposed, altering the mode and intensity of self-efficacy and self-fulfillment. In this regard, prospective FGMCS consider the messages about the importance of going to college and associated outcomes when considering the option for higher learning. Exposure to positive messages about higher learning is likely to encourage such students to improve their education.

### **Intrinsic Motivation of First-Generation Minority College Students**

Combining personal goals, ideas, beliefs, and concepts about specific tasks is the primary description of motivation (D'Lima et al., 2014). Understanding FGMCS motivation early may help provide instructions in a fashion that will obviate the motivation to complete their college education (D'Lima et al., 2014). While parents are an essential resource of social capital for student academic persistence at institutions of higher learning, some prospective FGMCS receive no financial support or social capital from their family members (Saavedra, 2018). Blackwell and

Pinder (2014) identified intrinsic motivation as the driving force behind some students' pursuance of higher learning despite having no family member with a college degree. A student's inner drive to attend college for a better future motivates them to pursue available options to realize their dreams (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Intrinsically motivated students perceive college education as a privilege their parents never had and an opportunity to improve their lives (Cabrera, 2014; Próspero et al., 2010). Mentorship programs connect students to critical support systems (Reid & Moore III, 2008). For instance, due to affordability issues, first-generation students fail to proceed to higher education (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Mentorship programs assist such students in applying for scholarships and grants to cater to their education (Garriott et al., 2015). These findings suggest that mentoring programs for prospective first-generation minority college students are crucial to encouraging them to pursue higher learning.

Even though mentorship programs are crucial to equipping students with the resources they need to counter setbacks in their journey to higher learning, students with high aspirations are less likely to be discouraged by obstacles in their education (Garriott et al., 2015; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Highly motivated first-generation students aspiring for a college degree have twice the chance to persist as their peers with advanced degree ambitions (Somers et al., 2004). However, Rahim and Azman (2010) identify parents as crucial players in developing their children's aspirations for higher learning as they can effectively encourage their children to pursue higher learning (Gofen, 2009; Rahim & Azman, 2010). While aspirations for higher learning can be intrinsically motivated, parents and society play a role. Societal and parental messages about college education affect prospective first-generation students' aspirations (Wolf et al., 2009). The role of parents in developing high student aspirations contradicts the findings of prior studies identifying parents of first-generation minority students as a potential obstacle

(Somers et al., 2004). Variation in findings indicates the possibility of in-group differences in encouraging children to pursue higher learning.

### **Extrinsic Motivation of First-Generation Minority College Students**

Higher education is a form of acculturation for many students, which refers to acquiring a new culture. Higher education shares specific values, norms, and expectations of behavior that define a particular academic culture, which differs from existing in other types of institutions such as high schools. While parents or guardians of first-generation minority students have not experienced the literary culture in higher education, having their children attend university becomes an excellent acculturation task. As a result, first-generation minority students interact with two cultures: home, where family members, friends, and acquaintances possess comparatively less cultural capital, and academic, primarily comprised of people with higher education levels and working knowledge. Consequently, first-generation minority students experience frequent dialogical tensions between their culture and the dominant culture's ideologies (traditional university culture) (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). These students also need more advice on dealing with new social and cultural codes, affecting their adaptation and persistence in the system. Studies have shown that individual and non-individual factors play central roles in shaping educational outcomes among first-generation minority students in colleges (Lopez & Rocha, 2020).

According to Isik et al. (2018), school-related factors are primary extrinsic motivators. These factors include the school environment, academic achievement, and the support quality available for these learners. First-generation learners are more likely to excel in schools with proper support systems, which help identify their unique challenges and promote interventions to address the reported challenges. Moreover, poor academic outcomes could demotivate the

learners, resulting in a higher probability of first-generation minority students failing to graduate. In this scenario, mentorship programs tailored toward helping first-generation learners excel might be a beneficial intervention. Family environments and neighborhoods can also affect the educational outcomes among minority students. Isik et al. (2018) noted that family obligations and support can influence the learners' commitment to academic work. The responsibilities can also dictate how much time the first-generation learners commit to learning, a prospect that ultimately defines the study outcomes. At the social level, the dominant values and the socio-economic environment within the neighborhood can also influence first-generation learners' academic performance, hence their abilities to continue with their education (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Without proper structures to support the growth of the learners, they are more likely to abandon schooling (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Family-related factors closely interact with neighborhood situations and other social factors, such as racism and discrimination, to further influence the educational outcomes of FGMCS (Causey et al., 2022). These observations are supported by the findings of Próspero et al. (2012), who noted that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation could influence the GPA among first-generation students.

### **Institutional Support of First-Generation Minority College Students**

In predominately Caucasian institutions, there is a deficiency in offering pre-college and support programs to FGMCS (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). Although low-income students face numerous challenges in higher education, institutional support can improve their experiences (Ellis et al., 2019). Access to support during elementary and secondary education prepares them for college, but when they arrive at college, they need continued support that targets their specific needs (Hébert, 2018). Supportive educators and support staff are essential sources of motivation for low-income students and FGMCS to perform adequately in college. Minority high



school students, such as Latinos, Asians, and African Americans, benefit from programs where their faculty and advisors challenge them to keep improving and preparing for the college experience (Hébert, 2018). Students' constant challenges to improve keep them focused on their short-term and long-term goals for higher education.

Studies have found that first-generation minority college students generally participate less in social and academic activities associated with success and persistence in higher education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Evidence found in research revealed that first-generation minority students have lower levels of social engagement on campus and typically expect to spend less time socializing with their peers than traditional students (Aruguete, 2017; Ellis et al., 2019). These low levels of social and academic integration may derive, in part, from the challenges of navigating between the two cultures mentioned, one's own and the academic culture. Past research shows that first-generation minority students seek to remain isolated because they fear losing their cultural identity and, consequently, prefer not to attend the support programs at the university (Covarrubias et al., 2015). They avoid forming relationships with professors, classmates, and others perceived as members of the dominant culture, which presents a challenge in college retention. Faculty and peers are a source of motivation and support in achievement.

Academic activities and teacher support can positively impact the persistence of first-generation minority students and facilitate their transition to higher education (Causey et al., 2022). Participation in academic activities, especially those involving interactions with faculty members, may be more important in the persistence of FGMCS than participation in clubs and social activities (Hébert, 2018). Academic preparation, especially in secondary education, is among the most critical factors associated with dropout from higher learning institutions.

Research indicates that students whose parents or guardians did not attend or did not graduate college took and completed fewer courses, had lower grades, required more academic help, and were more likely to repeat or drop out of a course (Causey et al., 2022) First-generation minority students completed fewer credits in their first year of college than their non-first-generation peers (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). In addition, research shows that the grade point averages of first-generation minority students were lower than other students, and they were more likely to have taken a remedial course during the first year of study. The probability of obtaining a bachelor's degree in the estimated four years was lower among first-generation minority students than their peers, an aspect linked to the college dropout phenomena (Allan et al., 2016; Nichols & Islas, 2016). The situation confirms the importance of academic readiness and the influence of the secondary school curriculum's characteristics on the college experience.

Elements related to the first-generation minority students' desertion of their higher education programs must always be understood under a socio-political context (Pratt et al., 2019). In this sense, the decisions made in education are not politically neutral and are interconnected to a particular community's social and economic power structures (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021). For example, the socioeconomic stratum of first-generation minority students is linked to their parents' or guardians' educational level, the academic preparation received in secondary school, and the possibilities of access to higher education (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). Even when first-generation minority students experience academic failure, it is not an exclusive consequence of the student's cognitive abilities (Schwartz et al., 2018). Such experience is also influenced by their gender, race or ethnicity, social class, and privileged position that these conditions occupy in the social structure (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021). Given the above description of facts, it is proposed that an in-depth study may be carried out to

ascertain the external and internal factors in the motivation of first-generation minority college students. This study supports higher education professionals in developing support mechanisms for first-generation minority college students to develop a sense of belongingness, confidence, and motivation to pursue higher education. The research results could also lead to additional exploration of the relevant fields of study. Hence, the study serves as a source of academic exploration.

### **Summary**

The literature review demonstrated diverse characteristics, strategies, and factors that impact first-generation minority college student motivational tools essential in promoting engagement within their environment to enable proper learning processes and social development. First-generation students who excel in higher learning institutions can navigate new academic environments, have access to social capital, are adaptable, and somewhat self-reliant (Bui & Rush, 2016; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Developing these aspects of a student's self-concept can enhance their competence to succeed and persist in higher learning. Some first-generation students do not know how to successfully integrate into the college context. Those with social contacts who possess a college degree or contacts at an institution benefit from those accessible networks. In these cases, FGMCS use their social contacts as sources of support and guidance to navigate the challenges in the learning environment (Tate et al., 2015).

Highly motivated and self-directed first-generation students are more likely to succeed in higher learning than those with low self-esteem and a lack of professional attitude. Their achievements enhance confidence in their abilities and persistence in their degree programs. Even though parents are the primary source of social and cultural capital required by first-

generation students, their support is not limited to the time a student transitions from high school to college (Nichols & Islas, 2016; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

Parents are somewhat responsible for the development of students' aspirations for college. Although some parents lack the information required to motivate their children, first-generation students can draw motivation from family, friends, or the community to develop a desire to work hard for a better future. Schools are ideal places for learners and teachers to interact and share information on available support systems for vulnerable students to get assistance. Teachers are knowledgeable about available resources, which can assist first-generation students in coping with academic challenges (Tollefson, 2000). Students who perceive to belong to an institution or degree program invest their time studying for better outcomes (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Outcome expectations encourage learners to commit to their studies (Pratt et al., 2019). The major themes identified in the literature provide insight into the potential areas of intervention to assist first-generation students in adapting to higher learning conditions and succeeding in their education (Garriott et al., 2015; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017).

The learning gaps in the literature review need to be filled. There is a lack of understanding of developing a sense of social acceptability among first-generation minority college students. Moreover, social planning to integrate such students into the capitalist society is also missing in the literature mentioned above. There is a need to observe and study the possible ways deeply and means through which a sense of social belongingness and high self-esteem may be developed among first-generation minority college students to pursue their higher studies confidently.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The transcendental phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experiences that motivated and contributed to first-generation minority college student success in an undergraduate degree program at a small university in the southeastern United States. Human experiences, behaviors, and relationships are the fundamental elements that researchers sought to understand (Moustakas, 1994). The exchanges between individuals in the college context contribute to the learning and degree attainment experiences of students. This chapter provides an overview of the research methods for this study. Furthermore, the rationale for the selected qualitative research design is revealed, along with a site description and participant selection. Methods for data collection and analysis are explained. Finally, actions taken to ensure the study was ethical and trustworthy are stated.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is a research approach used to understand phenomena naturally and holistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is a model that allows the researcher to develop a high level of detail of the lived experiences of individuals. Human experiences, behavior, and relationships are the fundamental elements social science researchers seek to understand (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) developed a practical guide to transcendental phenomenology to investigate human experiences. Phenomenology in qualitative research was designed to describe the participants' lived experiences to identify commonalities that emerge based on the lived experiences of individuals with a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenon is built upon something seen to form potential connotations, which will develop the core of the experience through consciousness

(Moustakas, 1994). Using the transcendental lens allows the phenomena to be viewed as they are seen by those who experience them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The transcendental phenomenological approach was a good fit for understanding the lived experiences of FGMCS as it allows for a description of the phenomenon from a small group of participants. Lessening the individual experiences with a phenomenon is the fundamental purpose of this research type (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants provided data from their own first-hand experiences as FGMCS. A transcendental phenomenological study was utilized to understand participant experiences in the context of the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology was mainly developed by Edmund Husserl (1965), a German mathematician whose philosophical writings inspired phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) suggested phenomena being viewed through a clear lens with no preconceived ideas as transcendental phenomenology. Through Husserl's (1965) transcendental phenomenology, the noema, noesis, and epoch ideas, which equate to the phenomenon, self-evidence, and awareness, will emerge from the data (K. B. Sheehan, 2014).

The decision to choose the transcendental phenomenological approach came from exploring the approach's advantages over other known strategies. S. Sheehan (2014) illustrated that when using transcendental phenomenology, the researcher sets aside any preconceived ideas about a given topic and develops a new way of approaching the issues related to the topic of study. Furthermore, Sheehan (2014) illustrated that transcendental phenomenology effectively ensures that the true meaning of a given phenomenon emerges by setting aside any old ideas about a given subject matter. The present study was necessary to consider first-generation minority college students' experiences and capture their struggles, problems, and successes as

they navigate everyday college activities. Adopting the transcendental phenomenological approach made it possible to view the issue with limited bias. Martirano (2016) illustrated the benefits of adopting the transcendental phenomenological approach. According to Martirano (2016), using the strategy helps to improve objectivity, similar to quantitative research methods often missing in qualitative research, as subjectivity and author bias are minimized by eliminating preconceived ideas about human experiences.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions emerged from the problem and purpose of this study. The phenomenological questions were created clearly and concretely, having social meaning and personal significance (Moustakas, 1994). The research for this study was developed on the following research questions.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences that motivate and contribute to first-generation-minority undergraduate college student success at a university in the southeastern United States?

This question grounds the study upon an open-ended, exploratory research question, which is then followed by the following sub-questions:

**Sub-Question 1:** What are the college social, learning, and student engagement experiences that contribute to first-generation minority college student success?

FGMCS work through social and academic challenges and should be supported by institutions that enroll them (Aruguete, 2017). Past research suggests that universities keep class sizes small, especially for minorities and FGMCS, to reduce challenges and support their development of social capital and networks in the college context (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). This

is not always a feasible model, especially at community colleges and public universities where over 60% of FGMCS enroll (Cahalan et al., 2019).

**Sub-Question 2:** What are the college context experiences that support social learning and self-efficacy among first-generation minority college students?

Hébert (2018) focused on a strong sense of self-efficacy that promotes human accomplishment and well-being based on the high achievement levels of first-generation minority college students. Hébert (2018) noted that regardless of complex backgrounds, a person with high efficacy views challenges as supposed to be mastered rather than threats to avoid. As a result, these people can recover from failure faster and are more likely to attribute failure to a lack of effort. Aruguete (2017) formed a qualitative study related to first-year students' academic self-efficacy that supported the importance of FGMCS' educational connectedness on campus. Thus, contributions to the academic success of FGMCS' observed learning experiences are motivated by a sense of belonging through engagement (Azmitia et al., 2018).

**Sub-Question 3:** What experiences with peers, faculty, and administration do first-generation minority college students attribute to the development of behavior patterns that support their academic success?

College student campus connectedness, social interactions, and social behavior patterns contribute to their academic outcomes (Aruguete, 2017). Among FGMCS, it is crucial to understand how they form social network relationships and develop a sense of belonging that supports their continued enrollment and degree completion (Azmitia et al., 2018).

### **Setting and Participants**

Information is provided on the research site, the participants, and the research plan to preface methods for collecting data. Decisions to determine the research setting play an essential



role in whether the research process will be successful. Qualitative research methods are used to understand complex social processes, capture essential aspects of a phenomenon from the perspective of study participants, and uncover beliefs, values, and motivations that underlie individual behaviors. Twelve participants were recruited from Anonymous University (AU, pseudonym) in the southern United States to participate in this qualitative research and share their lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Site**

Doody and Bailey (2016) asserted that for many researchers, the decisions made in determining the study settings are just as important as those made when crafting the research objectives and questions. The study was conducted at Anonymous University (AU). AU is a small private institution of higher education located in the southeastern United States with an undergraduate student enrollment of approximately 3,200. AU has been selected based on ethnic and family financial income levels.

The university has several bachelor's and graduate degree programs. Prospective participants were recruited from the university's undergraduate programs. This organization uses a typical chain of command leadership, which is led by the university president down through the provost, vice presidents for admissions, business office, student life, deans of the school, and department chairs.

The South has historically been a location where minorities such as African Americans have faced blatant discrimination and racial abuse (Garriott et al., 2015). The present study was designed to understand the experiences of first-generation minority college students in pursuing college degrees in the context of the South. The selected location offers an opportunity to consider whether the situation has evolved enough to accommodate the needs of FGMCS from

minority communities. Access to a suitable research participant demographic is a factor in determining a research site (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Anonymous University enrolls FGMCS from diverse backgrounds; this makes it suitable for this study.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were recruited using a purposeful criterion sampling technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were required to meet specific criteria to participate in this study, specifically having experience with the phenomenon investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This allowed the researcher to capture the lived experiences of FGMCS that contribute to their success. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, be a first-generation minority college student, and be enrolled in the undergraduate program at the site selected for this research. Tate et al. (2015) noted that parents of FGMCS did not have a bachelor's degree, which forms the basis for defining this student type. Age and demographic information were self-reported, including identification as a FGMCS. Each of the 12 participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card upon completing the study as a token of appreciation for their time and participation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Questions on the sample size for qualitative research often raise some concern among researchers. Dworkin (2012) illustrated that questions on the suitability of a given sample size are concerns in qualitative research strategies due to the effectiveness and purpose of qualitative research. According to Moustakas (1994), studies using qualitative research strategies often adopt small sample sizes, as qualitative research involves developing an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. Therefore, many do not see selecting a larger sample size as a practical approach for a deep investigation of phenomena. In qualitative research, time constraints also make it necessary to select a small sample size to effectively ensure available time to analyze

information from the few participants. Selecting a more significant sample limits the ability to allocate adequate time to the process.

Despite the consensus of a smaller sample size for carrying out qualitative research, there are no agreements on optimal numbers. Dworkin (2012) illustrated that research on the issue has established that it is ideal for the sample size to be between five and 50 participants. The concept of saturation was also influential in deciding the sample size for the research. *Saturation* is reached when recruiting more participants does not provide additional value to the research as new insight can no longer be obtained from the information offered (Dworkin, 2012). The decision to choose 12 participants was made after exploring the scope of the research question, the nature of the topic, and the quality of the research data obtained. After analyzing factors, it was apparent that 12 participants would meet the objectives of the research.

Student ethnic diversity at AU consisted of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and other minority ethnic groups. The gender of students was most likely around 55% female and 45% male. The site is comprised of undergraduate students who come from the following family income level that determines federal financial assistance: under \$30,000 (30%), \$30,000 to \$48,000 (15%), \$48,001 to \$75,000 (10%), \$75,001 to \$110,000 (15%), and \$110,000 (10%). Demographic information was gathered from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) public reports for the institution.

### **Recruitment Plan**

I sought approval from the IRB to perform the study while simultaneously obtaining permission from the research site in the form of a written document. Once I had both IRB permission and site permission, I contacted the department chair of the institution to request that information about the study be shared with prospective participants. Next, a flier was shared with

the department chair of the institution that provides information to undergraduate students about the study. Participants self-identified as being FGMCS over the age of 18 and enrolled in the undergraduate programs at Anonymous University. Compensation in the form of an Amazon gift card was provided to all 12 participants upon completion of the study as a thank-you for their invested time (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Researcher's Positionality**

The objective of this transcendental phenomenological study was to establish the lived experiences and motivating factors that contribute to the academic success of first-generation minority undergraduate college students (FGMCS) at a university in the southeastern United States. According to Lodico et al. (2010), social constructivism suggests that individuals develop and share unique conceptual frameworks based on their experiences, shaping how they perceive situations. In phenomenological research, researchers strive to understand phenomena through participants' lived experiences. By exploring the viewpoints of FGMCS, the study sought to capture their attitudes and insights into the factors influencing their academic success. The social constructivist framework was well-suited for studying the experiences of FGMCS. The framework highlights the interconnection between learning, development, and students' meaningful experiences, as reported by Smith and Shaw (2019). As explained by Wilson and Conyers (2016), academic success and social integration align with social constructivism as students develop their understanding and navigate the college environment based on their unique backgrounds and lived realities.

### **Interpretive Framework**

Effective teaching encompasses creating opportunities for students to engage with the classroom environment actively and authentically. The interpretative framework of social

constructivism served as the contextual foundation for this study. Social constructivism posits that individuals strive to make meaningful sense of the world they inhabit and operate within, holding complex and diverse perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretative framework of social constructivism suggests that researchers should actively engage with participants to understand their unique viewpoints (Lodico et al., 2010).

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

An individual's philosophical stance can influence their theoretical perspective (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Phenomenology encompasses four philosophical perspectives: a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy, a philosophy without presuppositions, the intentionality of one's consciousness, and the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this qualitative study involving FGMCS, the philosophical assumptions guided the research goals and outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ideally, after the participants shared their varied experiences navigating the college environment, they reflected, meditated, and modified their theoretical positions as needed.

A Christian worldview extends beyond philosophical, social, political, cultural, or economic standpoints. The Christian view advocates using the Holy Bible as a blueprint for governance, laws, and values. Tackett (2006) argued that those who truly embrace God's worldview can make truthful, unbiased decisions. The study's three philosophical assumptions were ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

The ontological assumption relates to how individuals view reality; in phenomenological research, the researcher aims to capture the lenses through which participants express their diverse viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Ontological assumptions provide

a platform for qualitative research participants to share their opinions from varied perspectives. In the context of this transcendental phenomenological study, the ontological assumptions allowed FGMCS to share their unique realities and perspectives. Qualitative researchers can capture participants' perspectives, ideals, or realities using varied instruments such as interviews, observations, journaling, focus groups, photographs, or videos. The perspectives and attitudes shared by FGMCS participants provided a unique view into their perceived realities and experiences related to academic success (Lodico et al., 2010).

### *Epistemological Assumption*

The epistemological assumption deals with the relationship between the researcher and the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epistemology explores what an individual can know, as noted by Smith and Shaw (2019). The biblical verse from Proverbs 4:7 KJV emphasizes the importance of seeking wisdom and understanding: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom: And with all thy getting get understanding" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Proverbs 4:7). Within this transcendental phenomenological study, the epistemological assumption guided the exploration of FGMCS participants' lived realities and their pursuit of wisdom and understanding in the higher education context. The study aimed to capture and explore the perspectives and experiences of FGMCS, potentially revealing barriers or factors influencing their academic performance and success.

According to Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020), thinking guides epistemologists' basis for knowledge and thought processes. Metacognition, the act of reflecting on one's thinking to enhance performance (Wilson & Conyers, 2016), was engaged by the FGMCS participants as they reflected on their college experiences. Consequently, the data collected in this study could provide insights into how FGMCS can improve their academic outcomes and success in the

higher education environment by gaining wisdom and understanding from their lived experiences.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

The axiological assumption relates to the qualitative researcher's position and values regarding the study's context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In phenomenological research, researchers aim to capture their positionality and values in relation to the lived experiences of the participants. In the context of this transcendental phenomenological study aimed at describing the lived experiences that motivate and contribute to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success (FGMCSS) at a university in the southeastern United States, the axiological assumption was important. The axiological assumption highlights the importance of addressing what is valued in research processes to generate in-depth knowledge (Smith & Shaw, 2019).

In the current research study, the researcher placed value on understanding the unique challenges, motivations, and experiences that contribute to the success of FGMCS, as this population often faces significant barriers in higher education. To reduce potential biases originating from the researcher's values and experiences, the researcher employed bracketing. In this technique, phenomenological researchers set aside their preconceptions and experiences to ensure ethical integrity and to capture the authentic perspectives of participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Researcher's Role**

To complete a qualitative study, Moustakas (1994) suggested that the researcher should explain their role as a human instrument. As the human instrument, I collected and analyzed the data for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While I had no influence, authority, or relationship

with the participants, I had a great deal in common with them. Being a first-generation minority college student, I have first-hand experience with the challenges that this type of student faces. Checkoway (2018) asserted that first-generation students are forced to contend with issues caused by their family situation, problems with the university environment, societal issues such as racism, and financial difficulties.

The pressure to succeed is also significant, and universities are encouraged to develop teaching, learning, and support capacity to help students work through these issues effectively. Unfortunately, facing such challenges is not an asset for this research. Although understanding an issue can be seen as an advantage in other cases, this presents a problem that needs to be overcome. The issue is that having first-hand knowledge and experience as a first-generation college student may present a challenge of bias and subjectivity.

Even though qualitative research focuses on understanding the subjective experiences of individuals, there is still a need to reduce research bias and subjectivity. Mohajan (2018) asserted that eliminating the researcher's preconceived ideas is an excellent place to begin. The decision to use a transcendental phenomenological approach for this research project was informed by the desire to reduce bias and subjectivity in the research process (Mohajan, 2018). This allows me to focus on participant descriptions of their experiences, not mine. Furthermore, I refrained from using my experiences as a first-generation college student to influence the participants. Nonetheless, the research was necessary to help develop an understanding of the challenges that FGMCS faced.

Steps were taken to minimize bias by identifying instances when such an issue occurred in my own experiences and acknowledging the impact this could have on the research. Similarly, I conducted extensive reading to ensure that stereotypes and opinions did not influence the



research. However, Pannucci and Wilkins (2010) show that bias could occur at any point during the research process. For example, bias could occur before the research, during the formulation of the research questions, during the data collection, and after the research is done when the researcher is engaged in reporting the study's findings.

I had no relationship with the participants of this study. As the study focused on undergraduate FGMCS enrolled in a degree program, no data was collected from the faculty or staff of the institution from which participants were recruited. I bracketed my own experiences as a first-generation minority college student who majored in music education to present participant experiences rather than my own (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Procedures**

The procedures section is organized to demonstrate the steps that were taken to conduct the study (Moustakas, 1994). Procedures included attaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, recruiting participants for the study, collecting, and analyzing data, and digital recording procedures. Before data collection, approval was sought from Liberty University's IRB (see Appendix A).

#### **Securing IRB Approval**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought at Liberty University once the dissertation proposal was finalized and defended. Steps were taken to secure this approval, including completing the IRB application for Liberty University after completing the proposal defense. The completed IRB application was reviewed by this researcher's assigned dissertation chair, who then certified the application. Any requested revisions from the IRB were handled immediately to ensure the timely completion of this process.

## **Gathering Data**

Data were gathered using interviews, focus groups, and personal journals (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Following IRB and site approval, participants were provided consent forms explaining the details of the study along with procedures, risks, confidentiality, volunteer nature of the study, how to withdraw from the study, and the researcher's contact information (see Appendix F). Protocols were developed for the interview and focus group data collection (see Appendix D & E). Interview questions were peer-reviewed and piloted with individuals who fit the criteria of the study but did not participate in the study (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). Piloting the interview questions ensured that the questions were understandable and clear so that appropriate data was gathered (Y. Kim, 2010).

## **Data Collection Plan**

Three different methods were employed to collect data for this study. These qualitative data collection methods include individual interviews with each participant, a focus group, and personal journaling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Prior to data collection, a consent form was provided to each participant for review and signature consenting to participate in this research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Individual Interviews**

Each participant was asked to participate in an individual, in-depth interview to allow for a thorough exploration and description of the phenomenon. J.W. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted the need for qualitative interviews to consist of open-ended questions to record participants' thoughts on the phenomenon being investigated. This allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences with the phenomena being investigated. A predetermined sequence of questions using the exact wording will help keep bias to a minimum (Gall et al., 2006).

However, probing questions were asked where appropriate. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and interview procedures and informed that they may end the interview at any point in the process (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each of these interviews was conducted in a face-to-face setting in a neutral location selected by each participant and was digitally recorded. This allowed for later transcription for data analysis (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Alternatively, if the candidate preferred a virtual interview, that too was arranged via Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

The interview setting allowed the participant to feel relaxed and comfortable to encourage a depth of response to the prescribed questions (Moustakas, 1994). A brief social conversation took place before each interview, discussing the purpose of the study to provide a sense of awareness to each participant (Moustakas, 1994). This helped build rapport between each participant and me. The following interview questions have been developed and utilized for participant data collection (see Appendix E):

1. Please describe who you are, including where you are from, your age, ethnicity, and your first-generation college student status.
2. Please tell me about your current progress toward degree completion and if you live on campus or commute.
3. Describe your transition from high school to college, including emotions and level of preparedness for the academic responsibilities of college-level coursework.
4. Please share some of your successes in college as a first-generation student.
5. Please describe some of your challenges in college as a first-generation student.
6. What is it about the college environment that motivates you to continue with your degree goals?

7. How would you describe your college social activities outside of the classroom?
8. How would you describe how your involvement in student activities beyond course requirements influences your academic performance?
9. How would you describe your learning experiences in college as a first-generation student?
10. Please describe experiences in college that have supported your self-confidence as a student?
11. Please tell me about experiences that have supported your social growth on campus among peers and among faculty.
12. Describe the relationships you have developed on campus that have supported your academic standing.
13. Describe your communication with college faculty, staff, and administrators during your time as a college student.
14. Describe any support systems formed based on your interactions with college faculty, staff, and students that have contributed to your academic standing.
15. Describe why you keep working toward the completion of your degree.
16. Discuss anything about your experience to help future first-generation minority college students in degree programs.
17. Would you like to add anything else about this topic that you have not mentioned?

The knowledge questions (Patton, 2015) are in the form of questions one to three. They are based upon the sequential arrangement of the subsequent questions to ascertain the overall broader view of the students regarding their education and demonstrate that they meet the criteria for the study (Patton, 2015). These questions are somewhat generalized, and their primary aim

was to build rapport between the researcher and the participants (Patton, 2015). Fowler (1981) has propounded that developing complex systems of ideas and beliefs is an undemanding task. The capability to knowingly ascertain one's belief and make conscious choices about including a specific set of working ideas comes after passing through this stage. These questions prepared participants to answer deeper questions about their social and learning experiences. Sire et al. (2015) have also stressed that a person can knowingly or naively uphold his views and ideas. The questions were designed to motivate the participants to speak about their awareness of their experiences in an academic setting are important. Questions four through 12 were designed for these purposes.

Comparing one's ideas in the context of communication and support systems in the educational environment is the focus of questions 13 and 14. Question 15 explores their reasoning for academic persistence, and question 16 is forward-thinking, allowing the participant to see themselves in the context of an experienced college student who has advice to provide less experienced peers. It is hoped that the participants were confident at that stage (Patton, 2015). Many reputed researchers assert that personal struggle is essential to worldview development (Bryant, 2011; Fowler, 1981; Mayhew et al., 2010).

### **Focus Groups**

Field notes on participants' behavior and activities at the research site are essential to qualitative observation (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Themes may emerge based on the participants' interaction with other participants or the researcher in a focus group setting. Notes can be taken about the atmosphere of the group, motivation to be an active participant, and engagement with others. Moreover, having participants interact with one another about the

phenomenon under investigation can provide additional insight into the subject matter (J. Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A focus group in qualitative research is a means to facilitate a discussion among a select group of individuals for the researcher to obtain perceptions and clarity on a defined area of interest among the participants (Gall et al., 2006). All participants were invited to participate in the focus group discussion with the goal of having at least five participants engage in the focus group discussion (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The focus group was held in a common area of the research site that provides privacy and space. As an alternative for participants who may not feel comfortable meeting face-to-face, I hosted a virtual focus group using the Zoom application. The focus group meeting was digitally recorded on my laptop and later transcribed. The meeting was constructed of an introduction, group questions, and a conclusion, allowing 10 minutes for the introduction, 10 minutes for each of the questions, and 10 minutes for the conclusion for a total of 30 minutes to complete the focus group (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The focus group questions were developed to allow participants to share their ideas and perceptions in a comfortable setting for data collection (see Appendix E). It also confirmed emerging themes from initial data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In keeping with the research questions and the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), the following statements and questions guided the discussion:

1. Can you please review the emerging themes from the initial data analysis that has taken place? Are the themes presented representative of your experiences as a first-generation minority college student?
2. How do these categories explain your experiences as a first-generation college student?

3. In light of these themes, is there anything missing that captures your experiences?
4. Would you consider any of these more important than others? Is there an order that you would present these in to reflect most important to least important?
5. Is there anything missing that sheds light on your experiences as FGMCS?

These questions were developed to confirm or refute emerging themes from the initial analysis and explore hierarchies of importance among the participants' experiences.

### **Personal Journal**

Each participant was asked to keep a personal journal throughout the study, noting three to five events experienced in the college context, each involving a significant challenge or success that affected their determination to succeed in their degree program (see Appendix E). Personal journals are identified as qualitative documents that directly connect to each participant and a valid data source (J. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The rationale for collecting personal journals allows each participant to discuss their experiences as FGMCS through a different medium, aside from the interview and focus group. A personal journal offers an opportunity to gather more data from each participant and provides a reflective, semi-structured opportunity to write about the subject being investigated (Vagle, 2014).

I encouraged each participant to write a journal, sending them a digital document with a password and instructions as a prompt. This allowed me to capture information that may have been forgotten or did not come to mind during the interview or focus group. I used this information to clarify what had been provided earlier during the interviews and as a tool for developing new themes that had not been apparent earlier and to triangulate the data. The journals provided an informal technique where the participants were not restricted to specific responses to questions or interviews. Any ideas that were related to the research could be further

analyzed. The prompt for the journal was: Please write about three to five events experienced in college, each involving a significant challenge or success that affected your determination to succeed in the degree program.

### **Data Analysis**

The transcendental phenomenological analysis is based on four main stages, including the following crucial components of the study: epoché discussing the case in detail, phenomenological reduction imperative for the analysis, imaginative variation that is also crucial for support, and meaning synthesizing (Moustakas, 1994). After the initial identification of the phenomenon, bracketed experiences were compared to several others who have lived the phenomenon, followed by analyzing the data and searching for factual statements that can produce themes, which form textural and structural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The goal in identifying and highlighting textural and structural descriptions was to understand the lived experiences of FGMCS in higher education from the participant's perspective and in their own words (Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, words, descriptions, and phrases that elucidate motivating interactions, activities, and relationships that contribute to FGMCS' success in college. These depictions may lead first-generation minority students to seek higher education in heterogeneous educational institutions with high self-esteem and confidence.

### **Epoché**

One method I employed to analyze the data collected is epoché; this is a setting aside of my personal history and preconceived ideas through self-reflection. It is also known as a suspension of judgment (Moustakas, 1994). Multiple reviews of the data were conducted and met with a renewed perspective, focused on what the data is expressing, limiting personal bias as much as possible (Adu, 2019; Husserl, 1965). Past experiences and biases were documented in



the epoché through bracketing (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was a conscientious effort to limit my opinions and review the data through the lens of the participants themselves.

### **Phenomenological Reduction**

Data reduction was performed to extract the most vital points made by the participants to form textual descriptions that produced themes (Adu, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). The strong points were selected considering the purpose and research questions of the study (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similar participant experiences were grouped based on the extracted significant statements (Adu, 2019). Finally, a primary statement was selected from each group to develop themes categorized to create textual descriptions. The textural descriptions of the study sought to describe the individual experience of FGMCS who established secure attachment bonds during their academic programs of study and successfully graduated. The methodology of transcendental phenomenology involves the reduction and analysis of specific statements to filter out the clusters of meaning into overarching themes (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994) that break down the broad themes into smaller, easy-to-understand ideas (Adu, 2019; J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Interview transcripts had rich content to draw ideas, statements, and context. However, the consistent ideas and information across the data are far more effective in identifying themes. The analysis process involved breaking down the information obtained from the participants and identifying common themes across the information offered. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) indicate that breaking the available information into smaller components before analysis was fundamental to the research process. It helped provide a clear picture of what to discard and use and the information to emphasize. The data reduction process was accompanied by data coding and the identification of themes throughout the research process.

While the textural description of phenomenology focuses on the “what” of the phenomenon, the structural description focuses on the background and the “how” of the phenomenon under study (J. Creswell, 2013; J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). Structural descriptions focus on the subtleties of the experience (Saldana, 2016). The structural description of the research participants as a group helped readers understand how the participants collectively experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The structural description of the proposed study searched for the details of how first-generation minority students were able to form secure attachment bonds during their college years and how these experiences helped them to complete their programs of study successfully.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is an essential component of all research. The trustworthiness of the research was addressed using participant interviews, focus groups, and participant journaling (Patton, 2015). This process ensured the validity and transferability of research findings (J. Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Patton (2015) explained that “combinations of interviewing, observation, and document analysis are expected in most fieldwork” (p. 661). In memoing during interviews, the researcher can compare observations with interviews (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Asking for additional information through writing prompts and comparing it against interviews, document analysis, and qualitative questionnaires add to the study’s trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

Polit and Beck (2017) defined *credibility* as confidence in the truth of the study, and therefore, the findings are the most crucial criterion. This study utilized the triangulation of data to establish credibility. Data collected through interviews, document analysis, and focus group

discussions will be triangulated for validation. According to J.W. Creswell and Poth (2018), this technique involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants to judge the accuracy and credibility of the account. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. These procedures would increase reliability because feedback would come from participants and ensure that their input was interpreted correctly. Credibility is also achieved through lengthy engagement with the participants themselves and interactions that gain their trust.

### **Transferability**

The researcher allows readers to decide on transferability because the writer describes the participants or setting under a student (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers then study transferability with a rich, detailed description of the context, location, and people studied and transparency about analysis and trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016). According to J.W. Creswell and Poth (2018), to ensure that the study is transferrable to other contexts, thick descriptions are necessary, meaning that the researcher provides details when describing a case or writing a theme. To create transferability, protocols are documented, and descriptions of the steps taken at each phase of the data collection and analysis were included in the revised version of Chapter Three once data is collected. Furthermore, I bracketed my experiences to minimize bias by setting aside the researcher's opinion. Hence, the researcher must be mindful that the information shared was based on the participant's experiences without entertaining the personal researcher's experiences.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability of the data over time and the conditions of the study (Polit & Beck, 2017). Both dependability and confirmability are established by auditing the

research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I detailed the process of data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of data (Saldana, 2016).

Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were conducted to increase the reliability of data and theme development. Finally, the researcher seeks an external check by “someone familiar with the research of the phenomenon explored” (J.W. Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.129). For this validation strategy, the researcher sought feedback from the dissertation chair and committee. The researcher also sought someone with extensive knowledge and experience in FGMCS to provide input on the data collected from participants who have been through the same phenomenon. The input was based on the results of data collected after cross-referencing and the interpretation of the textural and structural descriptions of the experiences shared by the participants.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is where the degree of findings is consistent and can be repeated (Connelly, 2016). In this process, the researcher solicits participants’ views on the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the researcher achieved confirmability through an audit trail. An audit trail of all research processes and procedures was provided. This included a detailed description of the research methods used, rationale for selection, description of population and sample characteristics, and data collection procedures. In addition, data analysis steps and NVivo software were provided. Such detailed information is critical in assessing the confirmability of the study.

The second technique was data triangulation. Data triangulation refers to the process of combining data from different sources to assess the convergence and divergent ideas (Creswell

& Poth, 2018). In this study, the researcher used different multiple data sources to triangulate data, including individual interviews, focus groups, journal prompts, and personal journal.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Any ethical considerations or implications of the research should be discussed along with all permissions required for the research. In this section, information related to permissions, and other participant protections is discussed.

#### ***Permissions***

Ethical considerations were evaluated and addressed prior to conducting the study (Patton, 2015). According to J. Creswell (2013), before beginning the data collection process, I submitted and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). The ethical standards for the conduct of the research performed were examined and approved before the research was conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consent was sought from participants.

#### ***Other Participant Protections***

I used pseudonyms for all participants, and the participants' identities were kept confidential (J. Creswell, 2013). The researcher explained to every potential participant, and written consent forms were obtained from all concerned parties (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). Research participants were informed and had input into the results of the study (Patton, 2015). Through participation in the study, the research participants had their personal experiences validated (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, to ensure high ethical standards, all participant interview transcripts and other research data were kept in a securely locked location or password-protected in the case of electronic files (J. Creswell, 2013; J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). To show appreciation and gratitude for their willingness to participate in this research study, the participants received a gift card.

## Summary

Transcendental phenomenology is a philosophical way to deal with qualitative research methodology to comprehend the human experience grounded upon the idea that the researcher will set aside personal assumptions (epoch) to perceive phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). This setting permitted the genuine importance of phenomena to emerge naturally through participants' experiences. The primary approach to the methodology is founded on answering the research questions and understanding the experiences of FGMCS. As noted in this study, any ethical considerations or implications of the research were discussed. This study focused on the social growth developed among FGMCS linked to their cognitive learning environment.

Using purposeful sampling, participants were recruited from Anonymous University (AU, pseudonym). These were at least 18 years of age and come from diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. All must be first-generation students. The data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. Document analysis was applied to a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, legal documents, records, meeting minutes, letters, and diaries. In addition, the researcher observed and took notes of participant behavior and perceived attitudes and reviewed journal entries. Each participant was asked to keep personal journals. Participants' journals comprised three to five events or experiences and at least one paragraph each. The participants recorded significant challenges and successes that affected their levels of self-efficacy throughout the study.

The methodology used led to an understanding of the experience of the targeted group. Moreover, the approach makes it possible to collect data that is seen as more natural than artificial by exploring the individual experiences of the target group in the context of their own experiences. According to Cordes et al. (2017), transcendental phenomenology adds to the

improvement of new hypotheses; therefore, it is highly expected that the findings of this study could result in the development of new theories in this field of study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences that motivated and contributed to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success (FGMCSS) at a university in the southeastern United States. First-generation minority college students (FGMCS) have ongoing challenges in attaining a bachelor's degree, as shown by lower graduation rates and longer time to complete their studies compared to their second and third-generation counterparts who also pursue higher education (Pratt et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Chapter Four presents the data that provided insight into the experiences of first-generation minority undergraduate college students in an academic environment, specifically about their academic achievements. This inquiry was driven by the following research questions.:

Central RQ: What are the experiences that motivate and contribute to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success at a university in the southeastern United States?

Sub-RQ 1: What are the college social, learning, and student engagement experiences that contribute to first-generation minority college student success?

Sub-RQ 2: What are the college context experiences that support social learning and self-efficacy among first-generation minority undergraduate students?

Sub-RQ 3: What experiences with peers, faculty, and administration do first-generation minority college students attribute to the development of behavior patterns that support their academic success?



This chapter includes a description of the participants. An overall summary of the participants' demographics is provided, followed by individual participant profiles. Next, the results of the data analysis process are presented first by the theme, then by research question. This chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings.

### **Participants**

The study's sample included 12 first-generation minority college students currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at Anonymous University in the southeastern part of the United States. Of the 12 individuals, 10 described themselves as African American, one as Chinese, and one as Hispanic. Fifty percent of the participants are male, while the remaining 50% are female. There were nine participants who were born in the United States and three participants who were born outside of the United States. The age range of the participants is from 18 to 61, with an average age of 37.08 years. The demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. The profile of each participant is shown in the following sub-sections. Each participant was questioned separately. In addition, Gail, Renita, Willie, Barbara, Cynthia, and Nicole took part in the focus group discussion. Additionally, all participants besides Alex submitted prompted journal entries as a third data source.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Ethnicity	Gender	Birth Place	Age
Mia	Chinese	F	Panama	30
Alex	African American	M	United States	24
Cynthia	Hispanic	F	United States	26
Rico	African American	M	Ghana	25
Kobe	African American	M	Kenya	21
Lebron	African American	M	United States	18
Willie	African American	M	United States	48
Barbara	African American	F	United States	42
Gail	African American	F	United States	52
Nicole	African American	F	United States	48
Renita	African American	F	United States	50

**Mia**

Mia is of Chinese descent. She is a native of Panama. Initially, she had a desire to pursue her studies in Toronto. However, she could not pass the admission test due to a language barrier. She first matriculated at a college in Panama but then relocated to a campus in the United States. During her time at the U.S. campus, Mia admitted feeling first daunted by the campus's vast size and the many activities available. Nevertheless, she relocated to the United States with a cohort of companions, and her educational experience was enhanced due to the presence of her pals. In addition, her parents provided her with financial assistance.

**Alex**

Alex, a male individual of African American descent, was raised in a family headed by his single mother after his parents' divorce. Following his parents' divorce, his family relocated to another state, resulting in a loss of communication with his counselor. Due to his lack of higher education, his mother could not provide him with guidance on navigating college and financing his expenditures. Alex's father expressed doubt to his mother over his ability to get a college degree due to their current financial circumstances. On the contrary, Alex used his

father's statements as a source of inspiration for him to excel academically and enhance his mother's quality of life.

### **Cynthia**

Cynthia is of Hispanic descent. She was born in California. She was the third of six siblings brought up in a family headed by a single mother. She financially sustained herself and her family while working towards obtaining a college degree. Her family exhibited a lack of support and expressed the opinion that pursuing a college education was a futile expenditure. She was determined to refute their beliefs and demonstrate that achieving a college degree would lead to an improved quality of life for both herself and her mother.

### **Rico**

Rico is a Ghanaian-born African American man who studied political science. With two brothers and a sister, Rico grew up in a home with a single mother. While he was in high school, his father passed away. Rico was initially taken aback by the vastness of the campus and the variety of students and selected the school due to its proximity to their place of employment. He felt driven to complete college to give his family a better life.

### **Kobe**

Kobe was born in Kenya, but his family relocated to the United States when he was six years old. Kobe is the oldest among his siblings, consisting of two boys and four girls. Upon their arrival in the United States, Kobe's parents had challenges securing employment, while he faced obstacles in gaining admission to high school due to financial limitations. Ultimately, Kobe obtained a scholarship. During his time in college, Kobe diligently labored to sustain himself and assist his family. He encountered racial discrimination and endured feelings of

tension and depression. He maintained the conviction that acquiring a college degree would result in an improved and more effortless existence.

### **Lebron**

Lebron's family had financial hardships after his father's death in his last year of high school. Lebron's employment prospects were hindered by his insufficient school credentials, causing him to lose out on many career possibilities. This failure served as a catalyst for him to enroll in college and get a degree. Lebron had a strong sense of self-assurance and actively engaged in classroom activities. He formed friendships and had a specific study companion whom he characterized as intelligent and happened to be of African descent. Lebron saw instances of racial discrimination throughout his time in college. He had feelings of worry and anxiety but managed to handle them with the assistance of a psychologist and an instructor of African descent.

### **Willie**

Willie intermittently sought further education. Having been raised in New York, he was immersed in an environment where his contemporaries lacked a genuine interest in pursuing higher education, and the people around him did not possess college qualifications. His perception of college changed when he relocated from New York to Virginia and saw his friends' parents, who were employed in professional occupations, advocating for higher education. His first endeavor at college was unsuccessful due to his perception of being unable to assimilate. Furthermore, he had to juggle his employment with his academic pursuits. Feeling ashamed, he decided not to ask his parents for assistance and instead pursued a job. Upon becoming a father and seeing his coworkers' academic achievements, he concluded that he must get a college

degree. He successfully completed the task with self-control and determination. He had a sense of validation upon achieving success.

### **Barbara**

Barbara is the oldest sibling among three children in a home headed by a single mother. She financed her schooling while providing financial assistance to her family. Her motivation to get a college degree stemmed from her aspiration to become either a teacher or a lawyer. In addition, her mother encouraged her to pursue further education. Nevertheless, Barbara discontinued her undergraduate education upon joining the military. Subsequently, she embarked on a journey to get a degree in business to serve as a role model for her kid.

### **Gail**

Gail is a married mother of three children. She has several work experiences, including being a nurse, being in the army, and being a master cosmetologist. She shared some challenges in pursuing college, such as navigating the system, allocating budgets, and socializing with younger classmates. However, being the first in her family to pursue a college degree, Gail persevered and felt a sense of pride in herself. Gail is the eldest among her siblings, and her parents encouraged her to go to college. Her time in the military helped build her resilience.

### **Reggie**

Reggie has a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and a master's degree in operational art. Reggie's intention to attend college was further reinforced when he developed a friendship with a college student during his part-time employment in the food sector. His acquaintance assisted him in navigating the system. Reggie disclosed that he had great academic performance throughout high school, but, his counselor dissuaded him from pursuing further education due to the anticipated financial burden. His acquaintance informed him that he could

finance his college education by becoming a student who works. During his undergraduate years, his social group was comprised solely of students with whom he collaborated on academic tasks. Reggie, a graduate of a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), believed that his education equipped him with the skills to assume leadership roles and drive positive transformations. He was provided with support and motivation by an instructor.

### **Nicole**

Nicole described herself as a non-traditional student and reasoned that she had irregular schedules at school because of being a mother. She pursued college to provide a better life for herself and her family. Additionally, she did not want to experience the hardships of working multiple low-paying jobs that her parents experienced. She also wanted to set a good example for her younger siblings and her child.

### **Renita**

Renita's family encouraged her to get a college degree to improve her quality of life beyond what her parents experienced. She received a scholarship and worked while studying. She adhered rigorously to high academic standards to preserve her scholarship. Renita's perception of her world expanded upon starting college as she discovered previously unknown options. She enthusiastically engaged in several school activities, with a special focus on the Black Student Union. Additionally, she cultivated connections with her professors until she identified two mentors.

## **Results**

This section begins by discussing the theme results data collected from interviews, focus, and personal journals from the 12 participants. When discussing the qualitative findings, information related to the frequency of the themes and those themes that align with the research questions are

revealed. Appendix D shows information on listing codes, subthemes, and themes. Table 2 presents the frequency of the dominant themes.

**Table 2**

*Participants and Frequency of Dominant Themes*

Theme	Frequency
Theme 1: Cultural Differences	77
Theme 2: Activities Engagements	29
Theme 3: Motivated to Persist	80
Theme 4: Overcome Challenges	31
Theme 5: Lack of Guidance Support	22
Theme 6: Lack of Emotional Support	18

The primary theme of this research was the challenges faced by first-generation minority college students in adapting to college life. They struggled to acclimate to a new culture and activities but were driven to persist in their pursuit of a degree. Despite occasional lack of direction and emotional support, they maintained their belief in overcoming obstacles in college.

**Individual Interviews Results**

The themes arising from participant interviews are based on their responses to the interview questions. Data from individual interviews were coded and categorized into themes to aid interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants engaged in in-depth individual interviews to thoroughly explore the phenomenon. J.W. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize the need for qualitative interviews to comprise open-ended questions to capture participants' thoughts on the investigated phenomena, allowing them to share their experiences freely. A set

sequence of questions with precise wording was used to minimize bias (Gall et al., 2006), and probing questions were asked when necessary. The participants were briefed on the study's purpose and interview procedures and assured of their ability to end the interview at any stage (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All interviews took place face-to-face in neutral locations chosen by the participants and were digitally recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Virtual interviews through Zoom or Microsoft Teams were also arranged if preferred by the participants. The interview environment sought to promote relaxation and comfort to encourage detailed responses to the questions (Moustakas, 1994). A brief social conversation before each interview was held to discuss the study's purpose and raise awareness among participants (Moustakas, 1994), fostering rapport between the participants and the interviewer. The interview questions developed for participant data collection can be found in Appendix E. The focus will be on the experiences of first-generation minority college students and the factors contributing to their success at a university in the southeastern United States. The analysis of the interview themes is presented in Table 3.



**Table 3***Theme Analysis for Interview*

Interview Questions	Themes
Interview Question 1: What college social, learning, and student engagement experiences contribute to first-generation minority college student success?	Social and Academic Challenges
Interview Question 2: What are the college context experiences that support social learning and self-efficacy among first-generation minority college students?	Self-Efficacy, Cognitive Learning
Interview Question 3: What experiences with peers, faculty, and administration do first-generation minority college students attribute to the development of behavior patterns that support their academic success?	Social Interactions

The structured interview questions (Patton, 2015) were designed to elicit comprehensive insights into students' educational backgrounds, ensuring alignment with the study's criteria (Patton, 2015). These general questions primarily serve to establish rapport between the researcher and the participants (Patton, 2015). According to Fowler (1981), the development of intricate systems of ideas and beliefs entails a non-trivial process. Conscious comprehension of one's beliefs and deliberate choices in integrating a specific set of working ideas occur after passing through distinct stages. These questions serve as a precursor to more in-depth inquiries about the participants' social and learning experiences. Additionally, Sire et al. (2015) emphasize the conscious or unconscious nature of upholding personal views and ideas. The interview questions are structured to prompt participants to deliberate on the significance of their awareness of experiences within an academic context. Questions four through 12 were intentionally crafted for these specific purposes.

## Focus Group Results

The data obtained from the focus group participants was encoded and organized in the same manner as used for the individual interviews. Field notes on the behavior and activities of the participants at the research site are vital for qualitative observation (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Themes emerge based on the participants' interactions with each other or with the researcher in a focus group setting. Observations can be made about the atmosphere of the group, the participants' motivation to be actively involved, and their engagement with others. Furthermore, having participants interact with one another about the phenomenon under investigation can provide additional insight into the subject matter (J. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The focus group questions were designed to encourage participants to share their ideas and perceptions in a comfortable setting for data collection (see Appendix E). This also served as a way to confirm emerging themes from the initial data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Refer to Table 4 for a detailed breakdown of the focus group themes.

**Table 4**

*Theme Analysis Focus Group*

Focus Group Observations	Themes
Focus Group Observation 1: Motivated by Oneself	Intrinsic motivation, Prove black men can achieve
Focus Group Observation 2: Motivated by others	A role model for their kids Disprove other negative opinions
Focus Group Observation 3: Interaction with different people	Build a network of professionals Exposure to diverse population, Build Social skills
Focus Group Question 4: Exposure to different culture	Encountered racism and prejudice Foreign born student to overcome language barriers

All participants were encouraged to take part in the focus group discussion, with a goal of a minimum of five participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The focus group was held in a designated private area at the research site. Additionally, a virtual focus group was conducted using Zoom to accommodate participants who were uncomfortable with in-person meetings. The digital recording of the meeting was later transcribed. The structure of the meeting included an introduction, group questions, and a conclusion, with 10 minutes allotted for each segment, totaling 30 minutes for the entire focus group (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The focus group questions were thoughtfully designed to create a comfortable setting for participants to share their ideas and perceptions for data collection (see Appendix E).

### **Journal Results**

Table 5 presents a thematic analysis of the participants' journals, emphasizing their responses to journal questions. The data obtained from the participant's journals was coded and organized. Participants were directed to maintain a personal journal throughout the study, documenting three to five events experienced in the college context, each involving a significant challenge or success that affected their determination to succeed in their degree program (see Appendix E). Personal journals are qualitative documents directly linked to each participant and valid data sources (J. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Collecting personal journals allows each participant to share their experiences as first-generation college students through a different medium, apart from the interview and focus group. Personal journals offer an opportunity to gather additional data from each participant and provide a reflective, semi-structured platform for writing about the subject being investigated (Vagle, 2014). Refer to Table 5 for a detailed breakdown of the journal themes.

**Table 5***Theme Analysis for Journal*

Participants Journal	Themes
<b>Journal 1: Benefit from participation in the activities and classes</b>	Benefit from learning from others, Cognitive Learning, social skills
Journal 2: Factors that Motivated to complete degree program	Wanting better life for family, Career Opportunities
Journal 3: Motivated from other factors	Being told that you were not college material, Settings realistic goals
Journal 4: Motivated by Administrators, Staff, and Peers	Administrators, peers that holds you accountable, Experience seeing college peers succeed

In this approach, participants were given a digital journal, a password, and a prompt to document their experiences. This method allowed the gathering of valuable insights that might have been overlooked in interviews or focus groups. The information from the journals not only helped clarify previous discussions but also facilitated the identification of new themes and data validation. Additionally, the open-ended nature of the journals provided participants with the freedom to express any ideas relevant to the research. The prompt for the journal was to reflect on three to five significant college experiences, each involving a challenge or success that influenced their determination to succeed in their degree program.

### **Themes**

The dominant themes were as follows: (a) first-generation minority college students found it difficult to adjust to life as college students; (b) they encountered new people and activities; (c) they were inspired to persevere in their pursuit of a degree; (d) they believed they could overcome obstacles in college; (e) they lacked direction and support in their pursuit of a

degree; and (f) they received some emotional and resource support. Descriptions of the themes are provided.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Experienced Challenges in Coping with Changes in Being a College Student**

All 12 participants contributed to the elements of the first theme. As the first person in the family to attend college, the participants experienced some obstacles related to changes in the college setting's environment, lifestyle, and culture. All 12 participants experienced a change in lifestyle, particularly with regard to finances and independent living. Cynthia stated, "It was difficult balancing . . . working and going to class . . . And you lack sleep at times . . . It was the most challenging part." Eight participants experienced different levels of anxiety for various reasons as they entered college. Six participants experienced challenges in being exposed to people from different cultural backgrounds. As minorities, Rico, Kobe, and Lebron shared their experiences of racism. The challenges experienced by the participants were categorized into three sub-themes: (a) exposure to a different lifestyle, (b) feeling anxious, and (c) exposure to a different culture.

#### **Exposure to a Different Lifestyle**

The 12 participants, who were first-generation minority college students, underwent alterations in their financial situation and lifestyle. Economically, eight participants said that they had to sustain themselves financially and assist their families throughout their time in college. Therefore, the participants revealed they were required to engage in both job and study simultaneously. Willie expressed that the problem was not his parents' lack of desire to provide financial assistance but rather their inability to afford it. He clarified that their message was not centered on support but rather on the need for him to become self-sufficient due to their financial

constraints. Willie had to forego living on campus to decrease his expenditures. As a result, he became estranged from his classmates. Willie said that they resided on campus. Consequently, Willie gained a sense of isolation and detachment.

Both Cynthia and Barbara mentioned their obligation to assist their unmarried mother in sustaining their family. Barbara disclosed: "Due to my mother being a sole caregiver, I, being the eldest offspring, had to procure student loans under my own name to finance my education. Furthermore, I had to engage in employment while pursuing my education, therefore preventing me from residing on campus." Renita expressed that she lacked guidance and information on fees beyond the tuition amount. She registered at the college closest to her residence in order to save on lodging and commuting costs. In addition, she obtained a scholarship and landed employment to support her academic pursuits. Nevertheless, Renita failed to foresee the extent of her expenses for educational resources, such as books. Renita expressed:

When I say I worked and studied, I mean I worked during Christmas breaks and summers. It was my responsibility to pay for everything. The biggest worry was not having enough money. When you first get to school, there are many things you don't know you need, and it's hard to figure out how to get them. For instance, books can cost up to \$300, which can be overwhelming. Why do I need a book that is expensive?

As a result of alterations in job, family, and school obligations, six individuals said that they were unable to attend some courses and social gatherings. The participants placed higher importance on their employment and academic responsibilities than on forming social connections and engaging in extracurricular activities. Alex expressed his love for playing football, but his focus was on the financial constraints that prevented him from enrolling full-time in school due to his inability to pay the costs. Consequently, he had to divide his time

between attending school and working. Alex specifically said that after finishing high school, they received a football scholarship to participate in the sport in college, which would partially fund his education. However, Alex mentioned: “Being aware of my parents' financial limitations, I made the decision to pursue a career in the military instead of attending college.”

Nicole stated about her experience in missing out on school activities:

My experience . . . I wasn't on campus, I wasn't involved in student activities. It was like I was working, and I was also going to school, and I also had a daughter, so I wasn't as involved as most students on campus. Even though we were the same age, it was like my experience was I'm just coming here to go to class, and I'm back home.

Three participants expressed challenges in adapting to the financial changes associated with attending college due to a lack of advice in financial preparation. Willie said he lacked the knowledge to handle the complex financial documentation required for accessing financial aid. Additionally, Willie's parents were unable to provide assistance in this matter.

Richard further expressed:

They think everybody knows about the financial aid and classes and have a knowledge. But a lot of people come into college with no idea about the resources that are there not knowing how to obtain financial aid and had no one to guide them through the process. I didn't know anything about that.

Renita stated that she only learned about financial aid when she experienced the process in college. Renita perceived that her exposure to financial aid and benefits was an advantage she could share with her children. Renita stated:

If you were a first-time college student, you really didn't know how to navigate that world. For those of us with children, we kind of understood it more about the financial aid and all of those things that were available to our children.

Mia, Barbara, and Reggie shared that they did not struggle financially like the other participants. Ami was financially supported by her parents by stating, “Thankfully, my parents were able to support me financially, and I didn't have to worry about getting a job on the side. And I focused on my studies.” Barbara was able to cut her expenses by choosing a nearby campus, noting, “I didn't want to miss my work. So I had to pick a school close.”

Apart from changes in financial struggles, seven participants disclosed that they experienced challenges living independently from their parents. Mia stated that before college, she lived with her parents, who were responsible for cooking. Cooking was an adjustment for Mia when she lived on her own in college. Alex, Lebron, and Rico shared that living alone in college was lonely. Lebron shared, “My first year I was like . . . I don't really have anybody here, like friends, family. I'm always very down because in my first year I was missing home. It is a new environment, new people, new space.”

Five participants stated that they experienced challenges adapting to college's social aspect. Mia and Cynthia shared that they barely knew anyone on the campus and that they had to adapt to their new environment. Mia shared, “I just came alone with another friend and had to adapt to the whole environment.” Gail shared that she had difficulties interacting with classmates who were younger than she was. Additionally, Gail stated that she is a naturally quiet and slow-to-warm person. Gail described, “Some of the people there were a little bit younger than myself . . . I was kind of a quiet person. It took me a while to get out of my shell.”



## Feeling Anxious

Eight individuals expressed experiencing anxiety over some parts of their college experience as first-generation minority students. Four participants, who were the first in their families to attend college, said that their parents had certain expectations of them and that they had anxiety about the possibility of failure. Kobe acknowledged that it was a challenging task, “I contemplated the conditions and the implications for my family in the event of my failure, considering what I would communicate to them.” Lebron admitted experiencing significant anxiety due to the fear of failure, as he believed that if he were to fail, his mother's little money would be squandered.

Three individuals had anxiety due to feelings of disorientation and worry while navigating their college experience. Lebron said that he sometimes has anxiety issues due to his lack of knowledge on how to approach certain situations. Mia tried to make preparations before attending college but still had a sense of confusion. Mia said, "I made a sincere effort to thoroughly research before arriving here. I felt quite disoriented and highly anxious.”

In a similar scenario, Alex and Cynthia expressed experiencing a certain degree of worry due to the absence of knowledge and advice when navigating college. Cynthia attempted to acquire knowledge about college using online resources, but she found the material inadequate. Alex felt insufficient due to a lack of knowledge of what to anticipate in college. Alex disclosed:

I didn't really prepare much for college life because my mom didn't go to school. She didn't tell me what I should be experiencing, what I should do. I didn't really know the full information on how to navigate the school environment.

## **Exposure to a Different Culture**

Six individuals reported difficulties assimilating to a foreign culture throughout their college experience. Four participants, who belong to minority groups, encountered difficulties such as racism and prejudice. Cynthia encountered demoralization from her teacher and felt excluded in the classroom. Rico, Kobe, and Lebron encountered instances of racial discrimination. Kobe disclosed:

I want to share that during that time, I navigated through various challenges as a Black guy in the midst of the university student affair. Although I initially felt overwhelmed by the racism and related issues, I took steps to address them and found ways to cope and overcome those obstacles.

Lebron, though born in the United States, did not have English as his native language. He experienced difficulties expressing himself to his peers in college because of the language barrier. Mia, who grew up in Panama, experienced language barriers when she moved to the United States. Mia stated, “I feel I was still lacking in the language when I came.” Additionally, Mia was the only participant to reference experiencing culture shock: “So some of the challenges I had, besides the language barrier, was the cultural shock of arriving here. The difference.”

## **First-Generation Minority College Students Experienced Engagement with Different**

### **People and Activities**

All 12 participants shared that their college experience involved interacting with different people and participating in various activities. The college setting was typically composed of a diverse population, in which nine participants stated that they met people with different backgrounds. Seven participants indicated that they experienced some benefits from participating in activities such as making friends, developing skills, and having fun. However, five

participants shared that they were not keen on socializing because they either did not have time or preferred not to interact. The three sub-themes under this theme were: (a) interacted with different people, (b) benefited from participation in the activities and classes, and (c) not keen on socializing.

### **Interacted with Different People**

Nine participants shared that they met different types of people in college. They became exposed to a diverse population and became knowledgeable in interacting with different people. Barbara perceived that going to a traditional college rather than attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU) allowed her to learn about other cultures and interact with people of different ethnicities. Nicole purposely chose not to attend an HBCU to be exposed to diverse people inspired her. Nicole described:

And I knew in real life that I needed to learn how to work with a diverse mix of people. So, I didn't want to get so comfortable in my Blackness that I didn't realize that I'm in business, which was my major, that I need to know how to work with all of them. I noticed that some of what I admired as some of the top business professionals were not African Americans. They were Asian, or Jewish, they were other races. So, I wanted to put myself also in a position where I could also network down the line.

In the focus group, Renita shared her belief that she was able to utilize the ability to build a network in her professional life. Renita shared her perceptions that having a network was an advantage in securing a job. She perceived that having connections allowed her to have opportunities to show her skills and prove herself. Renita stated:

It hasn't always been about what I knew and what I brought to the table. It was about those connections that I had. In several places where I have worked, positions have been

created for me because once I get my foot in the door, then I've shown them who Renita is and all my wonderfulness.

Mia also shared her experiences of meeting accomplished people in their field. She stated that she learned about them and how they became successful. Mia stated,

For example, the American Society of Civil Engineers, they invited some recruiters, some previous alumni to talk about how they accomplished, and how they also went from this college to working life and talking more.

Renita and Cynthia shared that they developed their social skills after interacting with different people. Renita stated that she learned a lot about other people and gained a deeper understanding of the Black community while in college. Cynthia stated, “Also, I learned on social intelligence, on how to interact with people. Yeah. That's one thing I learned: social intelligence.”

Alex, Lebron, Gail, and Reggie shared that they were able to make friends in class. Alex and Reggie disclosed that they were too busy to attend school events, but they made friends from the study group in their class. Lebron also had a study partner who became his close friend. Lebron shared, “I have a friend that, most times, we read together, we share insight together and it has been very good, a very source of my confidence.” Gail shared that she and her classmates formed a community where they helped each other with lessons. Gail shared:

Well, we were all trying to achieve the same goal, and so that made us come together to help one another, studying and coming up with different techniques to try to learn the different terminologies that we had, and practicing the different techniques of caring for patients and administering medications and things like that. So that was what helped me through that.

### **Benefit from Participation in the Activities and Classes**

Seven individuals reported deriving advantages from their engagement in programs and activities. In addition to engaging in social activities, the participants also acquired various skills. Lebron and Renita engaged in social activities with their fellow Black students and actively participated in several groups. Renita actively participated in the student union, where she engaged in community activities such as food programs and advocated for the young to use their right to vote. Rico established friendships by engaging in athletic activities. Mia disclosed that some courses included involvement as a component of the marking criterion to motivate students to interact in class actively. Mia shared:

The participation. The syllabus encouraged it and it was part of the grade. It was like five, 10% to participate in class. So, they encouraged us to read the material before coming to class, and answer questions when the professor pulled some pose questions and do teamwork together with our classmates for homework. I felt that encouraged us more to learn, to have some critical thinking,

Reggie shared that in joining school activities, he was able to learn from others. Reggie stated, “I benefited from learning from others . . . So, being in that type of collaborative environment was helpful.” This perception was also reflected in Reggie’s journal. Reggie added that some instructors trusted him to be a class leader. Reggie continued, “Couple of times the professor turned the class over to me and just said, ‘You just make sure everybody does what they're supposed to do.’”

### **Not Keen on Socializing**

Although there were advantages, five individuals lacked enthusiasm for socializing. Barbara emphasized that her only motivation for participating was to fulfill the grade

prerequisite. Due to her demanding profession and many responsibilities, she was unable to allocate any time for engaging in school activities and events. Kobe had a similar sentiment: "I have very little time for myself." Alex, Cynthia, and Willie were introverted individuals who liked to maintain their privacy and did not engage in extensive conversations. Alex said that while they did not participate actively in class discussions, they ensured to fulfill the essential requirements such as completing classwork and submitting all assignments.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Are Being Motivated to Persist Obtaining a College Degree**

All 12 participants contributed to the theme that they had the motivation to persist in their pursuit of a college degree. Motivation came from within themselves and from other people. All 12 participants shared instances of being self-motivated, especially in wanting to have a sense of achievement and self-validation, in improving their own lives, and in knowing the value of education. Ten participants shared experiences of being motivated by their siblings, children, peers, and parents. The two sub-themes under this theme were (a) motivated by oneself and (b) motivated by others.

#### **Motivated by Oneself**

Each of the 12 participants reported instances of self-motivation that enabled them to persist in their quest for a college degree. While nine people want to showcase their skills to others, their desire ultimately originates from their intrinsic motivation. For instance, Rico experienced racism from a student whom he believed had biased notions that Black men are less capable than White men. Rico saw the need to achieve exceptional performance in college as a means of affirming his values. Cynthia observed that others often have either elevated or diminished expectations of her. She was motivated to achieve excellence in college to confirm

her ability. Cynthia said that her motivation resided inside her, “The inherent motivation is what convinces me of my capacity to achieve it. I came here with the explicit purpose of acquiring it and am resolute in my determination to get it.” During the focus group, Cynthia reiterated her interview statement and expressed:

To me, it was self-motivation. It was self-driven. I wanted to change the situation back at home and to prove them wrong. I had that belief of going to college is going to help me have a better career. Yeah, that's what motivated me and I never wanted to be the situation that my mother was going through and it already changed my situation. It's always self-motivation to me.

Gail wanted to succeed in her endeavors, including college, as she stated, “It was proving it to myself.” Lebron was motivated to prove to himself and other people that he has the strengths to attain good grades and succeed in college:

I just want to know . . . Most times I just focus, ‘This is why I'm here; I just want to make a better grade.’ My drive was . . . Like I said before, I just want to show people this is my inbuilt strength and energy. I can do this and I just want to prove to people I have lots more in me. I just try as much as possible to be more focused, or if a lot of input has been put into me, I have to be able to bring out positive results.

Seven participants said obtaining a college degree was a part of their goals. Reggie reflected in the journal that he set “realistic” goals to motivate himself toward ultimately obtaining a college degree. Willie articulated his ambition to get a college degree to affirm his worth, especially if he ever had the chance to see his real mother. Renita desired a degree to fulfill her aspiration of becoming a lawyer. Nevertheless, Renita voiced the opinion during the focus group that possessing a degree was not a must for pursuing a job in the business sector.

Gail contradicted Renita's remarks during the focus group session. Gail said that acquiring a college degree would result in enhanced opportunities for professional accomplishment, such as higher remuneration and progression in one's job. Gail stated:

I would say that that would also depend on which field of work you choose. Being in the medical field, a degree definitely makes a difference in your pay grade. For my line of work, being in the medical field, it definitely . . . It's like night and day in the pay.

Barbara and Gail shared in the journal that obtaining a college degree would open up career opportunities for her. Barbara expressed her desire to pursue a career as either a lawyer or a teacher. She recognized that achieving her professional aspirations hinged on her success in college. Therefore, even though Barbara's mother did not pursue further education, she was aware that her journey must include acquiring a college degree. Barbara expressed:

Well, I had a bunch of different things I wanted to do, it was either be a teacher, own a daycare, or become a lawyer. And so, I knew to do those things I needed to go to college. So, college was the next step for me, but it was on my own initiative that I guess led me to want to go to college.

Renita, Gail, and Nicole confirmed during the focus group that using their objectives as a motivating factor allows them to persist in college. Nicole said that the achievement of her present position at work would not have been feasible without a college degree since it was often the absolute minimum need for securing a job in her chosen field of study. Gail claimed that her inspiration sprang from her desire to enhance the standard of living for her family. Her degree allowed her to fulfill her goals of matching their criteria and funding their travels by securing a high-paying job. Gail said that her attendance at college had greatly broadened options for both



herself and her family. The attainment of a college degree has led to higher income, the capacity to travel, and the chance to participate in various activities.

The participants were inherently motivated to improve their own lives. Seven respondents reported their desire to attain a superior standard of living in comparison to that of their parents. Barbara recognized that her life was comparatively more advantageous than others. However, she also noted that her mother had financial challenges supporting three children without a college degree. Barbara was certain that obtaining a college degree would lead her life on a different route from her mother's. Barbara said that the only method of accomplishing that objective was by acquiring a college degree at that specific juncture. Renita said that her comprehension of the immense scope of the universe expanded as she intensified her academic pursuits. This newfound information inspired her to pursue opportunities that her parents could not achieve because of financial challenges stemming from their limited educational attainment. Nicole pondered the life of her parents and voiced her thoughts:

Honestly, I think I was motivated by my circumstances. If I look around and I see everyone else struggling economically, if I see that the majority of my family lives in poverty, those type of things are what motivated me. I didn't want that for me.

Two participants articulated their drive to seek higher education, noting their understanding of the importance of acquiring knowledge and skills. Mia remarked that her motivation sprang from the desire to investigate unexplored regions. Furthermore, Mia underscored the importance of skills and experience, expressing, "In addition to academic performance, I believe they are also crucial." Mia believed that enhancing her education would benefit her career. Kobe said that the university setting provided a plethora of knowledge and a

diverse range of folks from which to get valuable perspectives. Kobe argues that personal growth results in an improved standard of living.

A wise man once said that the advice you receive from anybody or any person, the best advice is the one you give yourself. So, people gain from the different angles with the different stories in the entire world. And we are unlucky to gain from a family that we don't have. So, if anyone outside there is an opportunity to get into the university, they should just take every bit of chance, believing that the future will be bright.

### **Motivated by Others**

Ten individuals were inspired by others to achieve success in their college education. Eight out of the 12 participants believed that being the first in their family to pursue higher education made them influential figures for their siblings and offspring. The participants believed it was necessary for them to serve as positive role models for their siblings and children. Gail claimed that her drive to attend college stemmed from being the eldest among her siblings and the expectation for her to serve as a role model. Renita disclosed:

For me, I think that that set the example for my siblings to follow because they were 10 years younger than I was. When I went off to school, I was 18; my brother was eight at the time. I think it was trying to show them again about there's life outside of the four corners. For me that freshman year, I remember I would bring them up to campus with me. They would spend the weekend with me. We would go do things on campus or off campus to the movies because I wanted to show them, so that kept me motivated.

The participants conveyed that their success will instill in their siblings and children a similar sense of self-confidence and optimism in their ability to achieve. Nicole expressed in the focus group discussion that she was encouraging her children to see attending college as a

regular and expected path. Nicole's only responsibility throughout her college years was her kid, and her determination to serve as a role model for her child was her driving force to continue her education. Nicole said that as a young mother, her focus was not on herself but rather on being a role model for her daughter and establishing a solid basis for her to confidently grow upon. Kobe noted that his siblings are also facing difficulties in their pursuit of higher education, and many believe that if he is able to succeed, they may also achieve success. Willie thought that he would only be able to persuade his daughter to attend college if he had already earned a degree. Willie expressed:

And raising a daughter who was in high school, I knew what our expectations was going to be for her. And [my wife] and I would talk about it often, and I don't want to be a hypocrite stressing the importance of education, yet we don't have it. And so we would often have those conversations. And so that was my motivation was I didn't want to be hypocritical stressing the importance of education, yet I didn't have it.

Experiencing college with their peers and seeing their peers succeed was also motivational for four participants. Gail wrote in the journal that going through challenges with her friends during their first year in college helped motivate her to persist. Further, in the interview Gail reasoned, "It's just something about being around people that are like you, and seeing them strive to do great things, that motivates you." Willie detailed in the journal that moving from New York, where his peers valued getting a job, to Virginia, where his peers valued education, influenced his motivation to persist in college. Willie shared his perceptions during the focus group, "My motivation was looking at my peers and other people and say there's no way that this person can do it and I can't." Reggie initially did not plan to go to college but was later on motivated by a co-worker who became his friend. His friend was already a college

student when they met, and he helped him navigate college and was influential in his pursuit of an engineering degree. Reggie described:

At the time, I was a sophomore in high school, and his name happens to be [redacted]. He was a freshman at [Anonymous University] in the engineering program, and he worked part-time. We became very, very good friends, became someone I looked up to. When I started at Anonymous University, we eventually became college roommates, along with his cousin, who was also in the engineering program at Anonymous University. He probably had more influence on me selecting an engineering career field.

Two participants who both grew up in a single-mother household shared that they were motivated by their mother to go to college. Barbara was first inspired by her mother's resilience despite her lack of educational attainment and other challenges in life. Barbara's mother then encouraged her not to give up on her military service and then on her college education. Renita stated that her mother emphasized that she needed to pursue college. Renita stated, "For my family, my mom is a single mom, even though she had gotten married, but it was stressful to go on to college, to do more. I was always excited about doing something outside of college."

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Have Belief in One's Ability to Overcome Challenges in College**

All 12 participants have a strong self-belief and will to persevere and get a college degree. The participants' self-perceptions included qualities such as perseverance, discipline, time-management abilities, and the courage to be the trailblazer in their family by pursuing higher education. As reported by the participants, possessing tenacity included demonstrating resilience and persevering in the face of setbacks and obstacles. Cynthia recounted her experiences of almost surrendering but maintaining faith in her ability to persevere. Alex

imparted his counsel to other first-generation college students, drawing on his own experience of relying on his judgment. Alex expressed the belief that individuals should consistently have faith in themselves and possess the resilience to understand that their first startup may not always be successful or remain so indefinitely. Gail articulated in the interview and reflected in the journal that she developed resilience from her military experience. Gail recognized that her military experience had instilled in her the ability to bounce back from adversity. Gail expressed:

I was like, that was something that I really wanted to do, and it was difficult. There were plenty of times that I wanted to quit, but I just had that determination. I think some of that came from my time in the military. It's like you have certain things that you have to accomplish, and you know that you'll get promoted and go to that next level. So, having that ability to do that, that is what helped me stay in school.

The participants also perceived that tenacity included the belief that things will be better if they worked hard. Gail shared, "This is just temporary. The hardship and the struggle, it's only temporary. Your reward is going to come at the end." Gail confirmed this finding about her insights during the focus group during which she stated, "Even if it's going to be difficult, it's I can do it. I know that I can persevere if I just try hard enough. I may not do as well as I may want to, but I know that if I put in that work that I'm going to get the results that I need."

Nicole stated:

So, I use this analogy with ships. Ships are really safe and protected when they're in the harbor, but that's not what a ship is designed to do. It's designed to sail; it's designed to travel the seas regardless. Yeah, you may run into some waves, you may get blown over, but get on that ship and just go. So many times, we do allow other people to tell us what we should or shouldn't do. And I say, just go for it and find that niche.

In the focus group, Nicole stated that her college experience helped her face and overcome rejections later in life. She overcame the challenges by believing that she had the necessary skills needed for the job but needed to present herself better. Nicole stated:

I have had my fair share of rejection emails and been turned down from a whole lot of jobs, but I think most of the time, it's been a growing experience. It has given me an opportunity to either tweak my resume to look out into the market and see I've got some excellent computer skills, but it may have caused me to brush up on my advanced Excel skills. I work in finance. A lot of times, I would use those, I guess what I would even call rejections as a redirection.

Kobe and Renita recognized that discipline was a crucial attribute that aided them in their pursuit of a college degree. Renita emphasized, "In order to achieve success, I maintained a high level of self-discipline. I vividly recall my first semester during my freshman year, when I maintained a stringent approach towards myself due to my strong desire for academic achievement." During the focus group, Renita expressed that in addition to self-discipline, she had self-confidence. Renita expressed her self-confidence and conviction in her ability to transcend the limitations of her little hometown and explore the vast world beyond, "I had self-confidence in my abilities to do the task."

Kobe remarked, "I was contemplating my own self-discipline." That was the motivation that kept me persevering. Alex and Rico have proficient time management abilities, enabling them to effectively allocate their time and fulfill their obligations, resulting in academic success. Alex said that he effectively organized his schedule to ensure he was aware of his obligations and knew where he needed to be at certain times. Mia considered herself courageous during her first year of college.

## **First-Generation Minority College Students Lacked Guidance and Support in Obtaining a College Degree**

Eleven out of the 12 participants provided components to the fifth topic. The central issue revolved around the challenges faced by first-generation minority college students, who encountered a dearth of advice and assistance in their quest for a higher education. The participants encountered a dearth of assistance and help in navigating college. Rico, Reggie, and Nicole explicitly said that they lacked enough direction and assistance in navigating college due to their parents' lack of personal experiences to impart to them. Rico expressed his lack of knowledge on the matter, "I contacted my mother, who was unaware of the situation since she did not pursue further education."

Reggie realized that he would have been more well-equipped in his pursuit of his engineering degree if he had received help navigating college. Reggie provided an explanation:

I would say I probably was not as prepared as I needed to be to pursue an engineering education. When I think back on it, I probably could have been more intensive on the math side of things when I was in grade and junior high and senior high school. But I had an idea, even though at the time I didn't know anybody in my family that had started college and had taken any courses, that was on the horizon. My mom and dad at the time; my dad, of course, was a cab driver, drove cabs, drove limousines, worked as a custodian at high school.

Alex shared that because her parents divorced, she and her mother had to move to a different state. Her mother had no college experiences to share with her. Additionally, she lost contact with her college counselor when they moved. Alex detailed:

I would have gotten more encouragement from a counselor, but like I told you, we moved . . . That was when my dad and mom separated, so I have to move from [State 1] to [State 2]. So, I cut that connection between me and my high school counselor. So, we didn't connect, communicate again.

Six participants said that they experienced a lack of support due to the low expectations people had of them. Renita disclosed that she excelled academically throughout her high school years while she had a documented history of behavioral problems. Consequently, her counselor dissuaded her from seeking further education and predicted her lack of success. As a result, her counselor discouraged her from pursuing college and told her she would be unsuccessful. Renita also reflected on her experience through the prompted journal.

Reggie excelled academically in high school and received a discouraging message from his counselor, stating that his family's financial constraints would hinder his success in college. Reggie was instructed to prioritize securing employment after his graduation from high school. Kobe's parents disapproved of his choice to attend college. Kobe disclosed:

Since it was a scholarship, not really their funds, just church scholarship that I needed to get into the university, at first, they were not believing that I'm going to make it. That was the first. And they were even thinking of me staying back home and working for the rest of the family. So, the support was not really there.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Received Some Emotional and Resource Support**

Of the 12 participants, 10 contributed to the theme that first-generation minority college students received some support from their families, peers, instructors, and administrators. The support was primarily emotional. Six participants received encouragement from their instructors.



Nicole and Renita shared that their instructors made them feel like they belonged in college despite being minorities and non-traditional students. Renita wrote in the journal, “I really had some really great professors over my academic career, because I never felt, even though like I said, as a non-traditional student, I never felt that I didn't belong there.” Reggie, Cynthia, and Alex stated that they had instructors who motivated them to persist. Reggie stated, “I was supposed to present a paper, and I got up there, and I froze . . . He pulled me outside the classroom, and what he did was encourage me . . . I'd had that fear beat by the time I finished college.”

Lebron had a Black instructor who supported him emotionally and gave him a space to express himself while facing challenges in college. Lebron elucidated:

It was very, very challenging in my first year. But what helped me there was I met with a Black lecturer because I would not always express the way I feel. Sometimes, I was very bullied by the Whites, so it really helped me a lot because I was not able to express myself.

Three participants shared that counselors helped with their emotional needs when they were in college. Mia and Cynthia stated that their counselors helped address their stress and anxiety in navigating college and provided them with the support they needed. Lebron experienced anxiety and depression after encountering racism in college. A counselor helped him cope emotionally. Lebron elaborated:

I had to meet up with my counselor. I booked a section, talk with someone. I know that I needed to talk with someone to help me through because I know that my case was not actually forced. I know that I believe that there are some people that have gone through it

and they were able to come after it. I just had to talk to people, and they were able to help me, and I was back.

Gail and Nicole shared during the focus group that their peers also provided them with the support they needed to persist in college. Gail believed in surrounding herself with peers who have a growth mindset. Nicole shared that her peers motivated and encouraged her and held her accountable. Nicole stated, “I try to make sure that my inner circle or my circle period stays motivating and encouraging to one another. I think it's highly important that you surround yourself with people that'll keep you on that track.”

### **Research Question Responses**

This section presents the results based on how they answered the research questions. The essence of the FGMCS’ experiences of the contributors to success at a university in the southeastern United States is described in the sub-sections. The specific experiences on student engagement are detailed in sub-question one. The experiences of self-efficacy are under sub-question two. The influences of peers, faculty, and administration are under sub-question three.

### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences that motivate and contribute to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success at a university in the southeastern United States?

Overall, the participants’ experiences revealed that they were motivated to pursue college success because they wanted to change their lives, prove themselves to others, and meet their family’s expectations towards them. The participants saw their parents’ hardships and attributed their adversities to their lack of college education. The participants believed that, in obtaining a college degree, they could secure a job that pays well and offer financial security; as James stated, “Most time they discover we don't have educational qualification to get some jobs that

comes on our way. I was really motivated. I did want to break the barrier . . . get educational qualification and more income for myself.” The participants experienced skepticism and a lack of support, but they persisted in trying to prove themselves to others. Richard stated, “So I kind of feel like I need to prove him that being Black doesn't mean that I'm dumb.” As the first person in the family to attend college, the participants felt anxiety over the possibility of failing as they perceived they could not let their family down.

The participants generally received some support, especially in the emotional aspect. Instructors and classmates were typically encouraging and supportive. However, they lacked support in the financial aspect and in navigating the college system. Due to having to support themselves through working while studying, most participants did not have time to participate in organizations and school activities. Nonetheless, they managed to build friendships within their classes and learned to interact with a diverse population.

### **Sub-Question 1**

What are the college social, learning, and student engagement experiences that contribute to first-generation minority college student success?

Regarding student engagement, the participants experienced difficulties in coping with the changes in their way of living in college but also experienced benefits in interacting with a larger and diverse population. College exposed the participants to a lifestyle and culture they were not used to. They had to support themselves financially and learn to fulfill responsibilities independently. James explained:

That's not really been so easy for me because I had to adjust my independence. I was very independent when transitioning from high school because I was on my own doing the busy tasks. Sometimes, mostly financially, I have to do some jobs after the school or

programs. I just have to do this to finance myself. It was not very easy for me because on my academic life, when I first started.

The participants experienced interacting with new people as they hardly knew anyone when they entered college. The participants shared that they experienced some level of anxiety, especially in meeting their family's expectations and in navigating college. They also had to adapt to a different culture in which some participants experienced racism.

### **Sub-Question 2**

What are the college context experiences that support social learning and self-efficacy among first-generation minority undergraduate students?

In motivation and self-efficacy, the participants were motivated by others. They were motivated by their parents, siblings, children, and peers. They were also self-motivated, as they aimed to provide a better life for themselves and their family. They wanted to have a sense of achievement and validation through their degrees. The participants also had belief in themselves. They had the tenacity and the belief that things would be better after they succeeded in college.

### **Sub-Question 3**

What experiences with peers, faculty, and administration do first-generation minority college students attribute to the development of behavior patterns that support their academic success?

With peers, faculty, and administration, the participants received a lack of support and guidance in navigating college. Other people had low expectations of them and told them that they would not succeed in college for being a minority or for being from a low-income family. For instance, Sherry noted:

He looked me right in my face and he was a Caucasian man too. He looked me right in my face and he said, "Okay, so it's time to get rid of the knucklehead." I said, "Oh my goodness."

Bryan stated, "Sometimes it was really terrible experience because of the financial situation. Most of the materials, I could not afford it, and most of the fee that was not included in the scholarship, we could not afford it." However, the university had sufficient resources to help with their learning. Counselors, peers, and faculty also offered their emotional support to the participants. The participants received words of encouragement that allowed them to persist.

### **Summary**

This chapter contained the presentation of the study findings that addressed the purpose of describing the lived experiences that motivate and contribute to FGMCSS at a university in the southeastern United States. This transcendental phenomenology involved the investigation of the lived experiences of 12 first-generation minority college students. Nine participants were born in the United States, while three participants were immigrants. The participants' experiences were summarized into six themes. The essence of the participants' experiences was that the participants were primarily motivated to succeed in college to change their lives for the better, prove themselves, and meet their family's expectations. They observed their parents' hardships and attributed them to a lack of college education, driving their desire to obtain a degree for financial security.

The participants experienced doubt and a lack of support but persisted in overcoming stereotypes about minorities. They balanced work, school, and other responsibilities, which was not always ideal as they tended to have little time to participate in activities and events outside of class hours. The participants were also challenged by having no one to guide and help them

navigate college. The participants experienced some level of anxiety from being the first in the family to attend college, as they believed their family had expectations towards them. They received emotional support from some instructors and peers.

In the next chapter, these findings are interpreted through the lenses of Vygotsky and Cole's (1978) social constructivist theory and Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. The theoretical framework will be corroborated with the study findings to understand the factors influencing FGMCS' motivation to pursue a college degree. The next chapter also contains the implications, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions of the study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences that motivate and contribute to first-generation minority undergraduate college student success (FGMCSS) at a university in the southeastern United States. The problem addressed was that first-generation minority college students (FGMCS) continue to struggle with bachelor's degree completion (Pratt et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2021). The sample of this study consisted of 12 first-generation minority college students enrolled in an undergraduate program at Anonymous University located in the southeastern region of the United States. Ten of the 12 participants identified as African American, one as Chinese, and one as Hispanic. Half of the participants were male, and the other half were female.

### **Discussion**

Chapter Five presents the summary of the thematic findings, an interpretation of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, and an implications section including practical and theoretical implications. The chapter also provides the study's delimitations and limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusion.

### **Summary of Thematic Findings**

Six themes resulted from the application of the four stages of transcendental phenomenological analysis to the interview and focus group data collected from the 12 participants. The discussion and interpretation of findings were based on the themes discussed.

## **First-Generation Minority College Students Experienced Challenges in Coping with Changes in Being a College Student**

Current research findings revealed that first-generation college students experienced diverse challenges related to the changes in the environment, lifestyle, and culture in the college setting. The findings demonstrated that participants experienced challenges such as being exposed to different cultures and lifestyles and feeling anxious about college life. Participants reported that they had to support themselves financially while in college as they had to work while studying to support their college life. First-generation minority college students experienced changes in their finances and way of living, coping with the changes in the financial aspects of going to college. These experiences are caused by the lack of guidance in preparing them financially and the challenges of adapting to the social aspect of college. This theme has addressed the research question by identifying different challenges faced by first-generation minority college students in pursuing their college degree to completion. The research question has addressed the purpose of this study by establishing the challenges first-generation minority college students face in pursuing their college degree, including exposure to different cultures and lifestyles and feeling anxious about college life.

The current study findings support other studies that indicate that first-generation college students deal with a lack of finances, academic issues, and personal problems worsened by the inherent differences between the college environment and their family setting (Chang et al., 2020). The study has indicated that being exposed to different cultures and lifestyles and feeling anxious about college life are challenges for first-generation minority college students' success in earning college degrees. These findings can also be observed in previous literature, which revealed that stress is a problem that most first-generation students from minority communities



must contend with every day (Goldman et al., 2017). Previous research showed that first-generation students from minority communities are forced to develop coping mechanisms to handle higher education pressure and challenges effectively, as students who are unable to create effective coping mechanisms are often forced to drop out of school (Goldman et al., 2017).

The current study outcomes also concur with past research findings, which demonstrated that first-generation minority students experience frequent dialogical tensions between their own culture and the dominant culture's ideologies of traditional university culture (Isik et al., 2018). These students also need more advice on dealing with new social and cultural codes, affecting their adaptation and persistence in the system (Isik et al., 2018). This theme has contributed to the previous literature by establishing that first-generation minority college students face challenges such as exposure to different cultures and feeling anxious about college life.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Experienced Engagement with Different People and Activities**

First-generation minority college students had to interact with different people at college, including various organizations and activities, as the college setting was comprised of a diverse population, and they met people from different backgrounds. Despite the challenges of interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, participants indicated that as first-generation minority college students, they experienced different benefits at college. Such benefits emanating from participation in activities such as making friends, developing skills, and having fun were significant for students in ensuring student engagement and collaboration. College students became exposed to a diverse population and learned to interact with different people. This helps students develop their social skills after interacting with different people at college.

While some participants benefited from participating in activities and classes, others highlighted that they only participated in meeting the grade requirement and were not keen on socializing. This theme has addressed the research question by identifying diverse student engagement activities with different people that motivate them to pursue their college degree programs. The research question has addressed the purpose of this study by establishing different benefits and experiences of FGMCS, including making friends and developing social skills.

Current study findings align with previous research outcomes, which revealed that colleges with excellent academic integration can improve performance as first-generation minority students are exposed to adequate research experience and tutor support services are readily available. Faculty involvement in student development is promoted (Aruguete, 2017). Social integration helps ensure that the student develops better friendships with their peers and life at the college, which would be generally enjoyable, leading to the achievement of a college degree. However, poor academic integration at colleges leads to low performance levels for FGMCS, leading to high dropout rates (Aruguete, 2017). The discrepancy in findings could be due to differences in participants' characteristics and settings used in these studies.

Inconsistent with current research findings, previous studies have demonstrated that first-generation minority college students generally participate less in social and academic activities associated with success and persistence in higher education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). Evidence found in research revealed that first-generation minority students have lower levels of social engagement on campus and typically expect to spend less time socializing with their peers than traditional students (Aruguete, 2017; Ellis et al., 2019). These low levels of social and academic integration may derive, in part, from the challenges of navigating between the two cultures mentioned, one's own and the academic culture. First-

generation minority students seek to remain isolated because they fear losing their cultural identity and, consequently, prefer not to attend the support programs at the university (Covarrubias et al., 2015). They avoid forming relationships with professors, classmates, and others perceived as members of the dominant culture, which challenges college retention. Faculty and peers are a source of motivation and support in achievement. The difference in findings can be attributed to diverse target populations, study settings, and sample sizes used in conducting these studies. Overall, the current research outcomes have contributed to the past research by revealing first-generation minority college student engagement and interaction in academic activities, improving their social skills.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Are Being Motivated to Persist Obtaining a College Degree**

The findings indicate that FGMCS are motivated to persist in college degree programs. As reported by participants, the motivation for first-generation minority college students comes from within themselves and other people, including their parents, friends, and peers, which encourages them to persist in pursuing their college degree to completion. The results imply that for first-generation minority college students, being self-motivated, especially in wanting to have a sense of achievement and self-validation, improving their own lives, and knowing the value of education motivates them to continue their college degree programs. The research findings have addressed the research question by highlighting that first-generation minority college students are motivated by themselves and others. The research has addressed the problem and purpose of this study by revealing that FGMCS are self-motivated and derive their motivation from other people, including parents, siblings, peers, and friends, enhancing their persistence in pursuit of a college degree.

The current research findings have also been partially reported in previous studies, which revealed that it becomes apparent that the students may need an environment where they can develop as individuals and be empowered to develop their skills as a motivation to pursue their college degree (Bui & Rush, 2016). However, other studies indicate that most universities are taking steps to ensure that the environments they develop are friendly and promote the success of first-generation minority students (Bui & Rush, 2016; Ishitani, 2006). Nichols and Islas (2016) found that students whose parents have a college degree benefit from high parental involvement in their education and in accessing networks for support as FGMCS who feel connected and cared about in an institution are motivated to persist (Bui & Rush, 2016; Ishitani, 2006). The research findings have contributed to the previous research by establishing that students are self-motivated to pursue college degrees.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Have Belief in One's Ability to Overcome Challenges in College**

The research findings demonstrated that FGMCS believe in themselves to persist and succeed in obtaining a college degree. The findings indicated that having tenacity, discipline, time-management skills, and bravery to be the first in their family to pursue college helps first-generation minority college students overcome challenges in college, which helps them persist in their college degrees. This builds resilience and not giving up despite delays and challenges in college degrees among FGMCS. The results suggest that the ability of FGMCS to believe in themselves to overcome challenges in college helps them succeed in attaining college degrees. The theme has addressed the research question by identifying the abilities that help students overcome college challenges, including time management skills, discipline, and tenacity, which build resilience to persist in pursuing their college degree programs. The research question has

addressed the purpose of this study by establishing that FGMCS can overcome college challenges through their ability to believe in themselves.

Whereas the current study findings have indicated that belief in one's ability helps overcome college challenges among FGMCS, previous literature indicates contradictory findings. Isik et al. (2018) established that family obligations and support can influence the learners' commitment to academic work. The responsibilities can also dictate how much time the first-generation learners commit to learning, a prospect that ultimately defines the study outcomes. At the social level, the dominant values and the socio-economic environment within the neighborhood can also influence first-generation learners' academic performance, hence their abilities to continue with their education (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). The discrepancy in findings could be caused by diverse study settings and characteristics of the participants used in these studies.

The current study findings also disconfirm previous research, which indicated that family-related factors closely interact with neighborhood situations and other social factors, such as racism and discrimination, to influence the educational outcomes among FGMCS. Furthermore (Próspero et al., 2012), the findings have contributed to the previous literature by demonstrating that self-belief in discipline, time-management skills, and bravery to be the first in their family to pursue college helps FGMCS overcome challenges in college.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Lacked Guidance and Support in Obtaining a College Degree**

Research data showed that a lack of guidance and support in their pursuit of a college degree hampers FGMCS' abilities to obtain their college degrees. Most participants highlighted that they lacked guidance and support in navigating college due to low expectations of them

from other people, which discouraged them from pursuing college and told them they would be unsuccessful. The research outcomes indicate that lack of support and guidance negatively affected FGMCS' pursuits of their college degree programs. This theme has addressed the research question by providing barriers hindering FGMCS from attaining their college degrees. The research question addresses the study problem and purpose by establishing that lack of guidance and support affects students' ability to persist in their college degrees.

These findings have also been reported in other studies, which revealed that academic activities and teacher support can positively impact the persistence of first-generation minority students and facilitate their attainment of degrees (Hébert, 2018). Furthermore, previous research indicates that due to a lack of guidance and support, first-generation minority students completed fewer credits in their first year of college than credits completed by their non-first-generation peers (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). The current research findings have contributed to past research by revealing that lack of guidance and support in their pursuit of a college degree hampers first-generation minority college students in attaining their college degrees.

### **First-Generation Minority College Students Received Some Emotional and Resource Support**

While some participants expressed a dearth of support and direction, other participants, who were first-generation minority college students, got varying degrees of assistance from their families, classmates, teachers, and administrators. The assistance provided was mostly emotional, with six participants receiving encouragement from their teachers to motivate them to continue their pursuit of college degrees. Counselors offered assistance to first-generation minority college students who faced racism in college, helping them handle anxiety and despair while navigating their college experience and completing their degrees. This subject has

explored the study issue by identifying variables contributing to the successful completion of degrees for FGMCS. These elements include providing emotional and resource support. The research question effectively examines the issue and objective of the study by demonstrating the need for emotional and resource assistance to facilitate the academic achievement of first-generation minority college students in obtaining their college degrees.

The present study results align with other studies, suggesting that instructors and support personnel who provide assistance and encouragement play a crucial role in motivating low-income and FGMCS to achieve satisfactory performance in college (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). However, the latest study contradicts previous results that suggested a lack of pre-college and support services for first-generation minority college students (Hébert, 2018). Low-income students encounter several obstacles in higher education, but their experiences may be enhanced by receiving institutional assistance and ongoing support tailored to their unique needs (Ellis et al., 2019).

Contrary to recent study results, previous studies indicate that minority students who are the first in their families to attend college tend to isolate themselves due to concerns about losing their cultural identity. As a result, they are less likely to participate in university support services (Covarrubias et al., 2015). They refrain from establishing connections with instructors, students, and others considered as belonging to the prevailing culture, which poses a difficulty in maintaining college enrollment (Covarrubias et al., 2015). This recent study has enhanced prior studies by demonstrating the need to provide emotional and resource assistance to assist FGMCS in achieving their college degrees.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

Based on the summary of thematic findings, there are three overall interpretations of those findings. These interpretations are considered significant by this researcher.

### **Interpretation #1**

Research findings demonstrated that the motivation to pursue success among minority undergraduate college students was because of their desire to change their lives, prove themselves to others, and meet their family's expectations towards them of academic success (Bui & Rush, 2016). However, most minority undergraduate college students experienced skepticism and a lack of support, albeit they persisted in proving themselves to others (Ilett, 2019; Radwin et al, 2018). While most students had some support, especially in the emotional aspect, from instructors and classmates who were encouraging and supportive, they lacked support in the financial aspect and in navigating the college system.

### **Interpretation #2**

The findings also revealed that the first-generation minority students did not participate in organization and school activities due to having to support themselves through working while studying (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). However, participants revealed they built relationships within their classes and learned to interact with a diverse population (Isik et al, 2018). Regarding student engagement in college, most participants reported having faced challenges coping with the changes in the way of living in college (Aruguete, 2017; Ellis et al, 2019). However, they also experienced some benefits in interacting with a larger and more diverse population. Participants underscored that they experienced some level of anxiety, especially in meeting their family's expectations and in navigating college because they had to adapt to a different culture in which some participants experienced racism (McCrea, 2015).



### ***Interpretation #3***

Concerning motivation and self-efficacy, the findings revealed that participants were motivated by others, including their parents, siblings, children, and peers (Bui & Rush, 2016; Ishitani, 2006). As per the findings, college students were also motivated by their aim to provide a better life for themselves and their families (Próspero et al, 2010). Participants aim to have a sense of achievement and validation through their degrees, which motivates them to succeed in college (Beasley & McClain, 2020). Despite their motivation to succeed in college, participants highlighted that they lacked support and guidance in navigating college from peers, faculty, and administration (Ilett, 2018; Radwin et al, 2018). However, the university had sufficient resources to help students with their learning, including counselors, peers, and faculty who offered their emotional support to the participants (Adam & McBrayer, 2020). The participants received words of encouragement that allowed them to persist in their learning up to college completion.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

Researchers use research implications to propose the potential significance of their results for policy, practice, theory, and future research endeavors (Polit & Beck, 2017). Research implications refer to the conclusions that researchers derive from their study results and elucidate the potential significance of the findings for policy, practice, or theory (Patton, 2015). The following are the research implications for both practice and policy applications.

### **Implications for Practice**

The study's results suggest that students encountered insufficient help from their institution. The results of this research study might foster a collective understanding of social cognitive learning experiences among professionals who deal with FGMCS. Utilizing this insight may enhance the academic achievements of FGMCS by offering the necessary resources and

assistance to get a degree. Additionally, it elucidates how instructors and parents assist FGMCS kids in surmounting obstacles. The results would provide valuable understanding for educators and parents on the need for emotional assistance for college students who are the first in their families to attend and belong to minority groups. Students with parents who have college degrees experience significant advantages due to their parents' active participation in their education and their ability to tap into supportive networks (Bui & Rush, 2016; Ishitani, 2006).

### ***Implications for Policy***

The results suggested that first-generation minority students need both emotional and resource assistance. Higher education institutions might use the results of this research to justify the need to provide policies and assistance to students to help them successfully complete their college degrees. McCrea (2015) states that first-generation minority college students face significant anxiety when they begin attending academic institutions as they struggle to adapt to the challenges of college life and navigate the campus environment. These worries complicate the success and continuity of FGMCS, distinguishing them from their contemporaries.

The outcomes of this research are important for developing models to enhance interpersonal and psychosocial benefits among college students. The recent study has further developed the findings of Pike and Kuh (2006), who discovered that learners from different backgrounds who participated in intentional activities in the educational environment had significant interpersonal, cognitive, and psychosocial advantages. This underscores the need to foster the involvement of a wide range of students on campus. The present research has shown the advantages of actively participating in college activities and attending courses, which develop interpersonal and social skills among college students from minority backgrounds who are the first in their families to attend college.

The present research aims to provide insights to stakeholders, including college instructors, staff, and the administration, who work with FGMCS. It seeks to enhance their understanding of how students manage their self-efficacy and the amount of effort they exert throughout their college experiences. Gaining insight into the difficulties faced by college students is a continuous endeavor, particularly among students from various backgrounds. Research, such as the study conducted by Sadowski et al. (2018), has provided evidence in favor of retention programs and the overall achievement of students.

### **Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

The findings from the current research study showed alignments with other empirical research as well as with Bandura's social cognitive theory, which was the theoretical foundation for the study.

#### ***Empirical Implications***

The results of the present research study validated the significance of social networks, which facilitate the connection of individuals in social and emotional situations by emphasizing the importance of student involvement in college activities that improve their social skills. Social capital primarily involves using connections, social resources, trades, and the reliability of social networks that connect people and foster expectations of mutual benefit (Halpern, 2005). The present study's results validated the social cognitive theory by identifying the many obstacles, advantages, and assistance required by first-generation minority college students to pursue higher education.

#### ***Theoretical Implications***

The current research study used Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning theory as a framework to examine how the environment and social context of first-generation college

students influence their learning experiences. The self-image of a student about their talents and capacities also affects their view of their self-efficacy, which in turn affects the academic efforts of first-generation minority college students (Tollefson, 2000). The presence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivating variables significantly impacts academic achievements in higher education.

The social cognitive theory also elucidates the variations in the level of exertion that students allocate to learning tasks. It is founded on the belief that individuals establish objectives by analyzing their past achievements and setbacks and then prioritize these objectives, which serve as personal benchmarks for assessing their performance. These statements suggest that the level of confidence individuals have in their abilities influences the amount of effort they put into educational assignments (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Individuals who see activities as challenging are less inclined to devote a significant amount of time to them, as they perceive the requirements to be beyond their talents. This statement aligns with the current research results, which suggest that first-generation minority college students have difficulties in college that have a detrimental effect on them.

The social cognition theory's idea of self-efficacy beliefs is essential for comprehending the variations in academic effort between FGMCS and their peers. According to social cognitive theory, students are driven by the integration of reciprocal models, contextual influences, and dynamic practices (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Gibbons et al. (2019) contend that the likelihood of college students achieving success in higher education is contingent upon their capacity to effectively garner assistance. Although social networks impact one's college experiences, other important aspects contribute to success in higher education. Current study results confirm that emotional and resource support significantly contributes to the academic success of first-generation minority college students, enabling them to get their college degrees.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study had several limitations, which are potential weaknesses in research (Creswell, 2013). In addition, there were several delimitations to this study. Delimitations refer to the boundaries or scope within which the study is conducted (Creswell, 2013). Delimitations pertain to the specific limits or parameters within which research is carried out, as defined by Creswell (2013).

### ***Limitations***

Qualitative researchers often use limited sample numbers (Creswell, 2013). This research has a problem because the participants may not have properly reflected the variety of FGMCS. The results may not apply to all FGMCS in the demographic of interest, therefore restricting the generalizability of the findings. Qualitative research depends on the interpretations and judgments made by researchers, which might bring subjectivity and possible bias (Creswell, 2013). The researchers' preconceived notions, convictions, and viewpoints may have had an effect on the gathering, analysis, and interpretation of data, thereby affecting the impartiality and dependability of the study (Creswell, 2013).

While reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, it is essential to acknowledge that this study has a potential weakness. This research considers the possibility of memory bias or the effect of social desirability on participants' memories of their experiences. The respondents could have given answers that conformed to societal norms, which might have influenced the accuracy and reliability of the data. This constraint was somewhat alleviated by allowing participants to evaluate transcripts for correctness after the conclusion of the interview and gathering data from as comprehensive a sample as feasible.

### ***Delimitations***

The research was carried out at Anonymous University (AU, pseudonym). The research was restricted to AU, a tiny private higher-education school in the southern United States with an undergraduate student population of about 3,200. AU has been chosen based on criteria such as ethnic diversity and family financial status levels. The university has over 3,200 students and offers several bachelor's and graduate degree programs. This research was confined to first-generation minority college students specifically selected from the university's undergraduate programs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The research primarily examined the academic achievement of minority college students who are the first in their families to attend college. The study's objective was to investigate the firsthand encounters with academic achievement among undergraduate college students who are the first in their families to attend college and belong to minority groups (FGMCS). This suggests that the results may not be applicable to other groups of pupils who are not considered a minority in the United States. To address this constraint, it is recommended that future studies focus on first-generation college students from various backgrounds, irrespective of their social standing. Subsequent investigations should include a broader range of college students, especially those of Caucasian descent, in order to improve the applicability of the study findings.

Qualitative research can include limited sample sizes (J. Creswell, 2013), which poses a constraint in this study, and the participants may not adequately reflect the variety of first-generation minority college students. Future studies should use diverse research methodologies, including quantitative approaches, to enhance the validity of the results. The quantitative research approach facilitates the use of substantial sample size and diverse factors, enabling the analysis of numerical data to discern correlations among these variables and their influence on

the academic achievement of first-generation college students. The present research focused on the obstacles and tactics employed to assist students in surmounting the difficulties they encounter in attaining their college degrees. Future studies should prioritize the enhancement of teacher training to effectively assist college students in achieving academic achievement and obtaining their degrees.

Teacher development initiatives, such as providing mentoring and training, may assist instructors in identifying areas of need among students throughout their college degree course completion route. Teachers may need to serve as mentors for pupils from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, necessitating their understanding of numerous cultural customs. Conducting studies on the efficacy of training and development programs for teachers would enable them to acquire the skills needed to manage kids from diverse cultural backgrounds effectively.

### **Conclusion**

The primary objective of the present research was to ascertain the factors that drive and enhance the academic achievement of first-generation minority undergraduate college students (FGMCS) at a university located in the southern region of the United States. FGMCS had ongoing difficulties in completing their bachelor's degrees due to social and economic obstacles that hindered college completion. The research has yielded a valuable understanding of the obstacles encountered by FGMCS in achieving their college degrees. The results provide vital insights to education stakeholders, including parents, instructors, students, and legislators, on the significance of motivation in achieving academic achievement.

The research findings emphasized that both intrinsic drive and extrinsic motivation from others are crucial factors contributing to students' perseverance in their pursuit of college

degrees. FGMCS, while possessing self-motivation to complete their degree programs, require emotional and resource assistance in order to attain success. The results of this study may be used to tackle various obstacles to academic achievement faced by both students and educators in higher education institutions.



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### **Appendix A: Institutional Permissions**

May 8, 2023

Garry Mebane  
Floralba Arbelo Marrero

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY22-23-744 A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO FIRST-GENERATION MINORITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN PURSUING A BACHELOR DEGREE

Dear Garry Mebane, Floralba Arbelo Marrero,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: May 8, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

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

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair*  
**Research Ethics Office**

### **Appendix B: Letter to Research Site to Secure Permission to Recruit Participants**

NC A&T State University  
Southeastern, United States

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Gary Mebane, and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University. The research I wish to conduct for my doctorate dissertation is a qualitative study of first-generation minority college students' experiences with motivation and success in the context of their college experiences. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of this group so that I may identify strategies that institutions of higher education can take to better serve these students. The findings of this study will also provide insight to educators and support staff working with this group to better support their graduation rates.

The proposed research will involve 12 first-generation minority college students enrolled at Anonymous University who meet the criteria of being 18 or over, a first-generation college student, and a minority. The data collection methods for this study include an in-depth interview, artifact analysis, and a focus group. If I am permitted to recruit students who meet the criteria from your institution, I will only conduct research after I have gained the approval of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board. I will also follow the ethical guidelines established by this board.

I have included a document that will be given to potential research participants and a copy of the letter of consent, which will be signed by all research participants before any research will be conducted. I respectfully request to be given permission to conduct my research study at NC A&T University. If permission is granted, I will gladly share my findings with your institution.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach me.

Garry Mebane





## Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. My research aims to determine what experiences motivate and contribute to first-generation, minority, undergraduate, and college student success, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 or older, first-generation, minority college students with a yearly family income between \$30,000 and \$48,000, and enrolled in an undergraduate program. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a 15-minute survey via email, an audio-recorded interview via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or in-person meeting, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes, an audio-recorded focus group via Zoom that will take 60 minutes, and an audio-recorded follow-up interview that will take 30 minutes. The follow-up interview will also be conducted through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or in-person meetings. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate or for more information, you may contact me.

A consent document will be sent to you after you contact me to express interest in the study. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you must sign and return the consent document to me before participating in any study procedures.

Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for participating in the study.

Sincerely,

Garry Mebane  
Doctoral Student Candidate

**Appendix D: List of Codes, Sub-Themes, and Themes**

Code	Sub-theme	Theme	No. of Participants	No. of Occurrences
		First-generation minority college students experienced challenges in coping with changes in being a college student	12	77
	exposure to a different culture		6	12
culture shock			3	3
experiences as a minority			4	5
language barrier			2	4
	exposure to a different lifestyle		12	52
changes in financial struggles			11	37
doing things independently			7	9
having social challenges			5	6
	felt anxious		8	13
felt anxious about failing expectations			4	5
felt anxious from the lack of information			2	2
felt lost and stressed			3	3
felt somewhat anxious			2	2
not shy, embracing growth and mistakes			1	1
		First-generation minority college students experienced engagement with different people and activities	12	29

	benefit from participation in the activities and classes		7	11
developed socialization and critical thinking			4	4
doing volunteer work			1	1
enjoyed activities			2	4
learned from others			1	1
led younger classmates			1	1
	interacted with different people		9	12
exposure to a diverse population			4	5
made friends from class			4	5
meeting accomplished people			1	2
	not keen on socializing		5	6
did not talk much			3	3
no time for clubs			2	2
participated due to requirements			1	1
		First-generation minority college students are being motivated to persist obtaining a college degree	12	80
	motivated by others		10	21
motivated by mother			2	3
motivated by peers			4	5
wanting to be a role model for siblings and children			8	13

	motivated oneself		12	59
having a sense of achievement and self-validation			12	39
improving one's life			10	15
knowing the value of education			2	5
		First-generation minority college students have belief in one's ability to overcome challenges in college	12	31
Perceived one has good time management skills			2	2
perceived oneself as brave			1	1
perceived oneself as disciplined			2	3
felt inferior as a minority			1	1
Perceived to have tenacity			11	20
Had personal doubts			1	1
		First-generation minority college students lacked guidance and support in obtaining a college degree	11	22
no guidance in navigating college			9	17
others have low expectations of them			4	4
relatives did not value college			1	1
		First-generation minority college students received some emotional and resource support	10	18

other supports			4	4
received emotional support			9	14

## Appendix E: Data Collection Protocols

### Interview Protocol

The following interview questions have been developed and was utilized for participant data collection:

1. Please describe who you are, including where you are from, your age, ethnicity, and your first-generation college student status.
2. Please tell me about your current progress toward degree completion and if you live on campus or commute.
3. Describe your transition from high school to college, including emotions and level of preparedness for the academic responsibilities of college-level coursework.
4. Please share some of your successes in college as a first-generation student.
5. Please describe some of your challenges in college as a first-generation student.
6. What is it about the college environment that motivates you to continue with your degree goals?
7. How would you describe your college social activities outside of the classroom?
8. How would you describe how your involvement in student activities beyond course requirements influences your academic performance?
9. How would you describe your learning experiences in college as a first-generation student?
10. Please describe experiences in college that have supported your self-confidence as a student?
11. Please tell me about experiences that have supported your social growth on campus among peers and among faculty.

12. Describe the relationships you have developed on campus that have supported your academic standing.
13. Describe your communication with college faculty, staff, and administrators during your time as a college student.
14. Describe any support systems formed based on your interactions with college faculty, staff, and students that have contributed to your academic standing.
15. Describe why you keep working toward the completion of your degree.
16. Discuss anything about your experience to help future first-generation minority college students in degree programs.
17. Would you like to add anything else about this topic that you have not mentioned?

**Focus Group Protocol**

1. Can you please review the emerging themes from the initial data analysis that has taken place? Are the themes presented representative of your experiences as a first-generation minority college student?
2. How do these categories explain your experiences as a first-generation college student?
3. In light of these themes, is there anything missing that captures your experiences?
4. Would you consider any of these more important than others? Is there an order that you would present these in to reflect most important to least important?
5. Is there anything missing that sheds light on your experiences as FGMCS?



**Personal Journal Prompt**

Please write about three to five events experienced in college, each involving a significant challenge or success that affected your determination to succeed in the degree program.