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# Giving Primacy to the Voice of Parents: A Qualitative Study of the Involvement of Parents of First-Generation College Students

## Abstract

Parental involvement at the higher education level has become an area of interest in research and practice across the country. However, often there is a lack of convergence between research and practice when it comes to facilitating parental involvement (Tierney, 2002). Much of the current research investigates this phenomenon from the perspective of college students and institutions. Often, the voice of parents is missing from the research; this is especially true of special populations, such as parents of first-generation college students. The purpose of this study was to explore the level of involvement between parents of first-generation college students and colleges/ universities. The study utilized social capital theory as a framework to investigate parental involvement from the perspective of parents of first-generation college students. The study also explored how higher education professionals defined involvement and reacted to parent interview themes. The study used a qualitative method approach to help uncover how these parents understand, define, and practice parental involvement in the higher education context. Results provide details about the involvement of parents of first-generation college students. Major findings included that parents define their involvement as setting clear expectation that their children go to college and as providing support throughout their children's education including pre-college. Parents practice involvement by offering both emotional and academic support that is embedded in their relationship with their children. The study includes recommendations for research, higher education, executive leaders, and parents of first-generation college students.

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Giving Primacy to the Voice of Parents: A Qualitative Study of the Involvement of  
Parents of First-Generation College Students

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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St. John Fisher College

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## **Dedication**

First and foremost, I thank God for the strength that He has instilled in me. Through this journey, I have established a deeper relationship with God, making me a stronger, more confident, scholar, professional, and leader.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Diane Bruner—parent of this first-generation college student. You are and have always been an example of strength, dedication, and hard work. Thank you for your constancy and always believing in me. I appreciate your support, listening ear, and encouragement throughout this program and my entire life—I love you.

There is a host of special family, friends, and colleagues, near and far, who have each provided, in their own unique way, much inspiration, motivation, timely humor, and encouragement. I have valued your check-ins, prayers, listening to me vent, helpful insight, and overall confidence in me. I have tried to be sure to thank you along the way, but thank you again for your important part in my journey. Also, I have to thank Joel Osteen. He does not know me and will likely never see this, but he has absolutely been a part of my team. I thank you for your ‘on time’ messages and boosts exactly when I needed it. You have inspired much reflection, ‘taming my tongue’ when necessary, and embracing all that is in store for me. I thank Matt Burns, my supervisor, for encouragement, support of my research, flexibility, and reminders to push through.

I would like to thank the Executive Leadership program at St. John Fisher College. Dr. Marie Cianca, committee chair and advisor, thank you for your guidance, direction, and attention to detail. Dr. Melissa Ghera, committee member, thank you for always providing a different perspective. I appreciate all of the faculty and staff of the program. You all have made a meaningful impact on my overall experience and completion of the program. To my Six Degrees team, thank you all, I have appreciated the journey, laughter, debates, challenges, and insight. Thank you for allowing me to get to know you and learn more about myself through the process. To the upstairs writing crew, your support, encouragement, and camaraderie have been a wonderful addition to this experience—you helped me get through the last hurdle. A special thank you to Dr. Stephanie Townsend; I appreciate you. Your support and expertise has been invaluable and I am forever grateful.

Finally, I must thank my research participants. To the parents of first-generation college students, this study would not be possible without you. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. Thank you for all of the wonderful ways that you invest in your children and first-generation college students. To my parent and family professional colleagues from across the country, thank you for participating in this study and for all of the work that you do in support of students, their parents, and families.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Dawn L. Bruner was born in Rochester, New York. She is committed to education and has been a higher education professional for 13 years. Ms. Bruner has worked in roles as counselor and administrator, supporting students and families. Currently, Ms. Bruner is the Director of Parent and Family Relations at a private higher education institution in western New York. Ms. Bruner began her higher education journey as an undergraduate student at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. She graduated from Nazareth College in 1997 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. She continued her education, attending State University of New York College at Brockport. Ms. Bruner earned a Master of Science degree in Counselor Education in 2002. She began doctoral studies in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York in 2014. Ms. Bruner pursued her research in the involvement of parents of first-generation college students under the direction of Dr. Marie Cianca.

## **Abstract**

Parental involvement at the higher education level has become an area of interest in research and practice across the country. However, often there is a lack of convergence between research and practice when it comes to facilitating parental involvement (Tierney, 2002). Much of the current research investigates this phenomenon from the perspective of college students and institutions. Often, the voice of parents is missing from the research; this is especially true of special populations, such as parents of first-generation college students. The purpose of this study was to explore the level of involvement between parents of first-generation college students and colleges/universities. The study utilized social capital theory as a framework to investigate parental involvement from the perspective of parents of first-generation college students. The study also explored how higher education professionals defined involvement and reacted to parent interview themes. The study used a qualitative method approach to help uncover how these parents understand, define, and practice parental involvement in the higher education context. Results provide details about the involvement of parents of first-generation college students. Major findings included that parents define their involvement as setting clear expectation that their children go to college and as providing support throughout their children's education including pre-college. Parents practice involvement by offering both emotional and academic support that is embedded in their relationship with their children. The study includes recommendations for research, higher education, executive leaders, and parents of first-generation college students.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Parental Involvement in Higher Education**

Parental involvement at the higher education level has become an area of interest in research and practice across the country. However, often there is a lack of convergence between research and practice when it comes to facilitating parental involvement (Tierney, 2002). In addition, the history of parental involvement in the context of higher education has changed over time. Historically, dating back to 1837, *in loco parentis* was the model to which American institutions subscribed. *In loco parentis* meant that parents turned over some of their authority to institutions while the students were in school (Henning, 2007). *In loco parentis* carried over to colleges between 1913 and the 1960s, signaling that colleges and universities could prohibit certain student behavior, as the institution gained the right to discipline students at college. Later, college became responsible for protecting students, as well.

Historically, parents have received mixed messages from education regarding the desired role for their involvement (Kennedy, 2009). Some messages clearly indicate that parents should let go of their college age students. Yet, other messages conflict, suggesting parental involvement with students and higher education institutions positively impacts student success and outcomes (National Survey of Student Engagement, Annual Report, 2007). These messages may vary from institution to institution. Often, parental involvement in higher education focuses on intentional

programming, such as parent orientation and family weekend (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Some institutions have found that parents of college students who attend such programs tend to have a greater level of satisfaction with the institution and more productive communication with students (Beaman et al., 2010).

There is a growing body of research on this type of programming, but scant research on how parents of first-generation college students fit into the existing structure. The University of Minnesota Parent Program conducts a biannual survey, National Survey of College and University Parent Programs. The survey offers longitudinal data on programs and services provided by parent and family offices (Savage & Petree, 2015). In the most recent survey, 500 institutions were invited to participate and 223 institutions completed the survey. Data are extremely informative regarding the structure of parent offices, but do not delve into the services and programming geared toward special populations, such as parents of first-generation college students. Meanwhile, messaging to parents of special populations, such as first-generation college students, is sometimes nonexistent. First-generation college students are those whose parents did not attend postsecondary college or earn a college degree (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). In most institutions, parents of first-generation college students do not receive any targeted messages regarding their involvement or engagement. Furthermore, traditional programming may not be meeting the needs of the majority of parents of first-generation college students.

Because of mixed messages, nonexistent messages, and a history of varied expectations, parental involvement of first-generation college students is an area of emphasis in which further research is warranted. First-generation college students are



attending college in increasing numbers across the United States (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). In fact, the First-Generation Foundation reports that “an estimated 50 percent of the college population is comprised of people whose parents never attended college according to a 2010 study by the Department of Education. The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that 30 percent of all entering freshmen are first-generation college students” (First-Generation Foundation, 2016). The literature purports that parents of these first-generation college students lack information about the college process (Gofen, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). However, empirical research demonstrating investigation into their knowledge or involvement is lacking. In discussing pre-college programs, Tierney (2002) explains that parents are secondary constituents. The descriptor, secondary constituents, is utilized to refer to that fact that efforts related to pre-college and college students tend to focus on students as the primary constituent and the parent population is secondary. It could be argued that parents of first-generation college students have not only been treated as secondary, but perhaps even less of a priority. In addition, and important for higher education institutions to note, Tierney (2002) suggested programs which acknowledge that learning occurs in relation to family might incorporate a parental involvement aspect. Even though students should be the primary constituent in education, parents can have an invaluable role.

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

As mentioned previously, there is little research that provides the parent perspective for first-generation college students. Often, research identifies first-generation college students as those who have lower family incomes, are female, and are older than the traditional college aged students. In addition, research has found that first-

generation students are more likely to leave a 4-year college by the sophomore year (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). Also, literature has often cited first-generation students' difficulty simultaneously navigating between the culture of their family and the higher education culture (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Regarding the parents of these first-generation students, beyond the fact that they have not earned a college degree, there is limited information about this population. Without this information, it is unlikely that colleges and universities are effectively supporting these parents.

Although there is a growing body of research on first-generation college students, parents are not included in the research (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Bryann & Simmons, 2009). This research would be more informative if it provided multiple perspectives, such as students, institutions, and parents. Then, similarities and differences among these groups could be assessed, and more useful conclusions could be drawn. When included in some of the literature, parental involvement has been found to be important for college-going students (Gofen, 2009; Guiffrida, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005). Still, Tierney (2002) acknowledged that there does not seem to be a connection between research and practice when it comes to facilitating parental involvement. That is, research indicates that support resources are essential for the success of first-generation college students; however, that support has not been shown to carry over to parents (Tierney, 2002).

Support resources linked to the success of first-generation students have included academic assistance, activities to enhance engagement with college communities, mentoring, and strong faculty support (Jehangir, 2010; Thayer, 2000; Tierney, 2002). Variations of student support resources may be beneficial for parents. Parents of first-

generation college students do not have direct experience with the college going process and overall knowledge about college (Gofen, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Their limited knowledge might impact if and how they exercise parental involvement. Therefore, too little is known about what kind of knowledge parents of first-generation college students have about college and what factors influence their involvement.

### **Problem Statement**

Some level of parental involvement in education can be expected. Parental involvement in the higher education context has become more of a reality over time (Wartman & Savage, 2008). However, higher education fails to educate parents of first-generation college students about the systems and resources within institutions and how to best support their college-going children. Due to the increasing numbers of first-generation college students going to and moving through higher education, there has been increasing support for this student population (Jehangir, 2010; Thayer, 2000; Tierney, 2002). The institutional offices and programs which regularly engage with first-generation college students appropriately focus their attention on students.

Education, intervention, and support at the first-generation parental level often do not exist, even though there are student supports present. When it comes to the involvement of special populations, such as parents of first-generation college students, a lack of understanding persists. Largely, parents of first-generation college students are absent from the literature. That is, the involvement of the parent population has been studied without investigating the parental perspective of how they understand, define, and practice involvement (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011).

## **Theoretical Rationale**

This study used social capital theory as a framework to discuss first-generation college students and parental involvement. There are many aspects that contribute to the success of individuals. Formative family relationships impact the lives of children far beyond childhood. Social capital theory demonstrates the significance of an existing relationship between parent and child. The quality of those relationships is highlighted as a factor in the family social capital. Coleman (1990) states:

. . . social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities have two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of a social structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence (Coleman, 1990, p. 302).

Social capital theory is appropriate for this study as it positions children and parents in the theoretical assertions. Specifically, the concept of closure is an important component of the theory. Closure aided in the discussion of the relationship between parents and higher education institutions. This relationship, in the form of parental involvement, is a resource which can add to student success (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). Through Coleman's (1988) analysis, social capital, within and outside of the family context, was shown to have value in reducing the probability of dropping out of high school. Coleman (1987) noted the decline in the social capital available for raising children. The decreased social capital in a given community is most detrimental to children with the least social capital in their families. The decline and loss of social capital extends beyond families. It has implications for childrearing (Coleman, 1987). It

can be argued that the level of social capital has implications for higher education, as well.

This study examined the level of involvement between parents of first-generation college students and college/universities, as well as uncovered the level of social capital available to parents of first-generation college students. The examination of involvement is important because the social resources and assets that exist within families may impact educational experiences of students. Finally, the study uncovered the extent to which social capital is developed and maintained, in order to put forth suggestions for supporting parents, which will support the first-generation student experience.

Coleman (1988) asserted that all relationships produce some form of social capital. This use of social capital theory provided information that is distinguished from the current literature on parents of first-generation college students. There are six forms of social capital: (a) obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures; (b) information potential; (c) norms and effective sanctions; (d) authority relations; (e) appropriable social organization; and (f) intentional organization (Coleman 1988, 1990). Each form of social capital is important to both first-generation college students and their parents. The first form of social capital is obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness; this refers to the reciprocal relationship between individuals in a social environment (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Essentially, this form of capital speaks to the ideal situations where individuals can count on each other. It is impacted by the culture of the environment. The second form of social capital is information potential, which refers to the resource of valuable information made available through relationships. This form of social capital is particularly important in regards to first-generation students and parents

in the higher education context. Coleman (1988) suggests that information is a stimulus for action. Therefore, information provided to parents of first-generation college students by higher education institutions might encourage action, particularly action in the form of parental involvement. Equipped with more information from higher education institutions, parents might become a source of information for first-generation students, motivating them to act, as well. The third form, norms and effective sanctions, is a powerful form of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Norms and effective sanctions may facilitate certain actions and discourage other actions. Strong norms and sanctions may be important in steering children and young adults down an appropriate path. The fourth form, authority relations, refers to a form of social capital based on rights transferred from one person to another. That is, the person to whom rights were relinquished has a form of control—it may be a leader or someone else in authority, perhaps a parent (Coleman, 1990). The fifth form, appropriable social organization, means social capital may become available due to the nature of being affiliated with an organization. Finally, the sixth form, intentional organization, references the social capital derived from voluntary organizations. This capital benefits those involved in the organization and others who are not involved. Coleman (1990) gave an example of a Parent-Teacher Association. If a new association is developed and new disciplinary standards are enacted, this changes the school while impacting other students and parents. This last form underscores the fact that social capital is a by-product of activities that were initiated for a different purpose (Coleman, 1990). That is, it is not likely that increasing social capital is the motivation behind the development of Parent-Teacher Association, but it is certainly an outcome.

Social capital theory delves into family relationships. In exploring social capital theory, the complexity of families and their makeup becomes apparent. Coleman (1988) suggested that family background has at least three distinct parts: (a) financial capital, (b) human capital, and (c) social capital. Financial capital can be measured by the income of a family. This form of capital can be directly related to physical resources that promote achievement, such as study tools. Human capital can be measured by the education of the parent. The existence of this form of capital might be indicative of an environment conducive to learning. Coleman (1988) differentiates social capital as the relations between children and parents (and families). If human capital is not coupled with social capital, it does not impact the child. Social capital is paramount to the current study. Social capital allows a child to access the parent's human capital (Coleman, 1988). The relationship between parents and children is paramount in social capital theory. The existence of the relationship is important and there is much value in the *quality* of that relationship (Coleman, 1990; Marjoribanks, 2002), although Coleman's research noted that, as children age, the relationship with parents moved from an authority relation to a friendship relation, weakening the relationship with parents (Coleman, 1987).

Relationships outside of the family are important to social capital theory, as well. The quality of those outside relationships influences building social capital (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). Through this theory, Coleman asserted that social structures serve as resources to individuals in ways that allow the individual to achieve goals that they might not otherwise achieve (Coleman, 1990). Coleman (1988, 1990) demonstrated the importance of these structures with school-aged children. Social structures are networks of individuals and/or organizations representing relationships among them. For example,

a parent, child, and the child's friend represent a social structure or network (Coleman, 1988).

The current study applied Coleman's theory to first-generation college students and parents, further exploring Coleman's (1988, 1990) essential concept of closure and intergenerational closure, which indicates a more complex structure. Particularly, in cases of parents and children, intergenerational closure is significant (Coleman, 1988). Intergenerational closure is represented by relationships between parent and child and relationships outside of the family, such as the relationship that parents have with the parents of other children. Closure is a source of social capital. In regards to this study, parents of first-generation college students may not have relationships with parents of other college students. Also, parents of first-generation college students may not have a relationship with the institution, further indicating that intergenerational closure does not exist. This lack of closure between parents and higher education will likely have an impact on social capital. Further, for parents of first-generation college students who lack a relationship or closure with the institution, the institution may remain a mystery or a source of confusion. "Closure creates trustworthiness in a social structure" (Coleman, 1988, p. 108). Without an understanding of institutions, parents of first-generation college students may lack trust in the institution.

Per Coleman (1988), intergenerational closure provides a greater level of social capital to parents. It can be argued that enhancing the level of social capital available to parents will inevitably increase the level of social capital available to their children. Therefore, an additional component to this research is the investigation of the higher education *network* and the closure that exists between first-generation college students,



parents, and the institution. This type of exploration, relating to the success of first-generation college students, has not been found in existing empirical research. Further, parents of first-generation college students may not have many multiplex relationships or various networks which could contribute to the success of children in elementary, secondary or higher education (Coleman, 1988). Therefore, this study examined the relationship or lack of relationships existing between parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions.

Relationships outside of the family context can contribute to social capital. These relationships may be with other families or formal organizations and institutions. Still, it is pointed out that social capital tends to be a secondary outcome of actions. There are benefits to actions and social relationships which can positively impact children, families and communities. However, these important social capital building actions, which contribute to the public good, are often unintentional (Coleman, 1988). In some cases, these relationships may be lacking among parents of first-generation college students, but perhaps can be facilitated. More clarification is needed regarding the actions of higher education institutions that impact relationship building with parents of first-generation college students.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Currently, there is little information in the literature related to parental involvement from the parental perspective. Much of the published empirical research on parental involvement, in the higher education context, does not lead to a greater understanding of specific parent populations, such as parents of first-generation college students. Gathering such information makes it more likely that colleges and universities

can effectively support parents. Particularly, parents of first-generation college students are likely to benefit most from such support, as research has indicated this population may be unfamiliar with the college experience (Gofen, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). The study explored the involvement between parents of first-generation college students and colleges/universities. Also, this research uncovered the level of social capital available to parents of first-generation college students. Through this research, suggestions are put forth regarding supporting parents of first-generation students which may directly impact students.

The purpose of the study was to examine how parents of first-generation college students define parental involvement at the college level and identify how they practice involvement. The study also presented parent perspectives to college administrators in order to explore differences in the perception of involvement. The study was designed using social capital as the theoretical framework in order to explore the relationship between parents and higher education institutions. In regards to low income first-generation college students, Jehangir (2010) suggested that “making changes in how higher education invests in historically underrepresented students is critical . . .” (p. 186). The nature of the current study provided important information about students’ parents, and by including them, enhance higher education’s investment in parents of first-generation college students.

### **Research Questions**

Parental involvement in the context of higher education can be a complex issue. There are many populations within the larger population of parents of college aged students, such as parents of first-generation college students and parents of international

students. Parents of first-generation college student were the focus of this study. The primary research questions for the study were:

1. What is the understanding and definition of parental involvement according to parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions?
2. How do parents of first-generation college students practice involvement?
3. How can higher education institutions facilitate more effective parental involvement with parents of first-generation college students?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study contributed to the literature regarding parental involvement for parents of first-generation college students. The study addressed a gap in the literature by highlighting the population of parents of first-generation college students and their perspectives. This knowledge provides direction on how these parents impact first-generation college student outcomes. Specifically, institutional offices regularly engaging with first-generation college students might revisit parent related efforts as a result of this study. A key importance of the study was the inclusion of parents of first-generation college students as participants in the research design. Previous empirical research lacks this approach. Existing research indicates a need for greater understanding of parents of first-generation college students. Awareness of specific needs of the population allows higher education institutions to engage with first-generation college students and parents of first-generation college students in a more effective manner, possibly enhancing student success. Organizations such as the Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals (AHEPPP) may benefit from current

study findings, and provide recommendations to higher education institutions across the country.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Closure.** The relationship and connection between parents of first-generation college students and institutions may vary. Essentially, closure exists when a network is formed (Coleman, 1988, 1990). This network can exist in the form of a relationship between parents, students, and institutions. Closure is a source of social capital which creates trust (Coleman, 1990). As parents feel more connected with an institution, they are likely experience a greater level of trust. In addition, the study refers to intergenerational closure. Intergenerational closure may be the existence of a relationship with other parents of first-generation college students. The relationship between parents serves as a resource and knowledge sharing opportunity, due to their shared experience.

**First-generation college students.** First-generation college students are students whose parents did not attend postsecondary college and earn a college degree (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Choy, 2001; London, 1989). The definition of first-generation college students has varied in research and individual institutional contexts. Often, there are common themes in literature about first-generation college students and families. One such theme is a correlation between first-generation status and low socioeconomic status (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

**Parental involvement.** There are many levels and perspectives of parental involvement. It is important to note that various terms are used to discuss involvement in the literature. Such terms are family involvement (Bryan & Simmons, 2009) parental support (Dennis et al., 2005; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011) and helicopter

parenting (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Schiffrin, Liss, Miles-McLean, Geary, Erchull, & Tashner, 2014). As indicated by the concept helicopter parenting, parental involvement is sometimes seen as a deficit (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Generally, parental involvement in the higher education context is the phenomenon of parents being interested and actively involved in students' lives and developing or engaging in their own connection with the institution (Wartman & Savage, 2008). This definition represents an institutional perspective of involvement. In addition, it is not specific to parents of first-generation college students, but further exploring their connection with institutions is warranted. This study utilized the definition proposed by Wartman and Savage (2008).

**Socioeconomic status.** Like first-generation college students, the conceptualization of socioeconomic status may vary. Wartman (2009) relates socioeconomic status to parental education, occupation, and resources available.

### **Chapter Summary**

The chapter discussed parental involvement of first-generation college students. Research has indicated that parents of first-generation college students impact college going and success of first-generation college students. Yet, higher education institutions are not educating or engaging this constituent as a special population.

Further research is needed regarding investigating involvement from the perspective of parents of first-generation college students. The growing numbers of first-generation college students on college campuses has resulted in an increasing amount of support and resources. However, support or engagement with the parents of first-generation students is lacking. While research suggests that this parent population is

uninformed (Gofen, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006), there are few examples of higher education intentionally engaging this population. The study examined the relationship between parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions.

The theoretical framework used in this study was social capital theory. Social capital theory positions parents and children in the larger context of a social structure (Coleman, 1988). Coleman's (1988) concepts of closure and intergenerational closure help to frame the study and explore the importance of the relationships within the social structure. Applying these concepts to parents of first-generation students in a higher education context allowed more information to be gathered on this relationship. Further, information potential, a form of social capital, was emphasized. Information can be a source of capital for parents of first-generation college students, and therefore their students.

The study, unlike many others, took the approach of including the parental perspective. While there has been some indication that parents impact first-generation college students, there is little knowledge about *how* parents impact these students and how they practice involvement. Gaining the perspective of these parents and greater understanding of how their perspective compares to the perspective of higher education institutions was a valuable exploration.

Chapter 2 presents the body of literature on parental involvement and parental involvement of first-generation college students. The impact of parental involvement on college going, transition to college, and development is presented. In addition, the role of socioeconomic factors and other barriers are discussed. The chapters following the

review of literature present the study design, findings, and implications for research and practice.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

This chapter provides a review of the literature and research regarding first-generation college students and parental involvement. First, the chapter examines studies that have utilized the social capital theory to frame research on first-generation college students and parental involvement. Second, the chapter explores previous research demonstrating the importance of the parent – child relationship. Lastly, the chapter presents the existence, impact of, and factors which influence parental involvement in higher education.

Parental involvement in the context of higher education can be a complex issue. There are many populations within the larger population of parents of college aged students, such as parents of first-generation college students and parents of international students. Parents of first-generation college student are the focus of the current research. The primary research questions for the study were:

1. What is the understanding and definition of parental involvement according to parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions?
2. How do parents of first-generation college students practice involvement?
3. How can higher education institutions facilitate more effective parental involvement with parents of first-generation college students?



## **Social Capital**

Social capital is important in the discussion of students and parental involvement. Social capital theory recognizes the importance of the relationship between parent and child. Capital theories have evolved over time and there is increasing empirical research related to many forms, including human, cultural and family capital (Gofen, 2009; Ringenberg, McElwee, & Israel, 2009). In fact, Kouzes and Posner (2012) identified social capital as a contributing factor to success and overall happiness. Perna and Titus (2005) studied the relationship between parental involvement and college enrollment. The researchers discussed parental involvement as a form of social capital. This form of capital provides prospective college students with resources that aid in their college enrollment (Perna & Titus, 2005). Perna and Titus (2005) explored parental involvement at the high school level, prior to the transition to college. Perna and Titus suggested that parental involvement and the various forms of capital available correlate with the students enrolling in college (Perna & Titus, 2005). It could be argued that these same factors, parental involvement and capital, can influence success, retention and connectedness after students are enrolled in college. Still, while Perna and Titus (2005) did not specify first-generation college students, their perspective on parental involvement is valuable because it positively positions parental involvement as an asset to the student's education experience. The Perna and Titus study is in line with original assertions of social capital theory. In fact, "the extraordinary success of many first-generation Asian children in American schools is often seen to reside in strong families, highly oriented to academic success" (Coleman, 1987, p. 35).

Some international research supports the idea that families can have a valuable role in the lives of students. Gofen's (2009) research indicated that families are often facilitators of first-generation student success. Israeli first-generation college students were interviewed to investigate what contributed to their pursuit of college, particularly since their parents did not have college experience. Family was discussed in a broad context, not just parents. He found that all study participants indicated that their family was the reason they made it to college or the reason they were able to "breakthrough" (Gofen, 2009). While this study was informed by social capital theory, it highlighted the family context through the discussion of family capital. Ziemniak (2011) also explored the assets of family, finding that parents and family instilled values and resilience in first-generation college students. Students cited their parents as a motivating factor for their success. Gofen (2009) explained family capital as the family's practices which influence the future of the children; this included means, strategies and nonmaterial resources.

Gofen (2009) indicated that family income constraints were a factor for participants in his study. Still, he determined that parental involvement in the form of hopes and expectations does not vary based on socioeconomic status or first-generation vs non-first-generation status. That is, parents of these first-generation college students expected their students to attend college and do well, though family capacity may be limited (Gofen, 2009). Gofen's research established involvement of the family as a unit as essential, as well as a broader perspective of where involvement can take place. Gofen's research is valuable in supporting that lower socioeconomic status is not reason enough to assume that parents are not involved.

## **Parental Involvement in Higher Education**

The impact of parental involvement in the higher education context can be significant. However, the role of parental involvement prior to students reaching college is important, as well. The influence of parents and family is often meaningful to the college going, transition, and college enrollment of students (Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015). Also, parents' socioeconomic status can impact students by influencing the students' educational expectations and the type of higher education they attend. In addition, parental involvement may impact student development and overall well-being for students. The level of parental involvement may vary, but its existence or lack of existence can impact students.

**College going, transition, and college enrollment.** Earlier in this literature review Perna and Titus (2005) were highlighted as the researchers studied parental involvement as a form of capital. In addition, their research revealed that students' odds of enrolling in college, 2-year or 4-year institutions, increased with the frequency with which parents engaged students in discussions related to education. Also, students' odds of enrolling in college increased with parents' frequency initiating contact with school to volunteer or discuss academics. Perna and Titus (2005) found that positive indications of involvement increased students' likelihood of enrolling in college, though there was some variation in findings. Their study showed that the relationship between college enrollment and parental involvement varied by race and ethnicity. That is, African American and Hispanic students were less likely to enroll in a 4 year institution the fall after high school graduation than their White and Asian counterparts. Overall, Perna and

Titus (2005) showed that parental involvement was positive and was an asset to students' education experience.

Parental involvement as a positive or negative influence has a role in students making it to college. Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) investigated how parental involvement shaped college opportunity and how social contexts shape parental involvement. Importantly, parents were included among the diverse research participants. Distinguished from other research, these findings suggested that school structures and policies play a role in low levels of parental involvement. The researchers established that parental involvement is shaped by the higher education context, as well as the social, economic, and policy context (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Kiyama et al. (2015) appeared to support this idea suggesting "there is also a lack of attention on the role of institutions in the development and support of opportunities for parental and family involvement" (p. 43). The argument is made for gaining a better understanding of the parent and family experience and how institutions are impacting those experiences. Ziemniak's (2011) research suggested that institutions are not meeting the needs of parents of first-generation college students. When institutions do not effectively communicate available resources and support to this population, students are directly impacted because parents cannot share information that they have not received. That is, the level of parental involvement is impacted by more than educational background of parents and perceived deficits of the first-generation parents. Another key theme that emerged from Ziemniak's study goes beyond parents shaping college opportunities for students. Parents' involvement varied by socioeconomic status. Ziemniak (2011) found

that families with lower socioeconomic status showed a higher rate of dependence on schools for college related guidance and support.

**Socioeconomic status.** Socioeconomic status was significant to earlier research on the impact of family on education. Trusty (1998) conducted a quantitative study to explore family influences on educational expectation of late adolescents. Socioeconomic status was found to be the strongest predictor of late adolescent educational expectations (Trusty, 1998). Socioeconomic status, along with gender, was included in this research, as Trusty found that these variables related to parental involvement and education expectations in his previous research. Trusty (1998) found that at the lowest levels of socioeconomic status, parent involvement predicted students' educational expectations more strongly. Parents' school-related behavior and activity predicted educational expectations more strongly at moderate and high levels of socioeconomic status. The research elaborated to suggest that schools engaging low socioeconomic status parents might help to produce the highest educational expectations for these students. Trusty (1998) found positive correlation between adolescents' positive perception of parents and adolescents' perception of parents as controlling. In addition, there was positive correlation between more parents' self-reported involvement behavior and high educational expectation of late adolescents (Trusty, 1998). The study findings supported that parents' personal involvement with adolescents' influenced continued education at all socioeconomic levels.

Parents can also impact the type of institution students attend. Kim and Schneider (2005) used a transition model to assess the odds of students attending 4-year vs. 2-year colleges, when they have aligned ambitions with parents. Like other researchers, Kim

and Schneider (2005) used data from the NELS in this quantitative study. Results showed that alignment of parental expectations and student goals and aspirations increased students' odds of attending a 4-year college, as opposed to a two-year college, the year after high school graduation. Also, for the parents reporting regularly engaging students in academic related conversations, their students had greater odds of attending college. Further, findings indicated that students' odds or likelihood of enrolling in 2-year or 4-year institutions increased if their parents have reached higher levels of education (Kim & Schneider, 2005). However, the logged family income impacted the odds of enrolling in a 4-year college only. Importantly, parent participation in college related education programs was significant to college enrollment for minority students. These students benefited from assistance and education provided by the schools. Kim and Schneider (2005) also analyzed if the social capital variables utilized were predictive of the enrollment in selective 4-year colleges. Parental education and family income effect on college selectiveness were significant. That is, students from more advantaged, higher socioeconomic backgrounds attended more selective institutions. Also, students and parents with aligned ambitions, and parents participating in college related actions attended more selective colleges. Therefore, these aligned ambitions and behaviors significantly affected selectivity (Kim & Schneider, 2005).

**Impact on student development.** The level of parental involvement can directly impact student development. Cullaty's (2011) research explored the role of parental involvement in autonomy development, specifically, using the grounded theory methodological approach. Cullaty (2011) found that students had positive feelings and examples about support from their parents and their level of involvement. In addition,

the study reported students experienced instances of too much parental involvement, including parent attempts to control or direct academic and career decisions (Cullaty, 2011). Students revealed that parents exercising too much parental involvement left them feeling less confident and unsure about their decisions. Hence, overly involved parents negatively impacted students' autonomy development.

Like McCarron and Inkelas (2006) and Schiffrin et al. (2014), Cullaty's (2011) research included only the student participants in the conceptualization of parental involvement. In addition, Cullaty discussed parental involvement in a manner that fails to touch on the role that institutions have in parental involvement. Further, the research lacked a focused, operationalized concept to parental involvement, using terms such as involvement, support, and control.

More recently, literature has discussed parental involvement using various labels. Many of these references to parents of college students are negative. One such term is helicopter parent. Schiffrin et al. (2014) explored the impact of helicopter parenting on the students' well-being. They found that helicopter parenting behavior is related to increased levels of depression and decreased satisfaction with life. Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) defined helicopter parenting as parents who hover and are potentially over-involved in the lives of their children. Helicopter parenting was said to be similar to forms of parenting exercised with children younger than college aged students who are emerging adults, such as overprotective or over solicitous parenting (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Self-worth, school engagement, perceived adult status, and identity were investigated to explore the correlates between helicopter parenting and child outcomes. The study findings of Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) confirmed that helicopter

parenting, behavioral control, and psychological control were interrelated, but do not completely overlap. Therefore, helicopter parenting did present as distinct in emerging adulthood from the other forms of control studied. Importantly, the study established that though helicopter parenting is intrusive, it appears to come from a place of the parent's concern for the child's well-being (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012).

College students' adjustment to college has also been explored in the literature. Yazedjian, Toews, and Navarro (2009) explored whether college adjustment was a mediating variable in the relationship between various parental factors and the academic achievement of first-year college students. The measures were parental attachment, parental expectations, and adjustment. Findings indicated that there was a relationship between parental factors and college adjustment, but there were some differences across race. Yazedjian et al. (2009) conducted analyses to ascertain the relationship between parental factors and adjustment. Parental factors were significantly correlated with overall college adjustment for White students. Further, there was significant correlation between parental factors and GPA. The findings differed for Hispanic students. Parental factors that correlated with college adjustment were: parental relationship and parents positively impacting students becoming less dependent (Yazedjian et al., 2009). As with the White students, GPA and parental factors had significant correlation.

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

There is a growing body of literature regarding first-generation college students. First-generation college students are students whose parents did not attend postsecondary college nor earn a college degree (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Choy, 2001; London, 1989). The differences between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation



counterparts are often compared. Bui (2002) conducted a comparison study involving freshmen first-generation college students who began their education at a 4-year, competitive institution. First-generation college students were compared with students whom both parents have at least a bachelor's degree, and students whose parents have some college experience, but no degree. All study participants were asked to provide information about background, 16 reasons for attending college and accuracy of 10 first-year experiences (Bui, 2002).

Investigating the background characteristics of participants revealed that first-generation college students were more likely to (a) be an ethnic minority, (b) come from a lower socioeconomic background, (c) speak a primary language at home that is not English, and (d) score lower on SAT than other students (Bui, 2002). Regarding reasons for pursuing higher education, first-generation college students rated gaining respect, representing their family well, and providing financial support to family higher than the other students. Parental expectations to go to college was not rated higher for any group of participants, therefore was not significant. There were similarities and differences in first-year experiences. Though, financially helping parents after completing college is a reason first-generation students pursue college, it could be argued that it is a first-year experience connected to the issue of paying for school.

**Impact of parents and family.** First-generation college students may attend college away from home, but family related issues and realities can impact them from afar. Covarrubias and Fryberg (2014) explored the existence of family achievement guilt and tested to guilt reduction in a two-part study. The study consisted of first-generation and continuing generation college students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). Covarrubias

and Fryberg (2014) sought to establish that among ethnic minority and first-generation college students, guilt was more related to accomplishing greater success than family members, as opposed to being related to being more successful than unknown strangers. Also, it was expected that first-generation and Latino college students would experience more guilt than the continuing generation students in the study. Study findings revealed that the first-generation students came from lower income backgrounds than continuing generation students. In addition, Latino students came from lower income backgrounds than their White counterparts.

Covarrubias and Fryberg's (2014) research indicated that first-generation college students experienced more family achievement guilt than continuing generation students. Though there was no differentiation between Latino and White first-generation students, White first-generation students experienced more family achievement guilt than their White continuing generation counterparts. Overall, Latino first-generation students experienced more family guilt than all other participants. However, college generation status (first or continuing) did not significantly affect survivor guilt in this study. The guilt experienced by participants was directly related to family, but not strangers.

In a second study, it was of interest to explore how to reduce family achievement guilt. Covarrubias & Fryberg (2014) employed an additional strategy in which participants were randomly assigned to either (1) reflect on a time when they provided assistance to a family member in need or (2) not to reflect. The second study used analysis to test if the perception of family struggle mediated the interaction of generation status and family achievement guilt. The results of study two matched the results of the first study. Those findings were that first-generation students, and those who are ethnic

minority, reported more family achievement guilt than White and continuing generation college students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). The findings revealed that the strategy of reflecting on helping a family member reduced family achievement guilt for first-generation students. In fact, the first-generation students who reflected on helping family had less family achievement guilt than first-generation students in the control group (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). Covarrubias and Fryberg's (2014) research presented an interesting representation of the impact of family. Sometimes students are negatively impacted by family, but it may not be directly related to the behavior or involvement of parents. Covarrubias and Fryberg (2014) offered a strategy or intervention for family achievement guilt. This strategy may have implications with parents of first-generation college students, as well.

Connections within the family have been found to be important to first-generation college students. London's (1989) study established the important connection between family and first-generation college student education. In this early qualitative study, London (1989) interviewed first-generation college students from low income and working class backgrounds. The study sought to investigate the relationship between college enrollment and family dynamics, using psychodynamic family theory as a research lens. Prior to Tinto's theory, London (1989) sought to uncover how students handled the varying demands of home and education. London (1989) found that higher education brought up separation-related concerns for students. The participants revealed how their parents expressed their needs and educational hopes for them. The strength of the legacy of the voices of parents and grandparents significantly impacted students' decision making and attitudes about college. Layered family influences, often

multigenerational, were definitely among the reasons for first-generation students matriculating into college (London, 1989). London demonstrated that the educational decisions of first-generation college students were often tied to a rich family history, pressure, conflict, and conflicting responsibilities. Whereas Tinto (1993) emphasized the importance of separating from communities of the past, London's research acknowledged that family influences and patterns can be both positive and negative. Still, the expressed educational needs and hopes of families stand in contrast to other research which suggested that parents may not grasp the value of a college education or provide minimal support (Engle, 2007; Sy et al., 2011; Thayer, 2000).

### **Parental Involvement and First-Generation College Students**

The involvement of parents of first-generation college students is increasingly investigated. Parental involvement may impact the behavior of students, but may also impact their educational goals, motivation and attitudes. Exploration into the literature on involvement in the form of parental support shows interesting findings for first-generation students. Perhaps institutions have a role in parental involvement. In fact, they may sometimes serve as barriers to involvement (Jehangir, 2010; Rowan-Kenyon, et al., 2008).

**Parent/family impact.** Understanding how parental involvement impacts and influences the academic lives of first-generation college students has been explored in the literature. McCarron and Inkelas (2006) investigated if parental involvement influenced the educational aspirations of first-generation college students. In addition, McCarron and Inkelas explored if the educational aspirations of first-generation college students differed from their attainment, and if there were variations in attainment based on gender,

race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (2006). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) did a comparative sample with the populations of first-generation college students and non-first-generation students. They found that parental involvement was the most significant indicator of educational aspirations for non-first-generation students. In contrast, the chief predictor of educational aspirations for first-generation students was their own understanding of the value of good grades, though parental involvement was a predictor, as well (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). The findings for McCarron and Inkelas indicated that parental involvement was not significant for first-generation students.

The impact of parental influence, as well as peer influence, has been explored. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) conducted a short-term longitudinal study with first-generation Latino and Asian college students during their second year of college, at an institution which primarily serves ethnically diverse students (Dennis et al., 2005). The researchers explored how personal characteristics and factors such as parents and peers influence college outcomes and motivation for attending college. Also, the researchers studied the role of environmental factors on academics. Both support and lack of needed support were explored. The only significant differences between the participant groups were high school GPA and cumulative college GPA. The GPA for Asian students was higher. It was found that the students' own motivation to attend college based on internal interest was predictive of college adjustment. However, family expectation motivation was not related to any college outcome variables (Dennis et al., 2005). Also, the results indicated that the first-generation student participants perceived that peers were a better source of support than parents, in regards to doing well in college.

Interestingly, the research of both McCarron and Inkelas (2006), and Dennis et al. (2005) indicated students' individualistic motivation, as opposed to collectivistic motivation.

Parents and first-generation students are in regular communication during college. Research is mixed on the impact of that communication and support. Palbusa and Gauvain (2017) found that this communication is mostly in the form of emotional support. Unlike their non-first-generation counterparts, first-generation students did not report that they communicate about college related concerns or utilize parents as a resource. First-generation student experiences with parental involvement, in the form of parent support, have been explored in relation to negative experiences, such as stress. Sy et al. (2011) conducted a quantitative comparison study of first-time, female freshmen students. First-generation students were compared with continuing generation students. Ethnic groups participating in the study were White, Latina, and Asian American students. Study participants completed an online survey that focused on their transition to college (Sy et al., 2011). College generation status, parent support and stress, and demographic information obtained from university data, were measured. The study focused on two types of parent support, informational and emotional, as these types were most reported and most relevant for college students (Sy et al., 2011).

First-generation students had lower parent emotional support and parent informational support, compared to their continuing generation counterparts (Sy et al., 2011). However, the student stress and GPA did not show a difference. The correlation was negative between stress and parent emotional support for groups of students. Though, there was no significant correlation between parent informational support and stress, first-generation students showed a negative trend (Sy et al., 2011).

In another comparison study, Nichols and Islas (2016) found that parents of first-generation college students pushed students through college by way of their support, while parents of continuing generation college students pulled students through college by way of their own higher education experience. All parents served as the main form of social capital and a significant source of support for students (Nichols & Islas, 2016). However, study participants reported experiencing differences in messages received from parents. Sometimes students receive messages from parents based the past experiences of parents. Rondini (2016) found that low-income, first-generation students utilized the knowledge of parents' past struggles in life as a source of motivation to succeed in college. For their parents, the students' success was not only a point of pride, but also a reward for the parents' lifelong hard work. Parents of the low-income first-generation students created a foundation in which they valued higher education even without going to college. They felt successful because of their part in getting their children to and through college. This success made up for what some parents saw as their own mistakes or shortcomings. Related to the findings of Rondini (2016), Wang (2014) found that first-generation students recalled parents' sharing messages with students about their experiences. Some of these messages were cautionary tales or opportunities for expressing that parents wanted students to be more successful than themselves. All messages had an emphasis on family and students accessed the messages as resources to support their success. Students expressed that this communication was impactful in their experience as college students.

Some existing literature highlights what first-generation students and families are lacking. This deficit based language may get in the way of gaining a better understanding

of parental involvement and first-generation college students. Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, and Moll (2011) argued that gaining an understanding of and valuing the funds of knowledge of families is important. Funds of knowledge refers to the resources and values within the fabric of students, parent, families and communities. However, these funds of knowledge may go unrecognized by institutions (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). Exploration of the role of the institution is essential, but often lacking in research (Dika & Singh, 2002). Further, O'Keefe and Djeukeng (2010) suggested that the type of institution that first-generation college students attend influences the social capital made available to students. This may be true regarding the social capital made available to parents, as well, therefore impacting parental involvement.

**Barriers.** Socioeconomic status has regularly been included in research about first-generation college student parental involvement. While the research of Rowan-Kenyon et al., (2008) did not specify a first-generation population, the teacher and parent participants from low-achieving schools and low socioeconomic status indicated barriers to involvement. This finding is interesting as low-achieving schools and families with low socioeconomic status are sometimes connected with first-generation students in the literature. Though some research seeks to explore the impact of family, it can reveal other findings. Bryan and Simmons (2009) sought to determine if family and other factors influenced the success of first-generation Appalachian college students. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the researchers developed a qualitative description study. It was determined that the participants were impacted by each of Bronfenbrenner's four levels of influence. These levels of influence are: microsystem,



mesosystem, ecosystem, and microsystem; they were indicated across the seven themes that emerged from the study (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

The impact of family on first-generation college students surfaced repeatedly in the data. Participants revealed close connections to family and home communities, reality of separate identities, a home self and a college self, pressure to succeed, and returning home are all directly related to families (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Data indicated that the family's lack of education about the college experience promoted feelings of disconnectedness for students. These students missed the connection with family due to the division that their postsecondary education caused. This study established education, the student's education system, and the parents' lack of education about that system, as a barrier to the connections between students and family. These barriers may affect the student at home with families and in their education setting.

### **Substantive Gaps in the Literature**

Existing research indicates a need for greater understanding of parents of first-generation college students. Awareness of how this population impacts students and institutions may allow higher education institutions to engage with first-generation college students and parents of first-generation college students in a more effective manner, possibly enhancing student success. Aspects of the reviewed literature provided valuable information, but in many cases the research stopped short of gaining a better perspective of parental involvement in the college context. Interestingly, much of the research only includes the student or child's perspective of parenting (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dennis et al., 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Schiffrin et al., 2014). Therefore, this represents an existing gap in the literature.

The literature indicated extant research on college going, transition, and enrollment in relation to parental involvement (Kim & Schneider, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Research provided some indication of the impact of parental involvement *in* higher education, but more research which focuses on the higher education context is needed. Research that continues the exploration of the extent to which education institutions, namely colleges and universities, encourage parental involvement would provide further direction at the higher education level.

Research regarding parental involvement and first-generation college students has focused on the institutional perspective. Often, higher education administrators, practitioners, or faculty are the primary investigators (e.g., Bryan & Simmons, 2009; London, 1989). Studies exploring the experiences of parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions (administrators) are only minimally represented in the literature. Research participants have primarily been current students, or sometimes institution employees. Often, within the current research, parents of first-generation students are not presented in a positive light and their contributions and strengths are unrecognized. Kiyama et al. (2015) discussed the danger in not acknowledging the strength of these parents.

Largely, parents of first-generation college students are missing as a source of data, only included as participants in few (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Rondini, 2016; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008; Trusty, 1998; Ziemniak, 2011) studies. Trusty's (1998) use of data which indicated involvement behavior as reported by parents makes his research stand out. Though Trusty's (1998) inclusion of parent data, during students' senior year of high school, is positive, Trusty highlighted the lack of data for 2

years post-high-school. Increased levels of actual parental involvement and interest in said involvement, justifies further follow up. Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) offered key research with a valuable research design and inquiry strategies. Unlike other researchers, Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) emphasized the role of the educational context and further study in this area is essential.

### **Chapter Summary**

Research in the area of parental involvement is growing, though parents of first-generation college students are a population in need of further study. It is clearly an area of interest as indicated by the studies that have touched on this topic. Parental involvement research has focused on college going and transition, differences between ethnicities and socioeconomic status, and impact on student's development. The combined parental-involvement and first-generation college student research has focused on impact of parents and families, as well as barriers faced. Based on the research, socioeconomic status, as an issue, needs further exploration. Some research indicated significant findings pertaining to socioeconomic status and other research only broached on variations based on socioeconomic findings.

Parental involvement has impacted students' transition to college as well as various aspects of students' development. Kim and Schneider (2005) reinforced that parental education, family income, and socioeconomic status can influence impact college selectivity. In addition, research has reinforced that there are varying levels of parental involvement, as reported by students. Further, research with students has found that some levels of involvement, such as helicopter parenting, negatively impact development and well-being (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). However, it is noted that

even helicopter parenting generally comes from a parents' positive place of concern. Additionally, student adjustment has varied by racial and ethnic differences, as related to parental attachment (Yazedjian et al., 2009). This research is informative, but it lacks detail on the varying levels of involvement from the parental perspective.

The current literature indicates that first-generation college students often differ from their non-first-generation counterparts. Bui (2002) found that financial matters are often important to these students, often manifesting in students worrying about how to pay for college, and a desire to provide financial assistance to parents after college. The existence of family relationships has been found to impact first-generation college students. In fact, one study found that parents are a main form of social capital for first-generation college students (Nichols & Islas, 2016). These students may experience family achievement guilt related to being college students, but not necessarily related to the existence or lack of parental involvement (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). Generally though, education decisions made by first-generation college students can be difficult and tied to complex family dynamics.

When parental perspective on involvement is sought out, parents are inclined to share their perspective, as well as barriers to involvement. The research of Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) uncovered barriers to involvement as identified by parents and school personnel. Some of the barriers were parents work schedules and need to focus on survival instead of involvement, language and lack of comfort with and trust of staff. In addition, schools approaches to parental involvement, often traditional and lacking innovation, also impacted involvement. However, in other cases, in high achieving and high socioeconomic schools, parents influenced the schools for college

opportunity by creating advisory boards and programming and advocating for their students' participation. These parents created bridges for their students.

The recent literature has contributed to an understanding of parental involvement and first-generation college students. While only some of the research focused on socioeconomic status, there is an undergirding thread throughout the research reviewed. Literature has emphasized how parents impact college going and the transition to college for students. Knowledge gained from the aforementioned research may inform research questions regarding parental involvement and first-generation students in the higher education context. Additionally, the literature reviewed suggests that parental involvement is a factor in various aspects of a student's development, autonomy, well-being, and satisfaction with life.

Most intriguing of all the literature reviewed is the concept that the educational context has a role in the level of parental involvement. Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) employed a study that sought multiple perspectives and utilized multi-data sources, and strategies of inquiry. The use of semi-structured interviews with teachers and counselors, student focus groups, parent focus groups, and school profile information provided rich data (Creswell, 2013). As previously stated, Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) is not specific to the higher education context or parents of first-generation college students. However, it offered a promising direction for research on parents of first-generation college students. Also, Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) tied in the social capital theory, which was the guiding framework for the study.

Chapter 3 provides the rationale for utilizing qualitative methodology and gives an overview of the research context. The chapter discusses the research participants,

instruments used in data collection, ethical guidelines, and detailed procedures used in the study.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Interest in parental involvement in higher education and the success of first-generation college students is growing. This interest is related to the increase in the numbers of first-generation students attending college across the United States (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Literature suggests that parents of first-generation students lack information about the college process, but their involvement and support is important to student success (Gofen, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). The involvement of parents of first-generation college students has been empirically investigated. However, including the voices of parents of first-generation college students in empirical research studies has not been common practice. The void in understanding the lived experience of first-generation college student's parental perspectives creates opportunity to inform the research and supports the current qualitative study. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) suggest that "the purpose of the qualitative research interview is to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives" (p. 27). This research approach fits the goals of the current study.

The study explored parental involvement, primarily from the perspective of parents of first-generation college students. Seeking parents' perspective on involvement helped uncover how they understand, define, and practice involvement in the higher education context. Too little is known about what kind of knowledge parents of first-

generation college students have about college and what factors influence their involvement. The study explored the level of involvement between parents of first-generation college students and colleges/universities.

Parental involvement in the context of higher education can be a complex issue. There are many populations within the larger population of parents of college aged students. Parents of first-generation college students was the population upon which this study focused. The following research questions were addressed through a qualitative methodological approach utilizing semi-structured interviews:

1. What is the understanding and definition of parental involvement according to parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions?
2. How do parents of first-generation college students practice involvement?
3. How can higher education institutions facilitate more effective parental involvement with parents of first-generation college students?

### **Rationale of Methodology**

The qualitative approach created a space for parents of first-generation students to share their experiences, relationship with the higher education institution, and thoughts regarding the impact of involvement on their college students. The study's approach allowed the lived experience of parents of first-generation college students to be described. Creswell (2014) suggested "this description culminates in the essence of the experience for several individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon" (p. 14). This research sought to understand the meaning of parental involvement to the participants and factors surrounding their involvement (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In addition, the research explored how the meaning of parental involvement for parents



coincides with the meaning for the higher education institution. Higher education professionals were engaged with a qualitative approach, as well. These professionals communicated their perspective of the phenomena and the insights regarding feasibility of parent suggestions. The literature supported the design of conducting a qualitative study, which employed semi-structured interviews.

### **Research Context**

The study began at a private research institution in upstate New York. This university, which is referenced as Upstate University, is a predominately White institution (PWI) and residential, where more than 90% of students live on campus. The university has over 5,000 full-time undergraduate students in arts, sciences and engineering, 23% of those students are first-generation and approximately 24% are international. Some students are both first-generation and international. Upstate University is highly selective with a 35% acceptance rate. The majority of accepted students were in the top 10% of their high school class, with SAT critical reading scores ranging from 600 – 700, and SAT math scores ranging from 640 – 760. University tuition is greater than \$45,000 (plus room and board) an academic year and 85% of the freshmen students receive some form of financial aid. The university's 6 year graduation average is 85% compared to the national average of 66%.

Many Upstate University students' attendance at the institution is a continuation of a family tradition. That is, it is a legacy institution which celebrates generations of Upstate University students and graduates. However, first-generation college students do not have a preexisting family relationship with the institution. Demographics of the class of 2019 are highlighted, as an example. The demographics are similar for the overall

class of 2019 and the first-generation college students within the class, though there are some differences, as shown in Table 3.1. While there are more White students in the class of 2019 and a greater number of White first-generation students, the percentage of all other represented ethnicities is significantly greater among the first-generation students. Therefore, the first-generation students within the class of 2019 are more diverse than the full class of 2019.

Table 3.1

*Demographic Comparison: Full Class and First-Generation Students*

	White	Asian	African American	Hispanic/Latino	American Indian	Multi-racial	No Reply
First-Generation 2019	34%	21.8%	19.5%	19.9%	1.5%	--	3%
Full Class of 2019	45%	13%	4%	8%	<1%	3%	6%

### **Research Participants**

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase entailed semi-structured interviews with the primary sampling frame for this study, parents of current undergraduate first-generation college students at Upstate University. For the purposes of this study, parents of first-generation college students were defined as individuals who have not earned a bachelor’s degree and have a current student at Upstate University. Each year, the office of admissions identifies first-generation college students based on responses on the common application, an application widely used and accepted as an admissions application for universities across the country. The researcher for this study receives the first-generation student data each year. Identified students and families are

invited to a luncheon specifically for first-generation families, based on the first-generation data received from Admissions. Therefore, research inclusion criteria included parents of Upstate University domestic first-generation college students, who have previously been invited to a first-generation luncheon hosted by the researcher's department, within the institution. Although there are international first-generation college students, only the parents of domestic first-generation college students were studied in the research. In addition, only English speaking parents were included in the study, therefore, exclusion criteria included those parents who do not speak English.

Stratified random sampling was used to determine the research sample. Stratified random sampling entailed separating the list of parents into ethnic/racial groupings, and random sampling from each group. Singleton and Straits (2005) posited that stratifying can support sampling efficiency. Stratified random sampling was appropriate for this study as it ensured diversity within the sample, as represented in the population. Previous research which included greater diversity within the sample of first-generation students, (Perna & Titus, 2005; Yazedjian et al., 2009), reported differences in findings based on ethnic background. The research of Perna and Titus (2005) and Yazedjian et al. (2009) was notable, as these researchers studied how findings varied by racial and ethnic differences. While this study was associated with Upstate University, this form of sampling allowed inferences to be drawn about the larger population of parents of first-generation college students, and variations based on race. These steps helped ensure external sample design validity. All participant participants were located within a 100 mile radius of the university setting and they represented various backgrounds. Parents represented racial, ethnic, socioeconomic status, and environmental diversity. Of

particular note is that participants were from urban, suburban, and rural communities. This varied representation makes the study findings more generalizable than prior studies that have focused on a single geographic sample. There were nine semi-structured interviews completed with parent participants. Nine parent participants was an appropriate number to collect enough data to reach saturation or new insights from the data (Creswell, 2014). All parent participants were mothers of current undergraduate first-generation college students. The inclusion of only mothers was not intentional, but no fathers expressed an interest in participating in the study. Interviews were conducted in person, over a period of 7 weeks. Each participant received a small gift card as appreciation for participating in the interview.

The second phase of the study involved a sample of five current higher education professionals working in the field of parent and family programs/relations. These individuals were purposively sampled from higher education institutions with parent and family offices. Purposive sampling in this study is an example of researcher use of professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of the field of parent and family relations to select professionals who represent the population (Singleton & Straits, 2005). The goal of phase two of the study was to interview the professionals to inform and share the emerging themes from parent interviews and obtain the professional reaction to parent themes. These higher education professionals were asked about the feasibility of parent ideas, as well as support structures and implementation barriers. These qualitative data were obtained through interviews. Professionals represented five institutions. The inclusion of professionals from public and private institutions of various sizes increased the generalizability of the findings. Telephone and in person interviews were utilized and

took place over 3 weeks. Each professional received a small gift card as appreciation for participating in the interview. The two phase approach of the study and the experience of the researcher promoted rigor and high quality qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

### **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The institution was not the site of the semi-structured interviews conducted with parents. As suggested by Coleman's (1988) social capital theory, the existence of closure or connections creates trustworthiness. As it is a possibility that parents of first-generation college students do not feel a strong connection with or trust within the institution, they may have reservations or experience discomfort about participating in interviews, particularly on the college campus. Therefore, interviews were facilitated in agreed upon locations, promoting greater comfort for participants. Specifically, interviews took place in the home of seven participants and in local establishments with the remaining two participants. The researcher reached locations by vehicle. Interviews were conducted in the city where the college is located and distances within the predefined radius.

**Interview protocols.** Data collection methods for this study were semi-structured interviews. Unique interview protocols were developed for use with research participants, parents and professionals. The protocols, as shown in Appendices A and B, were developed in consultation with the national Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education standards (CAS Standards) for parent and family programs. The interview protocols were pilot tested: (a) with individuals who are parents of current first-generation college students or parents of first-generation college graduates, and (b) higher education professionals.

While the researcher facilitated research interviews as an independent doctoral student, abiding by the priority diversity, access, and equity standards was appropriate. Related aspects of the CAS Standards include: “(a) foster communication and practices that enhance understanding of identity, culture, self-expression, and heritage; (b) promote respect for commonalities and differences among people within their historical and cultural contexts; and (c) address the characteristics and needs of diverse constituents when establishing and implementing culturally relevant and inclusive programs, services, policies, procedures, and practices” (CAS Standards, 2012).

Throughout the research, including review of the interview protocols, the researcher used a peer debriefer as a validity strategy. This individual’s role was to support the increased accuracy of the research by reviewing the study and asking questions to help clarify the research (Creswell, 2014). The overarching research questions, social capital theoretical framework, and findings of empirical studies directly related to parents of first-generation college students guided the construction of the interview protocol. However, the interview questions were not limited by this guidance, as it was necessary to build on participants’ responses during the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for the population of parents of first-generation college students because their insights are largely untapped.

**Interview memos.** Each interview was approximately 60 minutes in length. Therefore, detailed interview memos were utilized to document parent insights. In addition, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy and authenticity. Retaining the authenticity of the parental responses was essential. Member checking was used to review themes with participants. That is, the researcher shared preliminary

findings with participants to create an opportunity for participants to provide feedback regarding accuracy of data. Member checking helped ensure accuracy of the findings, and was another effort to strengthen validity (Creswell, 2014). In addition, the researcher used a notebook to document observations during each interview. Important observations noted were hesitations in responses, body language, and emotion.

**Researcher connection and memoing.** Beyond observations, the researcher's connection to the study should be noted, as well. Creswell (2013) emphasized the importance of specifying how the researcher connects with the study. The researcher is an employee of the institution where the participants for the research study were selected and has personal experience as a first-generation college student. In addition, the researcher has a primary role with parents of current students, and a secondary role with first-generation college students and parents. Therefore the researcher's self-reflexivity was important, and the researcher engaged in reflecting and asking questions of herself throughout the study to manage biases. This reflexivity or high level of self-awareness is a principle of crystallization, significant in qualitative studies (Ellingson, 2009). Further, the researcher used memos as a tool to help explore and examine her thoughts and feelings about the research subject and emergent themes (Saldana, 2013). These efforts moved the study forward. In this case, the researcher was an important instrument in the study (Creswell, 2014). The researcher's role is paramount in a qualitative study. That is, the facilitation of the interview is important, but the researcher's observations, reflection, and analysis of data were essential to the research process.

**Demographic information form.** The researcher asked the questions found in the Demographic Information Form, Appendix F, of each participant in phase one. This

form was completed after the interview has concluded. In addition, professionals in phase two completed the Institutional Profile Form, Appendix G before each interview.

### **Ethical Guidelines and Confidentiality**

The measures and procedures for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College. The researcher abided by ethical guidelines put forth by the Institutional Review Board, in regards to data collection. Each interview was structured in the same format beginning with a review of the purpose of the research. An overview of the study was verbally communicated, and each participant received compiled research study information materials. They also received an informed consent form for participation, Appendix E. Participants were informed that participating or declining to participate in the study would not negatively impact students or parents. The researcher created a space for participants to address concerns regarding how their participation may potentially impact them. To that end, all participants were informed that they could end their participation at any point during the interview. There were no participants who presented any concerns or chose to end participation. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher verbally informed participants that their name would not be associated with the research, as pseudonyms were created for all participants. Also, this information was included on the consent form. Further, participants were informed that interview content, audio tapes, transcriptions, and other research material would be accessed by the research investigator only. In addition, when not in use, related interview documents would be secured in a locked file for 3 years after the completion of the current research. When participants agreed to participate in the study, they were asked to affirm their understanding of the study and consent to proceed with the interview



(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Consent was audio recorded and indicated by the signed Informed Consent Form, Appendix E.

## **Procedures**

The researcher adhered to the following procedures to complete the study.

1. Obtained permission for the study from Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College.
2. Utilized stratified random sampling to determine prospective parents who will receive outreach communication.
3. Pilot tested the parent interview protocol with two parents of first-generation college students utilizing Appendix A, within a one-week time period.
4. Pilot tested the professional interview protocol with one higher education professional who has previously expressed interest in future research utilizing Appendix B, before beginning professional interviews.
5. Began introductory calls to prospective parent participants explaining what the research study is about and to communicate that an email will follow. These calls took place on a weekly basis after pilot testing with parents was completed.
6. Sent email communication to prospective parent participants to schedule a date and time for in person interview utilizing Introduction Email and Study Information, Appendix C. Each individual email was sent the same day of making telephone contact or leaving a voicemail message.
7. Communicated with prospective participants by telephone or email, as preferred by participant, to confirm, date, time, and location of interview.

8. Obtained informed consent from parent participants for phase one of the study utilizing Appendix E.
9. Facilitated in person parent interviews for phase one of the study utilizing the Parent Interview Protocol in Appendix A. At the close of each interview, completed the Demographic Information Form utilizing Appendix F. Interviewing was conducted over a period of 7 weeks.
10. Near the completion of phase one, began outreach with higher education professionals to secure participants, utilizing the study information recruitment email in Appendix D.
11. Shared individual preliminary interview data with a subset of phase one participants to allow participants to provide feedback regarding accuracy.
12. Obtained informed consent from professional participants for phase two of the study utilizing the consent form in Appendix E.
13. Facilitated interviews with professionals for phase two of the study utilizing the Professional Interview Protocol in Appendix B. Professionals completed the Institutional Profile Information Form utilizing Appendix G before or after each interview. Interviewing was conducted over a period of 3 weeks.
14. Shared individual preliminary interview data with a subset phase two participants to allow participants to provide feedback regarding accuracy.
15. Completed data analysis using analytic induction.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study, the unit of analysis was human participants. Prior to engaging with research participants, a priori codes were developed based on findings of previous

research, social capital theory, and the study's research questions (Saldana, 2013). An example of an a priori code is parent financial factors. As a part of the analysis of phase one and phase two, prior to transcribing interviews, the researcher listened to each interview recording. Listening for tone, emotion, and the type of language utilized provided additional qualitative data beyond the words themselves. Therefore, a first cycle coding method, in vivo coding, was essential to the study. As parents of first-generation students have rarely been included in research studies, capturing the actual language and essence of the participants was invaluable. That is, in vivo coding was appropriate for this research study, as it allowed the researcher to "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldana, 2013 p. 91).

Other coding methods were necessary with the progression of the analysis. For example, focused coding helped determine which initial codes were most important for further analysis and theming data accordingly (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, demographic information forms and institutional profile forms, as shown in Appendix F and Appendix G, respectively, audio tapes, research memo notes, and transcribed data were analyzed. Through the process of listening to recorded interviews and reading transcripts, additional codes emerged from the data. Data were analyzed for meaning and emergent themes, hence coding was a significant component of analyzing data. Example of codes are found in Table 3.2.

Analytic induction (Erickson, 1985) was utilized. Analytic induction involved formulating and testing assertions or statements that can serve as an explanation for the collected data and primary themes. This method worked in concert with earlier coding, and helped structure the analysis process (Erickson, 1985). Analytic induction requires

that assertions can be disregarded if there is not enough supporting evidence within the data. Exceptional cases were included when they represented an interpretable contrast to the rest of the data.

Table 3.2

*Examples of Codes*

Code	Definition	Example
Parent – student relationship	Description of emotional and tangible connections of parents and students	“I am one of his biggest supporters, so he feels very comfortable talking to me about any topic.”
Expectation of college	Not going to college was not an option	“You go to school for whatever you want to do, but you’re going to get a degree.”
Involvement History	Parents involved in education since elementary school	“I sat at the table with both of them...every single night.”
Parental Support	Examples of how support is provided	“I would remind her just to take a deep breath and take every homework [assignment] one at a time...”

**Chapter Summary**

This qualitative study adds to the limited body of literature regarding parents of first-generation college students. The phenomenon of the parental involvement of first-generation college students has often been investigated without the parental perspective of how they understand, define, and practice involvement. The study gave parents of first-generation college students a voice in the higher education context. The findings of this study inform higher education regarding the experiences of these parents. Further, the findings suggest educational and informational interventions appropriate for the

population. Such interventions may directly impact the first-generation student experience. The two phase format of this study not only gave voice to the parent participants, but it engaged higher education parent professionals in discussions related to the feasibility of ideas and implementation options. This approach begins to establish a direction in higher education in which there is limited empirical research.

Chapter 4 provides the results of the study. Chapter 4 includes information about demographics of phase one parent participants, as well as institutional profiles of phase two professional participants. The chapter presents the themes and key concepts, by research question, which emerged from the data. Parent themes are provided first throughout the chapter to consistently give primacy to the voice of the parents of first-generation college students.

## Chapter 4: Results

Parental involvement in the context of higher education is a complex issue due to differing experiences and needs of parents. Of particular concern is the capacity of parents of first-generation college students to support their students in ways that will increase the likelihood of academic success. Therefore, this study focused on parents of first-generation college students. The primary research questions for the study were:

1. What is the understanding and definition of parental involvement according to parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions?
2. How do parents of first-generation college students practice involvement?
3. How can higher education institutions facilitate more effective parental involvement with parents of first-generation college students?

### Data Analysis and Findings

**Parent participant demographics.** Data for this study were collected using a two-phase qualitative interview process. Phase one consisted of interviewing nine parents of first-generation college students ( $N = 9$ ), as shown in Table 4.1. All parent participants were mothers of current undergraduate students. Participants ranged in age from 39 to 61 with an average age of 49 ( $SD = 6.66$ ). There were five White participants, two African American participants, and two Latina participants. All participants had at least one child currently in college.

Each parent participated in an individual interview with the protocol in Appendix A to guide the interview. Upon completion of the interview, participants verbally responded to the items on the Demographic Information Form, found in Appendix F. Participant responses to items in the interview protocol were transcribed, coded and analyzed into themes that surfaced across all interviews. The parent participants represented racial, demographic and socioeconomic diversity. Unlike Perna and Titus (2005) and Yazedjian et al. (2009), differences based on background were not found. However, there were many similarities indicating a shared experience that is attributed to the commonality of being parents of first-generation college students.

**Institutional profiles.** Phase two of this study consisted of interviewing five higher education professionals ( $N = 5$ ). Table 4.2 presents the institutional profile which each professional represents. Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education were referenced to define institution type. All participating universities were not-for-profit institutions. In addition, the number of years that each professional worked in the field of parent and family relations was included. Experience ranged from new professionals with 3 years of experience to seasoned professionals with greater than 10 years of experience. Institutional size ranged from approximately 2,000 undergraduate students to greater than 25,000 undergraduate students.

Table 4.1

*Parent Participant Demographics*

Parent*	Age	Race	Marital Status	Number of Children	Household Income	Home Environment	Education
Tiffany	39	Black	Separated	3	~\$11,400/yr.	Suburban	Some College
Renee	45	White	Married	3	~\$25,000/yr.	Suburban	Some High School
Lisa	46	White	Divorced	2	~\$76,000/yr.	Suburban	Associate Degree
Michelle	46	Latina	Married	1	~\$80,000/yr.	Urban	Associate Degree
Miranda	47	Latina	Single	2	~\$14,000/yr.	Urban	GED
Wanda	48	White	Married	2	~\$90,000/yr.	Urban	High School
Barbara	55	Black	Single	3	~\$40,000/yr.	Urban	Associate Degree
Christine	55	White	Married	5	~\$120,000/yr.	Rural	Associate Degree
Harriette	61	White	Single	1	~\$30,000/yr.	Rural	Technical Trade

*Note.* Parent names are pseudonyms.



Table 4.2

*Institutional Profile*

Professional Participant	Institution Type	Number of Undergraduate Students	% First-Generation	Annual Tuition	Formalized First-Generation Program	Number of Years in Field
Flora	Private	≥2,000	7%	>\$50,000	Yes	3 years
Ilene	Private	≥5,000	--	>\$45,000	Yes	4 years
Clare	Private	≥6,000	~30%	>\$39,000	No	9 years
Alba	Public	≥10,000	--	>\$5,000	Yes	3 years
Mae	Public	≥25,000	16%	>\$15,000	Yes	5 years

**What is Parental Involvement? (Research Question 1)**

Phase one and phase two of the study addressed research question 1: What is the understanding and definition of parental involvement according to parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions? There were two components of data collection. First, parent participants were interviewed, followed by preliminary data analysis. As previously discussed, it was important to give primacy to the voices of the parents of first-generation college students. Second, professional participants were interviewed. Professionals shared their own definitions of parental involvement. Then, professionals were asked to share their reactions to the definitions that parents provided. By design, phase two of the study built off of data from phase one. Table 4.3 presents parent and professional themes and key concepts for research question 1.

**Parent perspectives.** The first research question of this study was focused on defining parental involvement in higher education of first-generation college students.

Table 4.3

*Research Question 1 – Themes and Key Concepts*

Participant Group	Theme	Key Concept
Parents of first-generation students	“You’re going to college”	Parents of first-generation students expect college
	“I very much wanted to go to college”	Family background and social factors influence definition
	“I’ve always been involved”	History of educational involvement
Professionals	“A pretty high impact”	Parents play an important role
	“Being informed and engaged”	Parents engaged in student success
	“Not as assertive”	Parents of first-generation students practice involvement differently

This question was first answered by exploring how parents see and understand parental involvement. Three themes emerged as important for defining parental involvement.

The first theme was “you’re going to college,” reflecting that parents’ expectations of college enrollment frames the context of their involvement. The second theme was “I very much wanted to go to college,” indicating that family background and social factors influence how parents define their involvement. The third theme was “I’ve always been involved,” pointing to a history of educational involvement that predated college enrollment.

**“You’re going to college.”** Many parents of first-generation college students expect their young adults to pursue higher education beyond high school. Parents reported wanting to provide their children with a vision for the future and instill in them a belief that they can accomplish anything, including being successful in their academic

and professional lives. The lack of degree in higher education did not hamper parents' desire for their students to attend college. In fact, in this study, seven out of nine parents expressed strong feelings about college attendance and graduation. As Tiffany said:

For me, I knew that when I was having kids they was going to go to college. . . . From when she was little, I think it was always discussed like, 'You grow up and you graduate high school and then you go to college and things like that'. . . . It's like it's a requirement. It's always been like that.

Other parents shared this same sentiment, emphasizing that college was the only option for their children. Participants stressed that students had significant choice in institution and type of degree pursued, but attending college was necessary. Lisa underscored this point; she said, "I suppose I prepared him. It was, like I said, an expectation. You'll go to school for whatever you want to do, but you're going to need to get a degree." Wanda expressed this idea, as well, she stated:

It's just something from day one when they started school, that that was your end goal. You're going to college, and you're gonna do something awesome. It was just never anything else but that. Neither one of them ever said, 'Oh, I'm just going to get a job.' I hope it's the way they were brought up.

This clear expectation that their children attend college is an important aspect of parental support. The children of the parents interviewed do not need to convince their parents of the importance or value of higher education. This removes a potential barrier to their enrollment.

***"I very much wanted to go to college."*** In some cases, parents' own upbringing and family context also played a role in their commitment to their own child's education.

Four out of nine parents reported that they did not receive encouragement to pursue higher education when they were young adults. They pointed out that their current college students were among the first in the family to attend college. Christine expressed a level of sadness as she referenced her own desire to attend college. She said:

My parents were not [pause] they just assumed I would get married and have kids. That's what they expected me to do because that's what they did and that's what my sister did. Although, had I had any direction [pause] because I very much wanted to go to college.

For Christine, it was important for her daughter to forge a new path. As several parents reflected on their immediate and extended family history of education; they appeared surprised by their realization that their child's pursuit of higher education contrasted with others in their family. Wanda explained:

I have six brothers and sisters, and they all have like five kids apiece. None of them went to college. [My husband's] got three siblings. None of their kids went to college. For our two kids to do it, it's just like, I'm so proud of them.

Another parent, Renee, shared, "I didn't go to college. My husband didn't go to college. Really in my childhood, college wasn't even talked about. It wasn't even, never was it talked about." The interviews reflect that these parents had a strong commitment to their children's pursuit of higher education.

*"I've always been involved..."* A second social factor that influenced these parents' views on parental involvement in higher education was the fact that they had a history of educational involvement. Eight out of nine parent participants detailed examples of how they supported students and engaged with schools systems, sometimes

advocating for students. Parent participants shared how they attended PTA meetings, helped with homework, utilized parent portals to access records online, and made costumes for school plays among other activities. Michelle expressed with pride:

I was really involved in her primary years because I didn't work when she was younger, so I had the opportunity to know the other parents, to help her with her homework. I've always been involved with her life academically. I have been PTA Treasurer. I have volunteered for her previous schools.

Wanda also recounted her involvement in early education. Noting a shift in the type of involvement as her children grew older, she said:

Up until probably seventh grade, a little bit into eighth grade, I sat at the table with both of them. It usually took 2 hours until their homework was done. Every single night. When they started high school, they were more independent and then they went to their rooms and did their homework and studies, or did anything like that. He'd come out and have me proofread it and make sure it was good, so still helping them, just not a sit down at the table kind of help.

Further, three out of nine parents discussed attending programs and ceremonies for honor roll and other academic achievements during their children's early education. During one interview in the family dining area, Renee turned with pride to point to her family "wall of fame." She explained that she has maintained this wall since her children were younger. The wall of fame was adorned with gold metallic stickers, positive messages, certificates, awards, and her daughter's college acceptance letter. In contrast, Lisa shared that she was the primary earner in her family even before becoming a single parent; therefore, she did not have much involvement earlier in education. Overall, the

interviews indicated that, for most parents, involvement in their children's education was long standing. Involvement in their college education was an extension of a long pattern of behavior and not a new occurrence.

**Professional perspectives.** Professional participants shared their perspectives on involvement of parents of first-generation college students. A summary of parent data responses was shared with professional participants after they provided their own definitions of parental involvement to compare parental and professional definitions. Then, the professionals' reactions were captured. Three themes emerged for the professional perspective. The first theme was "a pretty high impact," reflecting professionals' beliefs that parents of first-generation students play an important role with students. Professional participants recognized the significant impact of parents of first-generation college students. The second theme was "being informed and engaged," indicating that professional definitions of parental involvement included being informed and engaged in students' success. The third theme was "not as assertive," reflecting that most professional participants identified a difference between the involvement of parents of first-generation college students and parents who had attended college.

***"A pretty high impact."*** Higher education parent and family program professionals understand the impact that parents have and the resource they can be to first-generation college students. All professional participants shared their perspectives on parents of first-generation college students using positive, supportive, and respectful language. Four out of five professionals acknowledged that the parents of first-generation college students play an important role. Ilene said, "They do have, I'd say, a pretty high impact on how our students process change or how they feel."

Even with acknowledging the impact that parents have on first-generation college students, professionals identified needs that they perceive within this population. Flora explained:

They require more background information, more support in understanding what's available, what the possibilities and options are. . . . Our first-generation parents are very interested and they ask very detailed questions about how do I do this, how do I do that. They want instructions. For sure.

In contrast to this awareness of parents' impact and the additional information they may require, two out of five professionals reported being less aware of the high level of interest and concern shared by parents of first-generation college students. This contrast reflects varying levels of awareness of and engagement with parents of first-generation college students.

***“Being informed and engaged.”*** In addition to general perceptions regarding parents of first-generation college students, professionals shared their own definitions of parental involvement. Higher education professionals in the field of parent and family relations defined parental involvement as being informed and engaged in the student's academic success. All professional participants recognized that there were variations in how parental involvement is practiced. Clare stated:

I would say there's a range of parental involvement on a college level from being informed to being actively engaged and participating in campus events as volunteers to sitting on a parent council to being a donor, the variety of ways parents can get involved.

*“Not as assertive.”* Within this definition of involvement as being informed and engaged, three out of five professional participants thought there was a difference between parental involvement of parents of first-generation college students and parents of continuing generation students. Flora explained, “[First-generation parents] typically are not as assertive about either encouraging their students to access resources or trying to access the resources themselves.” Later, she clarified that she thought first-generation parents are not as demanding (as opposed to assertive) as other parents. Alba noted a difference in parents of first-generation college students. She reflected on her direct interaction with parents, and indicated that parents of first-generation college students are sometimes confused about institutional policies. She explained:

First-generation parents, they were really confused. ‘Why do I [need] to give you my financial information, but I can't get my student's grades, when I am paying for it.’ Those types of things were a little bit more heightened than they were for my general population students.

Another professional agreed that there may be differences in parental involvement, but expressed that those differences were not related to first-generation status alone. Ilene stated, “There might be a bit of a breakdown if there's a language barrier sometimes, because traditionally underserved communities, Spanish speaking, Chinese speaking, or other languages, there may be that language barrier.” While not a factor for parent participants in this study, language barriers may be a factor for other first-generation families.

There were two out of five professionals who included service to the institution in their definition of parental involvement. Interestingly, the majority of definitions of



parental involvement were specific to the relationship between parents and institutions. This was in direct contrast to the definitions that parents provided. For parents, the relationship with their first-generation students was central to their definitions.

### **What Does Involvement Look Like? (Research Question 2)**

Phase one of the study addressed research question 2: How do parents of first-generation college students practice involvement? It examined what specific behaviors constitute parental involvement. Parent participants described their involvement. Later during phase two of the study, professionals were asked provide their thoughts and reactions after learning the parent perspective on how parents of first-generation college students practice involvement. Professionals were not asked what parent involvement looks like, but during phase two of the study, professionals were asked to comment on parent descriptions of involvement. The professional response directly addressed parent data. The professional feedback is an important component of the study. Table 4.4 presents parent and professional themes and key concepts for research question 2. In addition, themes and key concepts are explained.

**Parent perspectives.** Extending from their earlier commitments to and involvement in their children's education, parent participants explained how their involvement manifests at the college level, detailing how they practice involvement. Four important themes from parents emerged. First, "reach for the stars," reflects the emotional support parents provide. Second, "he will often have me read papers," reveals that involvement includes functioning as part of students' academic support system. Third, "I've always worked a lot of hours," exemplifies that parent participants' involvement is sometimes impacted by significant life stressors. Three subthemes of

Table 4.4

*Research Question 2 – Themes and Key Concepts*

Participant Group	Theme	Key Concept	Sub-themes
Parents of first-generation students	“Reach for the stars”	Parents provide emotional support	
	“He will often have me read papers”	Parents function as a part of academic support system	
	“I’ve always worked a lot of hours”	Parents experience significant life stressors	Employment Status  Financial Anxieties  Health Conditions
	“They come to me”	Parental involvement is embedded in parent-student relationship	She’s an automatic sharer  Wow, look at my kid  She calls it home  It was hard watching her go through that
Professionals	“We want our kids to succeed”	Favorable response to emotional support	
	“Academic support, this is really eye-opening”	Surprised by academic support	

significant life stressors included: (a) employment status, (b) financial anxieties, and (c) health conditions. Fourth, “they come to me,” indicates that parental involvement is embedded in the parent-student relationship. There were four sub-themes to those relationships. The sub-themes were: (a) “she’s an automatic sharer,” characterized by students seeking parental involvement; (b) “wow, look at my kid,” as an example of the strength of parent-student relationship; (c) “she calls it home,” as an example of positive perceptions of students’ experiences; and (d) “it was hard watching her go through that,” which expressed that the parent-student relationship shaped the parents’ experiences.

**“Reach for the stars.”** High levels of student stress drive parents to regularly and actively engage in providing emotional support to students. All parents reported having a role that responds to the emotional needs of students when they are stressed or overwhelmed. Often, parents are providing reassurances to students and doing wellness check-ins. Those wellness check-ins varied, but consisted of communicating about basic necessities, such as inquiring if students were eating or how they were feeling emotionally. One parent, Renee, explained what she does:

We are very involved because we have to be. I need to make sure she is eating well. She is taking her meds. There is a lot that I am in the background making sure is going on. It's great for her. She loves it because she knows that mom or dad is a phone call away. If she needs something we can bring it to her directly. It's really good on both ends.

Another parent, Christine, shared these sentiments and referenced how she did not have the same type of emotional support growing up and how that impacted her:

Emotionally, I support her. She gets very stressed when test time comes. I try to spend time with her just to keep her [pause] stable is the word. . . . Being present in their life. Knowing what she needs emotionally, financially, physically, just paying attention to what's going on for her and her life. I didn't really have that. I ended up going way over here in my life.

This emotional support is paramount to how parental involvement is practiced.

Parents discussed the roles that they have taken with students. Some of the roles discussed were cheerleader, supporter, friend, and one who communicates that everything is possible. Interestingly, a few of the parent participants (mothers) indicated what role their husbands have taken on. Father roles were advice giver, one who has the safety talks, and money man, who helps explain loans and other financial information. Renee discussed her husband's philosophy of not reaching too high, in order to avoid disappointment. A testament to the level of emotional support she provides, she expressed that she had to teach her husband to believe in the possibility and always provide encouragement to their children.

Some parents grappled with the best way to support their first-generation college students. Three out of nine parents discuss finding the right balance in the support that they provide. Christine stated:

It seems crazy that I'm saying in one sentence, I wanted her to be independent, yet I have her here with no job and supporting her completely, kind of contradictory... I just wanted her to have the best opportunity that she could.

Renee delved deeper, sharing some of her uncertainty about the appropriate level support and her willingness to remain vigilant. She said that she has considered:

How do I communicate with her, still giving her strong confidence, but yet in the same token also kind of, I guess disciplining and giving her structure from home, which is hard because she's on her own? That's something I had to learn. How do I not push too far because now she is an adult? She wants to be treated as an adult? But in the same token she is still really, to me, a child that is learning how to be an adult. That fine line you find yourself not wanting to cross with them to giving them that independence, but yet stepping in and saying, 'Hey, you need some guidance.'

Parents' desire for students to achieve and find their best path led many of these parents to provide guidance and impart life lessons to their first-generation college students. Six out of nine parents reported communicating messages about pursuing excellence. Harriette said "One thing that I've tried to instill in her is she's free to choose and choose again. Always don't be afraid to choose again." This idea of choosing a direction and being confident in abilities was echoed by most parents. Christine said, "I've taught her from the time she could walk and talk to reach for the stars, go for it." Using a similar reference, Renee described her approach:

My point of view has always been reach for the stars. You always reach. Reach for your dreams. If you dream it, you can do it. There are always ways. There are always ways to make things happen. You may have to work really hard to get there, but you can make it happen.

These life lessons are uplifting and future orientated, but parents shared that they imparted other messages that conveyed a different tone, as well.

Data revealed that some parents also communicate cautionary messages to first-generation college students. During one interview, a mother frequently spoke about energy, balance, and knowing oneself. She discussed speaking to her daughter about the personal relationship with herself and responsibility. Harriette reported telling the student:

When you abandon yourself and you betray yourself, then you go through the pain of that and you can't blame anyone else for that and so it's really about there are always things that happen and don't feel guilty for that. Move on. But when you're not whole to yourself you're always open for wounds.

Throughout the interview, Harriette spoke from a place of pain and what she described as her own brokenness. Her experiences have impacted the type of communication she has with her daughter by leading her to advise and caution her daughter as a form of protection. Another mother explained how she wanted her daughter to be prepared for the real world and living as an independent adult. Tiffany explained that she tells her daughter:

When you leave home I want you to be gone, don't come back, unless it's an emergency of course. I want my kids, when they leave the nest, leave successful like you could do it on your own, and everything, don't come back.

Parents' descriptors of how they provide emotional support reflect the important ways they support their children outside of academics. Although the parents do not have direct knowledge or experience of higher education to offer their children college-specific advice, they can still provide relevant and important emotional support that may help their children to persist in their pursuits of higher education.

*“He will often have me read papers.”* Despite their lack of direct college experience, parents of first-generation college students are a part of students’ academic support system. Six out of nine parents discussed providing academic assistance to their first-generation college students. In many instances, students were described as seeking parents out for help with academics. For example, Lisa said about her son, “He will often have me read papers and help with editing.” Another parent described engaging her daughter in discussion about her academic direction and helping her talk through the academic plan. Renee said “The rigor, her class load. I discuss with her the steps. What classes she is taking leading to her major.” She spoke about supporting her daughter as much as possible with these discussions. However, Renee also mentioned that it would be helpful to have a better understanding of the university advising process so that she would be more informed in the discussions with her daughter.

Renee was not alone in admitting that there were times when she was not fully informed. Five out of nine parents reported engaging in academic discussions, even if they were unfamiliar with the subject matter. Barbara shared what she has said to her son about a paper that he was writing. She said “Let me read that paper, because I am supposed to be able to understand and I don’t know nothing about this.” Barbara went on to explain that she knows if something sounds like it flows well or if something is missing, and therefore she can provide important feedback on the paper. Tiffany discussed how her daughter draws her in to these discussions.

If she comes across an issue, as far as a project or something, she will tell me about it, how it’s stressful to her or how she’s going to execute something. She

just needs to let her thoughts feed her. She will tell me those things; I don't know what she's talking about, but just have that listening ear.

Through behaviors such as editing papers, lending a listening ear, and talking about academic planning, six out of nine parents of first-generation college students reported actively practicing behaviors that directly support student academic success.

While not all parents reported actively providing academic support, all parents discussed providing other support to increase first-generation students' academic success. For example, Christine explained:

I work harder so she doesn't have to have a job so she can focus on her studies, I don't know the percentage of college students that can go through college without a job, but I try to keep her focus there. I don't want her to get overwhelmed and not finish what she started.

Another parent shared that she spent the past summer working on what she referred to as the student's energy to promote strength and endurance for the academic semester.

Harriette explained that this energy work included ensuring that there was "a lot of clean eating, she got a lot of rest, and then we did a lot of emotional work." It might be assumed that parents who did not attend college would have little to contribute in terms of academic support. However, in this study each parent participant shared examples of how they supported the academic success of their first-generation students.

***"I've always worked a lot of hours."*** The extent and form of parental involvement in supporting first-generation college students was influenced by a variety of factors. Through the interviews, it became evident that other factors impacted how parents provided support. Data revealed that most parents were experiencing significant



life stressors that impact how much they are involved. These stressors included three subthemes: employment status, financial anxieties, and health conditions.

*Employment status.* Employment was a factor for many families. Eight out of nine parents shared how employment status positively and negatively affects their involvement. On the positive side, one married mother pointed out the benefit of her part-time employment. Michelle said, “Especially because I work part-time, if she should need anything, I’m only a phone call away.” Similarly, another parent discussed the flexibility that her employment has allowed. Wanda shared:

My job allowed me to go to every single thing that they did, even volunteering at school I could do. Just because they were always first, no matter what. If I didn't have that kind of job, I wouldn't work there. I would find a different job that could accommodate me to be there for them first.

On the negative side, sometimes, job responsibilities kept parents away. As Lisa explained, “I’ve been a single mom since he was in fifth grade and I’ve always worked a lot of hours trying to provide for both of them.” For Lisa, the long work hours made her less able to participate in her child’s education. The impact of employment status began during their children’s early education and continued to affect parental availability when the children progressed on to college.

*Financial anxieties.* In addition to general employment status and its impact on family finances, parents described financial anxieties related to affording college. They reported anxiety about the amount of financial assistance that they were able to provide, as well as the debt that the student may incur. Five out of nine parent participants spoke about this concern. Describing her family as poor, one parent shared that there were

times when she and her husband simply did not have funds to give to their daughter.

Renee stated “It's stressful on me, and it's hard for me to know that she needs books, or her tuition is due, or what not, and this is on her. . .” Renee went on to share more about her family situation, saying:

I feel it is hard because like this time of year is especially rough on us. The second half of the year is a lot harder on us financially. So that means that the help that we can give financially is a lot less.

Another parent reflected on her anxious feelings when her daughter decided to attend the university. Miranda said:

I was concerned actually for her. I would ask her a lot, I remember. . . . One of my most concerns was the scholarship. I would tell her, ‘You're going to owe a lot of money after you're done with school, and college, and all that.’

Parents reported stress about not having the means to provide financial support. This necessitated the students taking out loans which then led to parental stress about how the necessary student loans will impact the students in the future.

Additionally, financial realities affected more than the college student. Four out of nine parents discussed how having a student away at college financially impacts their family. One parent, Christine, said, “It's been an expensive adventure for our family.” She discussed that the financial aid package does not appropriately meet the family's need; therefore the family is expected to contribute more. She went on to explain that she works a lot and picks up extra hours when her job is short staffed. For another mother, as much as she wanted to support her first-generation college students, she felt she must look ahead to the future, at the same time. Speaking about both of her sons Wanda said:

They both knew they were going to college, but they also knew they were both going to pay for it themselves. Yeah, we could help them, but we're saving for our retirement and they both have stated, 'We're not taking away from you guys for us.'

The majority of participants, eight parents, discussed providing varying types of support related to financial matters, regardless if they were in a position to financially contribute to college tuition. The most frequent of this type of support was communication about financial aid. Some parents spoke about direct interactions with the financial aid office. Others discussed providing prompts and reminding students about necessary paperwork and deadlines. Further, some parents shared that they have invested time in understanding college costs, as well as student and parent loans. In addition, explaining the loan process to students was a practiced behavior of some participants. Most parents spoke about providing money to students, as much as they can and when possible. In most cases, there are limits to what they can provide. Tiffany expressed, "[Financial support] is not a big thing because if I don't got it, I don't have it." Finally, Miranda spoke about cherishing the special type of support she provides in this area. She shared that she has always listened to her daughter read various application essays for scholarships. As the student has won many scholarships, she regularly attended the award ceremonies.

*Health conditions.* For a subset of these parents, medical conditions also impact their involvement. Two out of nine parents have chronic medical issues which can create a barrier to their level of involvement. Tiffany shared "With my sickness, there's times I've been in the hospital, but my kids know what to do. . . . I used to work a lot, but now

that I'm at home and everything like that, everything just runs smoothly.” She discussed the benefits of being more available at home, but also shared that her medical symptoms can sometimes keep her from being involved. Similarly, Harriette discussed how having low energy levels and the negative energy of others impacts how much she is involved. She expressed being exasperated with her condition, stating “I've been on disability for 20 years with chronic fatigue.” After the completion of the interview, Christine spontaneously shared that she as well as other members of her immediate family have experienced substance addictions. Currently, she is in recovery, but her history impacts how much she is involved and invested with her daughter as a way of protecting her from going through what others in the family have gone through. Although medical conditions were not widespread in this sample, they are an important reminder that there may be significant issues that impact how and to what extent parents are involved in their children’s education. It is not merely a matter of whether they want to be involved or not, but of how other life situations may impact their capacity for involvement.

*“They come to me. . .”* Parental involvement in education is typically considered in terms of parental behaviors. An unexpected finding of this study was the extent to which parental involvement in their children’s college education was embedded in the parent-student relationship. Therefore, it is important to understand those relationships and how the relationship itself gives rise to parental involvement. Four sub-themes of the parent-student relationship were particularly noteworthy in these interviews. First, students actively sought their parents’ involvement. Second, the parent-student relationship was one of open communication. Third, those relationships led most parents to perceive their

students as having an overall positive experience in college. Fourth, the relationship shaped parents' own experiences of having a child in college.

*"She's an automatic sharer."* Close parent – student relationships led first-generation college students to regularly seek out parents as a primary resource and a sounding board. Six out of nine parents described students asking for their parents' input regarding the college experience. As Harriette explained about academic discussions:

Those are things I never have to bring up. She's an automatic sharer of those things even if a class is not going well. It's just automatic with her. I'll try to give her a different perspective or maybe a different view of how to see it.

Parents shared that students wanted to talk through their own ideas, but they also valued the viewpoints of their parents. Another parent, Renee, described what her daughter shared with her as she prepared for a meeting/presentation:

She needed to get her proposal together, so she called me the night before the meeting they were going to have. She was running things by me. 'This is what I want to do. I think we can do this.'

Parents provided wide-ranging guidance. In fact, all parent participants shared that they provided guidance regarding current college experiences and related to students' post-college trajectory. One parent of a current senior discussed future plans with her son. Lisa shared a recent conversation with her son:

His ultimate goal is to be a writer. It's not like he can just do that. I'll offer him some suggestions like, "Maybe you can get a job at my office being an admin or something while you're trying to figure out what you're going to do with your degree. Or try to write.'

Parents acknowledged that some of these decisions are stressful and significant to the next stage of the student's life. One parent expressed pride that her children, including a first-generation college student, continued to want guidance and this type of connection, while still making their own decisions. Another mother explained why her adult children seek her out. Miranda said:

They come to me, they ask me because they want to know my opinion, and since I've always been like that with them, they don't only come to me as a mom but also as a friend, because they know that I have a good judgement, let's put it that way.

These data indicate that parental involvement is not merely a matter of meeting tangible needs such as information or finances. Rather, it is integrally related to the relationship between the parent and student.

*"Wow, look at my kid."* These parents reported having an open relationship and frequent communication with their first-generation college students. Communication channels included in-person, text, email, and telephone calls. The strength of these relationships allowed students to share difficult situations with parents. All parent participants reported having regular discussions with students regarding academic and social lives. Lisa shared:

I'm one of his biggest supporters so he feels very comfortable talking to me about any topic...I saw him earlier today and he described some of the course content and some of his anxieties about being able to meet the course requirements.

First-generation students shared stressful situations with parents, but they were also connecting with parents to share other emotions. Renee explained:

The calls come when she needs a little bit of assistance, or a pick up. And the calls come when she's super excited and pumped about something great that happened. She does run things by me. I am very blessed in that manner. Because we are close she does call and run things by me.

Data revealed that parents sometimes initiated wellness check-ins with students to ensure that the student was doing well. Similarly, three out of nine parents reported that their first-generation students discuss parents' current or future well-being. Just as parents were mindful of their first-generation college student's health and safety, some students had these same concerns in mind. Parents shared enjoying the manner in which the relationship with their first-generation students has evolved. Some parents reported that first-generation students had developed more interest in parents' lives. Reflecting on recent discussions, Barbara shared, "Now, especially this year, since he started he's kind of calling me a lot more saying, 'Hey mom just calling to see how you're doing. I don't really want nothing.'" Another parent reflected on a discussion with her daughter and first-generation student about the future. Miranda said:

Even though she says, 'Mommy, don't worry. After I graduate, I'm going to make good money, I'm going to buy a little house, and I want you to live with me. But if I get married, yes, you're going to have to live alone, but don't worry because if I have to buy you a little house, I'll buy you a little house, but I want you to be close.'

Parents of first-generation students recognize changes in students. Three out of nine parents expressed their feelings about the students becoming more independent. Their close relationship is important, but the desire to see the student thrive is equally as

important. Tiffany described what she wants for her daughter, “It's like, with me for myself, I will get too involved and I can't do that because that's going to hurt her, because you can't always run to your parents; you've got to stand up.”

Parents spoke about being proud of students' independence, but sometimes grappling with wanting to do more. Wanda said, “He's very independent. . . . I think when he's done, he wants to look back and say I did this all by myself, which kind of stinks a little bit because I want to help him.” Then, later in the interview, with tears in her eyes, Wanda shared, “It's emotional, letting him go. Him not needing me. On the other spectrum, you're just like wow, look at my kid.” The pride that parents of first-generation college students had regarding their students' accomplishments and the desire for them to do better appeared to outweigh the concerns that they had for themselves.

*“She calls it home.”* Even with the stressors and anxieties that first-generation students may experience, most parents believed that students were having a positive college experience. Eight out of nine parents used positive descriptors about their perception of the student experience. Some of the language that parents used was independent, self-motivated, and knows what she wants. One parent, Tiffany, exclaimed, “She has a sense of freedom. She is involved with so much, there's not a cap on what she can do. She loves her college experience that she's having.” Another parent was happy to report what she has observed in her own daughter. Renee said, “She loves the campus. She absolutely loves the campus. She calls it home. That shows right there how comfortable she feels.”

While the majority of parents shared positive thoughts about the students' experience, some did express concerns. Two out of nine parent participants were parents



of students who transferred to their present university after freshman year. Those parents had concerns about the transfer student experience, although one still used positive descriptors to describe the student experience. Data from these parents sheds some light on the transfer student – parent population within the first-generation population. Lisa remarked:

I think he's a little disappointed. It might have been different had he not gone in as a transfer student and had maybe formed relationships as a freshman. Living off campus, also. I don't think he's gotten close to very many of his classmates or anything . . . he's not as involved in campus life as I think he would have hoped to have been.

While parents perceived that college had been a positive experience for most students, Renee commented on the high school to college transition as overwhelming:

I think part of that is because there is so much added into the bubble. Not only are they learning how to be college students and how to learn as a college student with professors in a different learning style than it would be as structured as high school. The structure is so much different. But then on top of it, they are learning how to be adults for the first time and take care of themselves for the first time.

There is so much added into that bubble that it can kind of be overwhelming.

While the parents reported that the student experience was mostly positive, they also picked up on negative aspects of their experience.

*“It was hard watching her go through that.”* Parents’ close relationships with their first-generation college students shaped the parents’ experience as well. Eight out of nine parents discussed the emotional impact of being a parent of a college student.

One parent had tears in her eyes as she spoke about how this transition has been for both herself and her husband. Michelle noted:

We've been very excited for her from the beginning, but when we came home, it was the empty nest syndrome. I was okay the first semester. I was just concerned for her. I put my feelings to the side. My husband took it hard. He was a little depressed . . . . This semester is going to be hard for me because I feel very sad and a little depressed about her leaving home because she worked two jobs all summer and we didn't get to spend as much time that I would have loved to.

Another parent expressed some feelings of guilt about not knowing how to prepare her daughter for the intensity of the college experience. Renee observed, "I felt I didn't prepare her for certain things that I could have prepared her for. . . . As a parent it was hard watching her go through that. It was difficult for me to know how do I handle it." For Renee, her own transition felt more difficult because she watched her daughter experience some difficulty with adjusting academically. She was not alone in commenting on some level of uneasiness about what experiences students may have attending the institution.

Two out of nine parents spontaneously shared that they had initial thoughts of wondering if their son or daughter 'belonged' at the type of university where the student was enrolled. The parents emphasized that their questions were not related to the student's ability, but instead the questions were more related to family history and socioeconomic status. Christine reflected back to her thoughts when arriving on campus, she said:

When I went to the orientation, I said to her people like us don't belong in a school like this. She thought I meant she didn't deserve it, but I meant that it was just a wonderful opportunity because growing up in this city I've heard good things. Usually, smart families or wealthy kids get to go to that school. I was quite proud that she got to go there.

Another parent recounted how she always expected her son to go to college, but she did not have this type of school in mind. Lisa said:

I guess I thought that he would go to a state school. Maybe live at home or maybe a dorm. Maybe make things a little bit more affordable for him. Also, I didn't think that he would be able to get in to a prestigious university. Our discussions were mostly focused around, 'Oh, you'll probably go to a state university. Here's what we're going to have to pay for that.' That was the assumption that I had and had discussed with him.

The interviews indicated that the vital parent-student relationship led parents to have an emotional response to their student being away at college. Sometimes the family history caused parents to worry about students being the right fit for the institution; often the worry for their students shaped their own experience.

**Professional perspectives.** While professional participants did not answer research question 2, they were asked to respond to data from parent participants. Two themes emerged. First, professional participants had favorable responses to the emotional support provided by the parents of first-generation college students. Second, all professional participants were surprised by the academic support provided by these parents.

*“We want our kids to succeed.”* All professional participants responded favorably and used positive language when the interviewer shared how parents of first-generation college students described their involvement. Professionals mentioned that they have previously heard and therefore expected many of the involvement factors shared by parent participants. All professional participants reported that they expected the emotional support component of parental involvement. The levels of unconditional love, support, and reassurances seemed appropriate to professionals. Flora reported that she related to what parents shared, saying:

I think the first couple would be a natural reaction for any parent. We want our kids to succeed and we love them and we're doing all we can to support them... Understanding the college experience for sure is, like I said before, is something that I've seen.

Flora found it easy to see similarities in the parent participants and the parents of first-generation college students who are connected to her institution. Mae shared the type of discussions she has had with parents to encourage them to put themselves in a position to provide emotional support. She said:

I tell parents texting is great, and emailing your student is good, but every once in a while you need to be on the phone if you live far away, you need to hear your student's voice, because you as a parent, are going to know if there's something wrong, if there's something going on, you're going to hear it in their voice. I think that's very important, their well-being.

*“Academic support, this is really eye-opening.”* There were some aspects of the parents’ description of their involvement that did not resonate with the professional

participants. All professional participants expressed that they were surprised or that they had not previously heard about parents of first-generation students providing academic support. While all professional participants were surprised by this level of support, they had conflicting perceptions of this data. Ilene said:

As far as being involved with papers, I haven't heard that, but I think that is absolutely a good level of involvement. . . . This is their big thing right now, being in school, so sharing a paper or sharing those thoughts about different events happening on campus, especially right now, I think it's not only appropriate but really important.

Mae commented on how the academic support component of involvement for parents of first-generation college students is new information for her.

I have not come across a first-generation parent who has talked about providing academic support or not providing academic support. I really had to process this, and I would have to say yes, that is a little bit surprising. Pleasantly surprising. Even though a parent may not have a college degree, that does not mean that they're not intelligent. That does not mean that they cannot make sense of a statement or a paragraph. I think providing academic support, absolutely. Now there will be some areas [pause] If a student has a calculus test, I don't know how many parents, even a parent who has a Master's degree in some areas, they're not going to be able to help with that either.

Another professional was moved to think about her own institution, Clare said, "This is something I didn't expect. . . . Your point of parents providing academic support is really eye-opening, because I bet you there are more students like this on my campus too."

However, there was one professional participant who shared that she would not support or encourage parents providing academic support to first-generation college students. Flora explained:

Actually, from the educator standpoint, we would not encourage to be involved with the academic progress of their student. Not only do we not share grades with them, because of FERPA, but we have had cases where parents actually do write papers for students. That is definitely not something that we encourage. I guess talking about ideas that you're discussing in the classroom is one thing, but providing support beyond the thoughtful discussion of what your student is studying, is really not something that we encourage at all.

Professionals' definitions of parental involvement were similar to the definitions that parents provided. Yet, some of the differences and exclusions, such as academic support, suggest the need for higher education professionals to gain a better understanding of parents of first-generation college students.

### **Institutional Connections and Disconnections (Research Question 3)**

Both phase one and phase two of the study addressed research question 3: How can higher education institutions facilitate more effective parental involvement with parents of first-generation college students? Data revealed the connections and disconnections that parents of first-generation college students have with the institution. In addition, the results also present the connections and disconnections that exist between the parent perspectives and the institutions perspective. The parent and professional themes that emerged from data are presented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

*Research Question 3 – Themes and Key Concepts*

Participant Group	Theme	Key Concept
Parents of first-generation students	“The only thing that attaches me to the institution is my daughter”	Students are the primary connection to institution
	“Just a checkup”	Parents desire targeted outreach and information. They want to utilize information and resources as a communication tool with students
	“What comes after graduation”	Parents desire information and resources that will help them support student nearing graduation
	“This is what we’re going to do with your child”	Parents want ongoing education about the university experience
	“We don’t hang out or talk much”	Parents have minimal relationships with parents of other college students
Professionals	“I think it would be logistically overwhelming”	Institutions are faced with limited resources
	“That needs to start at the top down”	Lacking investment from senior leadership
	“It’s our job and it’s our pleasure”	Parents may benefit from changing their behavior

**Parent perspectives.** Data in response to this question were telling. Both parent and institution perspectives were uncovered. Parents did not describe many connections to the institution when describing current involvement or facilitating more involvement.

Five themes emerged, largely relating to the parents' disconnection and needs from the institution. First, "the only thing that attaches me to the institution is my daughter," represented that parent participants' only connection to the institution was through the student. Second, "just a check-up," reflects that parents were interested in receiving targeted outreach and information from the institution, though this is not the current practice. They want to utilize information and resources as a communication tool with students. Third, "what comes after graduation," indicates that parents want more information and resources that would help them support students who are approaching graduation. Fourth, "this is what we're going to do with your child," underscores that parents want ongoing education regarding the university experience. Fifth, "we don't hang out or talk much," indicates that parent participants had minimal relationships with parents of other college students.

*"The only thing that attaches me to the institution is my daughter."* Data revealed that most parents of first-generation college students do not feel that they have a strong relationship with the institution. In fact, eight out of nine parents reported that they are minimally connected with the institution. There were some variations among parent participants. Michelle said, "I'm not as close to the college as I would like to be." However, another parent recognized that she was not connected to the institution, but does not think a connection is necessary. Wanda said, "When they go off to college, that's kind of like the breaking point. I don't think the parents need to have their own connections." Miranda simply stated, "The only thing that attaches me to the institution is my daughter." This is a sentiment that emphasizes the fact that most parents related



parental involvement to their relationship and support of their college student, and not necessarily contingent upon a relationship with the institution.

This notion is underscored by seven out of nine parents who described engaging with the institution as a student experience only. Lisa pointed out, “I don't know if it's necessarily something that I need either, to have that connection with the university, because that's his deal. That's his dream.” The majority of parents spoke about initially not having any expectations of the institution for themselves as they began the experience as a parent of a first-generation college student. Tiffany shared, “I never thought that I will be one-on-one with somebody. I just looked at it as I expect the institution to guide my child in the right direction of where she wants to go.” Further, parents reported reluctance in establishing a relationship with the institution or being unsure how to establish their own relationship with the institution, as a parent of a college student. This indicates that if parental connections to the institution are important, then institutions must take the lead in establishing and maintaining a connection with parents of first-generation college students.

**“Just a check-up.”** While some parents of first-generation college students were unsure if having their own relationship with the institution was necessary, data revealed that the majority of parents want to have access to more information and resources. This information would allow them to increase the amount of support that parents provide to students. Five out of nine parents reported a desire for targeted outreach to parents of first-generation college students. When asked for an example, Michelle responded, “Maybe a phone call. Asking how the student is doing at the institution. Just a check-up. Check on the parents, check on the student, just in case there are any questions.” Another

parent mentioned that a direct contact would be helpful, though she emphasized the importance of the outreach not happening too frequently. Tiffany said, “Probably a liaison that could call or something like that; that’s one way, but not too often.” Other parents expressed the need for more communication. Renee made a suggestion for the institution:

Some way with pulling the parents in more, involving them. Whether it be mailing, or just e-mailing. A general e-mail out to all parents with a way for a parent to get back to them. And give their input. How do you feel about safety on campus?

It is interesting to note that some of the efforts that parents suggested already exist at the institution. For example, many parents reported that they do not receive a monthly newsletter, specifically for parents. However, when the researcher attempted to update institutional contact information so that the parents would receive the existing newsletter in the future, it was discovered that they were already receiving it. It is important to note that not having access to email was not a factor for these participants, as some previous studies indicate. The example of the newsletter highlights an important issue in the findings about their being a difference between the existence of resources and parents being aware of those resources. Five out of nine parents reported that they were unfamiliar with existing university resources to support and assist parents of college students. Lisa, a parent of a transfer student said, “I suppose if I had known there were emails that went out I probably would have appreciated being on that list.” Access to information which allow continued support of students is important to parents of first-

generation students, but institutions will need to enhance efforts to ensure information is reaching parents in a way that they are aware of the information and see it as relevant.

When education and resources were provided to parents of first-generation college students, these parents were likely to use the information as a communication tool or a conversation starter with their students. For example, parents may discuss upcoming university award opportunities and deadlines. When speaking about communication from the institution, Barbara shared what she may say to her son:

‘Hey, I see your school's doing this.’ Because instead of saying, ‘Hey, how's it going?’ I need conversation, those things are conversation. ‘Hey, I seen your school listed this, so what are we doing about that? How many students are they going to pick?’ Even if I read it already, it's just conversation I'm getting out of him.

Parents suggested that as they were more informed, it created an opportunity to enhance the parent – student relationship. Importantly, one parent acknowledged that sometimes it is not clear why some information should be relevant to her or her first-generation college student. This emphasizes the need for intentionality without assumptions in communicating with parents of first-generation college students. This would entail moving beyond simply sharing information. Instead, information would include an explanation of why and how a resource can be accessed. Also, an important component in these communications is language which specifies the benefits to students.

***“What comes after graduation?”*** Parents were not only interested in being involved during the undergraduate college years. Parents described wanting to continue to provide support to students after their college graduation, but needing some guidance

regarding how to do so. Michelle said, “I would love [more contact] especially in her senior year, because of the transition, going from one college maybe to another college or to somewhere else, just a little guidance.” Michelle expressed that it would be helpful for the institution to provide some insight regarding what parents should expect after students graduate. Tiffany shared some of the thoughts going on for her as her daughter was nearing graduation.

Now that she's leaving, probably if I had someone to give me that one on one, what should she gear towards when she's leaving college, what do you think would benefit her, because they're still learning even when they leave and things like that. Plus for her, she's still my baby, ‘Okay, what's your next step, what are you going to do now and how can you. . .’

Tiffany continued with expressing some of the many questions on her mind. When asked to expand on what she would want to know, Miranda said, “Everything that has to do with students and parents because let's say parents are getting ready also. What comes after the graduation?” Lisa spoke about how she tried to support her son as he became stressed, during senior year, about the realities of repaying college loans. She said:

I try to be supportive when he's stressed about his classes or his future after college. He worries a lot about his financial future, having to pay back loans and things like that. I try to reassure him about that.

Although Lisa does what she can to be there for her son, she did not acknowledge, or may be unaware of, possible resources at the institution that may be beneficial to the student as he approaches graduation.

***“This is what we’re going to do with your child.”*** Overall, parents were interested in learning more about the university and gaining a better understanding of the university experience. They saw a direct connection between this knowledge and their ability to support their students. Five out of nine parents explained how they can access what they learn as a resource. Wanda expressed her desire to understand the college experience by sharing: “There was a learning process, even learning some of the terms that they use and that my son will say something and I’m like, what does that mean? It’s definitely all brand new, but interesting, and I do like to learn about it.”

Another parent was more specific and spoke about wanting to know more about academic advising. Renee said:

I think the freshman year, they do give a lot of support of freshman parents. I think further support though needs to be there, and there needs to be more parent involvement, I think, when it comes to the academic part when the schedules are being made. Or at least a seminar that parents can go to where they explain, ‘This is how we do it. This is what we’re going to do with your child. This is in the first 4 weeks. We’re going to do x, y, and z to set their schedules up, to get their classes going.’ . . . . I think if parents are a little more aware as far as how schedules are made, how classes are picked, and formed, and that portion of it, then a parent will have more knowledge to be able to say, ‘You know what? That schedule looks really heavy. Are you sure, don’t you think you should go back to your advisor and re-check that, and make sure that this isn’t going to be too much?’ Because I had no idea.

Being unaware of how the advising system works limited the amount of support that this parent was able to provide when her daughter experienced academic difficulty during freshman year. At that time, she did not know the appropriate resources where she could turn.

***“We don’t hang out or talk much.”*** It has been established in prior studies that parents of first-generation college students do not have a strong connection with institutions. Data in these interviews additionally revealed that minimal peer relationships with other parents of college students’ leads parents to utilize students as the primary resource for understanding the institution and navigating the experience. Eight out of nine parents reported that they have very little communication with parents of other college students. Lisa shared, “I don't really know many people that have college age students other than my kid's friend's parents. We don't hang out or talk much.” Other parents spoke about their students being the first to go to college in the family and social circles. Wanda said, “Honestly, a lot of our friends, their kids haven't gone on to college. They've gone on to jobs, or maybe taken some classes at a community college, which, to me, doesn't mean you're doing the whole college thing.” Without these connections to other parents of college students, parents of first-generation students are not participating in spontaneous discussions with other parents and, therefore, possibly missing out on information about resources, tips, and advice that parents with those networks benefit from. Although the majority of parents did not mention it, it should be noted that it is possible that parents may have other connections through various social, community, and faith-based networks.

One parent participant represented an exceptional case in the study. Renee researched resources and opportunities to find opportunities to connect with other parents before and after her daughter started college. Renee used these avenues to find enrichment opportunities for her daughter. Those avenues included online communication with parents and higher-education professionals across the country. Also, she had friends with college-age children living in the same residential complex. Those parents worked together to share information and explore financial aid resources, as well as other programs and opportunities. Renee shared:

What I did actually is online. I joined a lot of groups of parents with college students. Of course, groups that discuss many things about college, whether that be financial aid, or actually living on campus, or not living on campus, so I could get feedback from a lot of different parents, and different societies on how they handle situations or things that may come.

This example highlights that when connections are facilitated, parents and students may benefit.

**Institutional perspectives.** Data revealed that the majority of professional participants understood the needs and desires reported by parents of first-generation college students. Despite this awareness, most professional participants identified institutional issues and barriers. Three themes related to institutional connections and disconnections emerged. The first theme was “I think it would be logistically overwhelming,” reflecting that institutions are faced with limited resources. The second theme was “that needs to start at the top down,” indicating that investment from senior leadership is often lacking. The third theme was “it’s our job and it’s our pleasure,”

suggesting that parents of first-generation college students may benefit from changing their behavior and professionals are happy to help them.

*“I think it would be logistically overwhelming.”* Parents of first-generation college students reported that they were not closely connected to the institution. One professional perspective spoke to this disconnection. Alba said that she believes parents of first-generation students to have a love-hate relationship with educational institutions. Alba explained:

I find our parents are so happy, they are overjoyed for their student, for their child. It's like they love the institution because it's like you gave my child a chance. You're giving them access to things. It's like the notion of the American dream. ‘You are getting an opportunity to go to an institution to be educated, to grow and develop in ways that I cannot even imagine.’ They love our institution for that. They're proud and very thankful and grateful for the opportunity and the potential that they see in their child. The hate comes in because it's like we don't always as an institution, provide that population of students with all the things that they need. We don't properly prepare them.

Two out of five professionals reported that their institutions do not have a clear process for identifying first-generation students or families. Without knowing who fits into this population, it is difficult to know the needs of the population and foster connection. Other professional participants reported that their institutions have data on first-generation students and families, but lack of resources limit or prohibit some of their efforts. In fact, all professional participants mentioned limited resources as a factor at least one time during the interview. Alba summed it up, saying, “We know what best



practices are and how to support them but resources are scarce; it takes a lot of work to do that and we don't."

The size of the institution may also play a role. One professional, Mae, cited her large-sized institution as a barrier to meeting some of the needs of parents of first-generation college students saying "I think it would be very difficult for a large university to make individual contact with individual parents to make those specific, intimate connections with them. I think it would be logistically overwhelming." In contrast, Flora thought that some of the parents' ideas were more feasible due to her institution's small size and she planned to explore implementing some of the suggestions. She said: "As a small liberal arts college we pride ourselves on everything being what we call high touch, very individual, and so I think that would be something that would be an interesting idea."

***"That needs to start at the top down."*** Professional participants had many ideas and thoughts regarding how institutions can facilitate more effective parental involvement. Overwhelmingly, professional participants recognized the importance of addressing issues at the institutional level. All professional participants gave examples of needed institutional changes and efforts that could positively impact involvement and comfort level of parents of first-generation college students. Flora explained:

I think certainly the investments or the interest of senior leadership in providing the services is very important. I think it would have to be an institutional goal and there has to be that kind of support and then there has to be an investment in the resources that are available, especially when you want to be high touch and when

you want to be able to offer that personal interaction and personal connection, it takes time.

Another professional, Mae, shared these sentiments, saying, “I feel like that needs to start at the top down. At my institution I really wish that higher level administrators, especially on the academic side, would make themselves visible to parents and families from the very beginning.”

Clare addressed the need to break down the silos that exist at many institutions. She acknowledged that there are many simultaneous, isolated efforts operating across the institution. Collaboration across the institution would make efforts more effective and sustainable. This multi-divisional approach had recently been initiated at her institution.

Further, several professionals discussed the importance of demystifying institutional language in university websites, handbooks, and other publications. Making communication changes that appeal to various parent audiences may help break down barriers. Engaging senior leadership, working collaboratively, and addressing communication issues all tie into the importance of ongoing education regarding inclusion, serving, and understanding first-generation students and their families.

One professional participant’s perspective stood out because her language was the most supportive of parents of first-generation college students. She communicated the significance of viewing these parents as assets. She explained the importance of a needed mental shift in higher education. Alba said:

Shifting how we think about that from an anti-deficit, and valuing what they bring and playing upon that as opposed to saying these are things that you don't know.

If we know that parents are our students' biggest motivators, let's rally around that and see how we can motivate our students to do well. How can we encourage them to get the support that they need. . . . If we can work with our parents . . . using them in the way that supports where their strengths lie.

This professional perspective highlights the necessity of valuing what parents of first-generation college students bring to institutions.

***"It's our job and it's our pleasure."*** There were suggestions for facilitating more effective parental involvement that are not institution specific. One professional participant had further thoughts about parents of first-generation college students. Flora said:

I actually think that they could benefit from maybe taking a little bit more of a consumer approach to what their students experience is, so that they would encourage their students to make the most of their experience all 4 years. There are so many things that are available to them, and as higher-education professionals it's our job and it's our pleasure to make those things available to them. We want our students to take advantage of them. In that way, I guess I'd like to influence their relationship with the institution.

When asked if institutions can provide education on how to do this, Flora went on to say:

I think that there could be an implicit message as we continuously try to describe what's available to them. 'This is something that is part of your student's experience and you should be encouraging them to take advantage of it, whether or not you're paying for it, someone's paying for it, right, and it's part of the whole package, and it would be a shame to leave that on the table.'

While professional participants were mostly positive about parents of first-generation college students, there were still some thoughts about how parents should change their approach. This idea was in stark contrast to the idea of meeting parents where they are and supporting where their strengths lie. Still, even as Alba suggested meeting parents where they are, she also recognized a need for parental change which professionals can help. Alba said, that when parents are faced with learning of their students' struggles with adjusting, they must grasp for themselves and explain to their students that "This is a whole new world, you have to shift the way that you're thinking. Encourage them that it's going to be all right. The world is more than just your neighborhood."

### **Parents and Professionals: Comparisons and Contrasts**

Even though there were limitations and barriers, all professional participants reported that meeting needs expressed by parents, such as greater access to information and resources, is feasible at their institutions. Four out of five professionals expressed a desire to enhance programming and communication for parents of first-generation college students. In response to parent data, Flora explained, "I want to work towards developing something above and beyond the orientation experience for first-generation parents, and in fact I had a conversation with our dean in the academic office about a month ago about working towards that. That's something that I would like to grow a little bit." Alba shared examples of initiatives and outreach previously done at her institution which are similar to what parent participants suggested. Other professionals spoke about other offices that serve the first-generation college student population expanding programming to parents and families. The professionals were optimistic about collaborating with other

departments and divisions within the institution. Professional reported that some efforts already exist and others had begun related to new initiatives.

Professional participants shared mixed receptivity regarding the idea of providing guidance to parents during first-generation college student's senior year. Clare expressed that she was surprised of this interest, though she was open to exploring possibilities:

That's so revealing because we always [pause] I always thought the first-generation family is really a hands-off family. They are leaving this up to the students to figure out because they're not familiar with the system, but I see they are very concerned. They are concerned. They are thinking about those things. Yeah, this is something that [pause] it's against whatever perception I had about first-generation families.

Another professional, who disagreed with the idea of parents providing academic support, resisted the idea of providing senior year guidance to parents. Flora said, "That's interesting, because developmentally, I think we would hope that students would be making those decisions for themselves, in conversation with their parents, but not that the institution would actually guide that in any way." Other professionals immediately began to share how they can include this information in existing parent newsletters, as well as send special invitations to existing programs to parents of first-generation students. For example, Mae explained:

That would be an easy fix, to do a series and inform parents. I think to do it all in one newsletter would be too overwhelming, but I think a series over the course of months, that might be a good idea.

## **Summary of Results**

The chapter presented the results of the two-phase qualitative data analysis. The voices of parents of first-generation college students were illuminated. The ways that parents defined involvement were presented in response to research question 1. Three themes emerged from the study results. First, parental involvement began with the expectation that their students would go to college. Second, the fact that parents did not have an opportunity to go to college propelled these parents to ensure that they supported their children to take this path to college. Third, data revealed that there was a strong history of involvement dating back to elementary school for the majority of parents. Professional participants also defined parental involvement before learning about parents' definitions.

Professional views of parental involvement were provided as the institutional perspective of research question 1. While higher education professionals expected parents of first-generation college students to provide emotional support, they were surprised by the level of academic support that these parents provided. Most professionals believed that parents of first-generation college student practiced involvement differently than other parents. Overall, professional definitions of parental involvement were institution-specific, as opposed to parent definitions which focused more on their relationship with students.

Parental involvement manifests in many ways with parents of first-generation college students. Four themes emerged from data pertaining to research question 2. Parents of first-generation college students provided emotional support, provided academic support, were impacted by significant life stressors, and their involvement was

embedded in the parent-student relationship. The emotional support was often a response to student stress and anxiety. In addition, emotional support included parents providing guidance and imparting life lessons on their first-generation college students. The academic support may not be perceived as traditional academic support. Parents shared that they engaged in academic discussions, edited papers, and communicated about subject matters that seem foreign to them. Still, they would lend an ear, ask questions, and reassure students.

Data uncovered that parental involvement was influenced by significant life stressors. The stressors presented are employment status, health conditions, and financial anxieties. In addition, data revealed that the parent – student relationship was paramount in parental involvement. Parents and first-generation students were closely connected. Often, students sought parental involvement. Further, data showed that the existing relationship between parents and first-generation college students shaped the parents' experience. Most parents shared the emotional impact of being the parent of a first-generation college student while others grappled with issues of belonging at some point during their journey.

The most significant connection for parents of first-generation college student was the connection with their students. Although not initially identified, parents shared some of what they needed from the institution, specifically more information and resources. It was discovered that parents were unfamiliar with some of the current resources to which they did have access. This highlighted a need to ensure that parents are connecting with information intended for their use. When parents had information and resources, they would use them to support students. Data related to research question 3 revealed that

parents were not strongly connected with the institution or parents of other college students, indicating a lack of closure with the institution and intergenerational closure with other parents (Coleman, 1990). However, one exceptional case was presented of a parent who found resources on her own. This parent exemplified what parents of first-generation students may do with increased resources. Further, it suggests that parents, students and institutions might benefit if the institution helped facilitate more meaningful connections with this population.

Professional data revealed institutional issues and barriers to establishing more effective involvement with parents of first-generation college students. A need for institutional change was an important finding from the institutional perspective. Greater buy-in from upper level administration, collaboration, and effective communication strategies were suggested by professionals. Limited resources were a factor that all professional participants discussed. While parent participants did not mention limited institutional resources, professionals explained how the ability to meet parents' expressed needs was directly connected to resources.

Chapter 5 discusses research implications. Also, Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the limitations of the research. In addition, recommendations for research, higher education, executive leaders, and parents of first-generation college students are included in the chapter. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the ideal impact of the study.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

Extant research has yet to demonstrate a firm knowledge regarding involvement in parents of first-generation college students. Parents of first-generation college students are absent from the majority of literature on parental involvement. The purpose of this study was to examine how parents of first-generation college students define parental involvement at the college level and identify how they practice involvement. This chapter provides an overview of the research, its implications, and the strengths and limitations of this study. Further, it highlights recommendations for future research, higher education, executive leaders, and parents of first-generation college students. The primary research questions for the study were:

1. What is the understanding and definition of parental involvement according to parents of first-generation college students and higher education institutions?
2. How do parents of first-generation college student practice involvement?
3. How can higher education institutions facilitate more effective parental involvement with parents of first-generation college students?

Multiple themes emerged from data, providing the results of the study. The implications and findings highlight primary findings associated with each research question.

## **Implications and Findings**

It is important to explore how the results of the study align with literature, and with the theoretical framework for the study, social capital theory. According to Coleman (1990) the quality of parent-child relationships is a factor in family social capital. While the study sought to understand parental involvement and the relationship between parents of first-generation college students and institutions, the parent-child relationship emerged as important in understanding the parent-institution relationship. The importance of the parent-student relationship appears throughout the findings. Six forms of social capital were described in explanation of social capital theory. However, the study does not discuss all forms of social capital. The findings of this study highlighted information potential, as it is important to the relationship between parents of first-generation college students and institutions. In addition, intentional organization was addressed (Coleman, 1988). Further, closure and intergenerational closure, as sources of social capital, are elements of the theory and were referenced in this study.

**What is parental involvement? (research question 1).** Study findings related to research question 1 indicate that parents have a high level of engagement with first-generation college students. Early on during each interview with parents of first-generation college students it was discovered that parents had a common expectation that students would go to and graduate from college. Parents expressed factors that may have shaped their expectations of college attendance and their own deep commitment to students' academic success. Their own family background and social factors influenced how they defined involvement. The desire for first-generation students to realize a dream that parents had was discussed. It is time that parents of first-generation college students

be acknowledged for their consistent support of education. Research perpetuates the notion that that these parents are unfamiliar with education (Gofen, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006), but infrequently acknowledges the strength that they bring. While parents of first-generation college students were modest about their own strength, they have been a constant presence in the lives a students, as indicated by the theme *I've always been involved*. They are resources to students, and social capital stems from the resources that come about through relationships and those which can be tapped into for beneficial purposes (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Lin, 2001).

Parent data demonstrate that there is not just one way to be involved and that they have been connected to students' academic experiences over a long period of time. Parents of first-generation college students have invested in their children. Their history of involvement is deeply rooted and reportedly serves as a significant source of support for students. In accordance with present results, past studies highlighted the significance of family on student success (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Further, London's (1989) research pointed to the complexity of students' education decision being tied to a rich family history, pressure, conflict, and conflicting responsibilities. This research supports the idea of family history impacting the student academic experience. Coleman's (1987, 1990) social capital theory connected academic success of students to the strength of families, including the relationship between parents and students and the level of parents' attention. The perspective of the parents participating in this study confirms strong family bonds; they make a case for how those bonds support student success.

Professionals defined involvement in ways similar to the parents. Professionals acknowledged that parents of first-generation students play an important role in the lives of students and recognized that parents are engaged in student success. Interestingly, most thought that the involvement of parents of first-generation college students differed from that of other parents, as indicated by the theme *not as assertive*. While professionals acknowledged the importance of all families, for most, their perceptions of first-generation families are different. The results indicate a strong desire to support first-generation students and their parents and families. However, results suggested that these parents and families are not fully understood. Professionals may not recognize involvement of these parents because parents are highly involved with students, but minimally involved with the institution. This minimal involvement suggests a lack of closure between parents of first-generation college students and the institution (Coleman, 1990).

Parent data demonstrate that parents of first-generation students think of involvement in terms of their connection and relationship to their students. However, professional data demonstrate that professionals think of involvement in terms of relationship to the institution. According to Coleman (1990), the networks which develop from offices that the professionals represented could be considered an intentional organization because the institution has made services and resources available through these offices. While intentional organization is a form of social capital, some parents of first-generation college students are not benefitting from it. The professionals' ideas of involvement are indications that higher education professionals may be missing the importance of the role of family expectations and background. This importance of family

has been highlighted in the literature (Gofen, 2009; London, 1989; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

**What does involvement look like? (research question 2).** Upon describing how they are involved with first-generation college students, parents explained the types of support that they provide. Their practice of involvement took on two overarching forms, emotional support and academic support. The emotional support that parents provided was consistent. However, unique to this research, is the uncovering of the finding that parents of first-generation college students actively provide academic support to students. Regarding the academic role that parents took on, sometimes they listened to details and provided feedback regarding academic projects, read papers, and edited papers. Deep connections and the strong relationship between parents and students led parents to maintain a high level of involvement. That is, involvement is embedded in the parent – student relationship. Thus, study findings suggest that students continue to lean on parents for support during college years and that students count on active parental involvement. Analysis of parent data revealed the importance of the relationship between parent and child, as predicted by social capital theory (Coleman, 1987). The parent-child relationship is paramount in social capital theory and the theory placed value on the quality of the relationship. The parent theme, *they come to me*, highlights the fact that students draw parents in and seek parents out as resources. Also, parents expressed intense pride and a sense of awe of students' accomplishments. For this study, these examples highlight the quality of the parent – student relationship. The strength of the relationship, between parents and students, and the resources that the relationship provides, serves as a form of social capital for parents and students.

Previous research suggests that parents of first-generation college students are disconnected from the academic experience of students (Engle, 2007) and provide low levels of support (Sy et al., 2011; Thayer, 2000). However the findings of this study contradict those suggestions. Research participants detailed examples of how they support the academic success of students. Further, the results of the study addressed significant life stressors that impacted parents' involvement, including employment status, financial anxieties, and health conditions. Also, the extent to which parental involvement is embedded in the parent-student relationship was uncovered. For parents of first-generation college students, students are the key to the type and level of involvement that they practiced. They encouraged students to *reach for the stars*, regardless of what was going on in the lives of parents. Study findings suggest that the constant and consistent level of involvement that parents provide deepens the connection to students. As mentioned, parents recounted examples of how students not only seek them out and engage them, and how parents provide emotional and academic support. These revelations served as an indication of the high level of trust that first-generation students have with their parents.

Overall, higher education professionals responded favorably to data from parents of first-generation college students. Still, professionals were surprised and somewhat divided upon learning about the academic support that parents provided, with one professional questioning the appropriateness. However, social capital theory might suggest that parents' academic support is an example of parents' close relationships with students and may positively impact student success. While the interviews did not include any emphasis on the concept of helicopter parenting, issues of appropriateness may relate

to ideas of intrusive parental involvement (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). It is possible that these ideas influence professional perspectives. Therefore, these varying professional perspectives might suggest that higher education professionals may have some difficulty realizing parents of first-generation college students as assets to the students' academic experience. Recognizing these parents as assets to students' academic experience may help parents, and students, tap into their respective strengths for greater success (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). This same difficulty of realizing strengths may not exist if the professionals are considering parents who have obtained 4-year college degrees. For some professionals, their thoughts about parents of first-generation college students involve what these parents are lacking and preconceived notions about abilities that they may or may not possess, such as providing academic support. Yet the results showed that parents of first-generation students are academic resources for students. The academic support efforts described by parents of first-generation college students reflect a "high level of social capital in the family" (Coleman, 1987 p. 36).

Perna and Titus (2005) found that parental involvement is a form of social capital which impacts college enrollment. In line with Perna and Titus (2005), this study demonstrated how involvement of parents of first-generation college students impacts students during college. Further, this study upholds the findings of Gofen (2009) and Ziemniak (2011) which described families as assets (family capital) to students and a significant component to their experience. However, parent participants did not give any indication that students felt overwhelmed, less confident or unsure about their own decision making, as suggested by Cullaty (2011). Further, parent participants did not express any perception that students' experienced increased depression or dissatisfaction

due to an increased level of parental involvement or are otherwise negatively impacted by their parents' level of involvement, as suggested by Schiffrin et al. (2014). In fact, participants gave examples of how their students draw them in. Further, involvement was very much connected to providing emotional support, but did not appear to be intrusive as suggested by Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012). This was supported by participants' expressing the extent of the closeness of the parent-student-relationship.

Nichols and Islas (2016) found that parents of first-generation students pushed students through college with their support, while parents of continuing generation students pulled students through college with their own higher education experience. However, this study demonstrates that parents of first-generation students push and pull students through college. Although the pulling is not through direct higher education experience, parents imparted meaningful life lessons to students. Wang (2014) suggested that these life lessons become memorable messages that students receive from parents. The support and messages from parents of first-generation college students may be different at times, but this study posits that it is not any less significant.

**Institutional connections and disconnections (research question 3).** The study uncovered issues related to the relationship between parents of first-generation college students and institutions. Both parents and higher education professionals provided perspectives on how higher education can facilitate more effective parental involvement at the college level. Overwhelmingly, the findings of the study demonstrate that parents of first-generation college students experienced a disconnection between the institution and themselves. The study illuminated these disconnections experienced by parents of first-generation college students. For example, parents expressed that students were their



only connection to the institution. In addition, these parents are interested in being provided more information and resources from the institution which will assist them in supporting their students. Further, they reported minimal relationships with parents of other college students. These types of connections can be beneficial to parents as they support students during college years and beyond. Coleman (1988) described these relationships with other parents as a form of social capital; it is referred to as intergenerational closure. Intergenerational closure should be considered, as it provides more social capital to parents (Coleman, 1988). With this closure, parents of first-generation college students might experience more connections with the institution, particularly if the institution took an active role in facilitating a relationship between parents. Further, formal and informal parent networks which emerge from parent and family relations offices may serve as the form of social capital described as intentional organization (Coleman, 1990). The facilitation of parent – parent relationships might be a service provided through such offices.

The network that may exist between parents can serve as a resource to draw from, to positively impact students. For example, parents of first-generation college students might gain insight regarding the higher education experience from parents of other college students, if they are engaging within the same network and have common interests, such as student well-being (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998). In turn, parents of first-generation college students can be a resource to other parents within the network; it is a beneficial reciprocal relationship. The confirmation from parent participants that these relationships do not exist suggests that parents of first-generation college student may have limited information potential, a form of capital. Information potential refers to

information made available through relationships (Coleman, 1990). While access to information is important, the study showed that all parents are positively impacting students without it. Parents might access funds of knowledge, inherent in individual parents, as capital to obtain information for themselves and support students. Still, information potential is a form of capital in which institutions can take an active role in impacting the level of social capital available to parents of first-generation college students. According to Coleman (1990), information is a stimulus for action. Parents are finding their own resources, but they are also seeking more information, so that they may act more by providing more support to students. In some cases, the information provided by the institution is not resonating with parents of first-generation college students. Sandefur and Laumann (1998) may have argued that information from institutions, as a form of social capital, is a benefit to parents of first-generation college students, as it would allow them to meet the goal of providing and increasing support to students.

Institutions have power to provide access, and they are in a position to be a primary resource of such information. However, the institutional perspectives revealed that institutions are aware of disconnections between parents and institutions. This study found that professionals are interested in supporting parents of first-generation college students, but institutions are faced with barriers, as suggested by the theme *that needs to start at the top down*. Some of the barriers described likely negatively impact parents of first-generation college students. These barriers include lack of a process to identify first-generation students and families, limited resources, institutional size, and need for more buy-in from senior leadership. This point is a reminder of the assertion put forth by Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) that the educational context shapes parental involvement.

That is, the issues that were consistent across participating institutions are getting in the way of addressing the needs of these parents and strengthening connections with them. Rogosic and Baranovic (2016) suggested that the quality of all relationships, not just familial relationships, is important when it comes to building social capital. The issues that institutions are facing appear to be negatively impacting the quality of the relationship with parents of first-generation college students. In particular, strained resources prohibit the ability to engage with parents of first-generation students in ways that parents have identified as potentially helpful, such as targeted outreach and specialized programming. In addition, the absence of investment from senior leadership minimizes the importance of institutional engagement and support of this population; therefore, disconnections persist.

Often, professionals have good intentions but may be focused on their own institutional agendas and limited resources, without having a clear understanding of unique populations of parents such as parents of first-generation college students. As mentioned, parents reported that targeted outreach would be beneficial to their support of students. Some professionals, upon learning about the needs and interests that parents presented, began to think about how they can fit the targeted outreach needs into existing structures, as opposed to considering new structures. This is an important point because parents of first-generation college students revealed that some existing institutional efforts are not resonating with them. As described in the results, many parents were not immediately aware of existing resources available to parents of college students. This finding does not speak to a lack of resources. Instead, it emphasizes that existing efforts designed specifically for parents are not reaching this population. Therefore, the

institution may be creating a barrier to their involvement (Jehangir, 2010; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). For example, although most parents were receiving the electronic newsletter created for parents of college students, some were unfamiliar with this resource. Therefore, the institution may benefit from restructuring the content and delivery of the newsletter so that it is useful to these parents. In addition, some parents reported receiving information, but in some cases they are unsure of the significance. This suggests that the institution could do a better job of providing more context and education around information provided to parents, so as not to create barriers. The additional context and education would make the information more valuable and encourage greater parental involvement, therefore, increasing the information potential form of social capital. O’Keefe and Djeukeng (2010) acknowledged that the type of institution which first-generation students attend influences the social capital made available to them from the institution. It is appropriate to make that same connection for parents—the institution can impact the social capital available to parents through the institution. The barriers discussed above decrease the amount of social capital made available to parents from institutions. Rogosic and Baranovic (2016) expressed that “whether a particular structure represents social capital, depends on whether its function serves the individual involved in a particular action” (p. 84). The efforts of the intentional organization may be a resource for the general parent population, but may not serve as a resource or form of social capital for special populations of parents, such as parents of first-generation college students.

The study findings are supported by Ziemniak (2011) which posited that institutions are not meeting the needs of parents of first-generation college students.

Further, Coleman's (1987) social capital theory explains this disconnectedness as a lack of closure. Lack of closure limits the ability for parents of first-generation college students to utilize their relationship with the institution as a resource for supporting students. Moreover, closure in relationships creates trustworthiness (Coleman, 1990). An issue of trust may explain the parent theme of *the only thing that attaches me to the institution is my daughter*. A greater relationship between parents and the institution increases the resources available to parents and students, thereby potentially adding to the students' success. According to Coleman (1988), all relationships produce some form of capital. Therefore, if institutions are addressing the relationship with parents of first-generation college students, then institutions are directly impacting the social capital available to these parents. Sometimes there is focus on what parents of first-generation students are lacking, but perhaps more emphasis should be placed how institutions may be negatively impacting their social capital. Some have argued that the social capital available to individuals varies based on socioeconomic status or ethnic background (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). However, the findings of this study did not support that argument, as related to parents' socioeconomic status and ethnic background. All parent data suggested parents' perception of minimal levels of social capital available from the institution. There was no notable difference in their perceptions. For example, parents with lower socioeconomic status and those with higher socioeconomic status reported being unfamiliar with some institutional resources which would increase social capital available to parents. Further, parents reported being interested in wanting to access information as a resource, but they did not believe that the type of information that they wanted was available.

The findings of this study showed that higher education institutions are in various states working with and supporting parents of first-generation college students. The study provided a greater understanding of parental involvement from the perspective of first-generation college students. In addition, a better understanding of the relationship and disconnections between these parents and institutions were revealed.

### **Limitations**

There were two limitations of the study. Although parent participants represented multiple types of diversity, the study consisted of all women (mothers). Some parent participants shared feedback about their husbands' perspective. Still, a first-hand account of fathers' perspectives was lacking and would have added to the generalizability of the findings. However, because saturation was reached in the data analysis, the sample size and type itself does not appear to have weakened the study findings as representative of mothers' perspectives.

The parent and institutional representatives participating in this study were not from the same institutions. Professional participants were asked how feasible parent suggestions would be at the institution which each professional represented. Therefore, multiple professional perspectives helped broaden the generalizability of the findings. However, this also means that there is not a direct institutional link between parent perspectives and institutional perspectives.

### **Recommendations**

The results of this study lead to recommendations for future research, higher education practice, executive leaders, and parents of first-generation college students. Ideally, the recommendations for higher education practice and executive leaders should

be acted upon simultaneously for the benefit of parents, students, and institutions.

Parents of first-generation college students are included in the recommendations because they are encouraged to continue to make their perspectives a part of the dialogue.

**Future research.** Parents of first-generation college students are actively engaged in the lives of students. The results of this study show that parents of first-generation college students have a high level of engagement. However, there is limited research that includes parents of first-generation college students as participants.

Therefore, four recommendations for research are warranted. First, it is recommended that more qualitative research be conducted to access the voices of this parent population, continuing to gain a better understanding of their lived experience and their involvement with students. Such research might further investigate the parent-student relationship. The significance of this relationship stood out in the findings. Further exploration and comparison of parent perspectives and student perspectives is needed. This comparison would help substantiate or negate the parents' perception of the student experience. In addition, it would promote future findings related to the impact of increased levels of involvement on the student experience.

Second, it is recommended that research be conducted on the impact of parent – parent relationships on parental involvement and students' higher education experience. The results of this study demonstrated that parents of first-generation college students are minimally connected with other parents of college students. That is, there is a lack of intergenerational closure. Intergenerational closure is a source of social capital and exists when the relationship between parents can be accessed as a resource (Coleman, 1988). Exploring the impact of these relationships when in existence, might shed light on the

significance of these relationships. Further, this research may uncover aspects of the parent-parent relationships that parents of first-generation college students already possess and/or access, as parent participants in this study demonstrated the extent to which they have been assets to student even with a lack of intergenerational closure.

Third, in investigating the questions of this study, future research should seek to diversify the sample represented. Specifically, the participation of fathers and other family members should be sought actively. With more representation in the sample, future studies can compare and contrast the perspectives of mother and fathers to determine the extent to which their experiences are similar and whether unique strategies are needed to reach both sets of parents. Further, expanding the study to include the larger family context may be beneficial. This study intentionally focused on parents of first-generation college students. However, the broader family perspective may yield different results. Although family members or guardians were not excluded from this research, a family approach would encourage more participation. The sample could also be diversified by triangulating the perspectives of parents with first-generation college students themselves. This might help to identify additional gaps between parents, institutions, and students.

Finally, quantitative methodology, such as administering a survey instrument, would create the opportunity to include a greater number of parents across many institutions. This quantitative approach would allow triangulation of data from professionals at the same institution. Further, this large-scale approach would create an opportunity for the identification of themes and trends occurring by region, state, and institutional type.



**Higher education.** As described in the results, parents of first-generation college students are an ongoing source of emotional support and they are interested in gaining more information and resources to increase the support that they provide to students. Therefore, institutions should acknowledge the needs of parents of first-generation college students by enhancing communication efforts while acknowledging the diversity, access, and equity category of the Parent and Family Programs Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education Standards (CAS Standards). There are four specific recommendations for higher education practice. First, higher education institutions should develop a clear process for identifying first-generation students and families. It is difficult to support a population if they have not been identified and their perspectives have not been sought. Upon identifying first-generation students and families, parent and family professionals will gain a better understanding of how these parents are supporting students and the values inherent in their support. Acknowledging this parental support as a resource and form of capital that parents pass on to students is essential. Then, higher education, especially parent and family offices, should encourage parents of first-generation college students to continue to be a resource for their students, as well as educating parents on how parent and family programs can be resources for them. This may involve embracing new ideas of the varied ways parents of first-generation college students are resources.

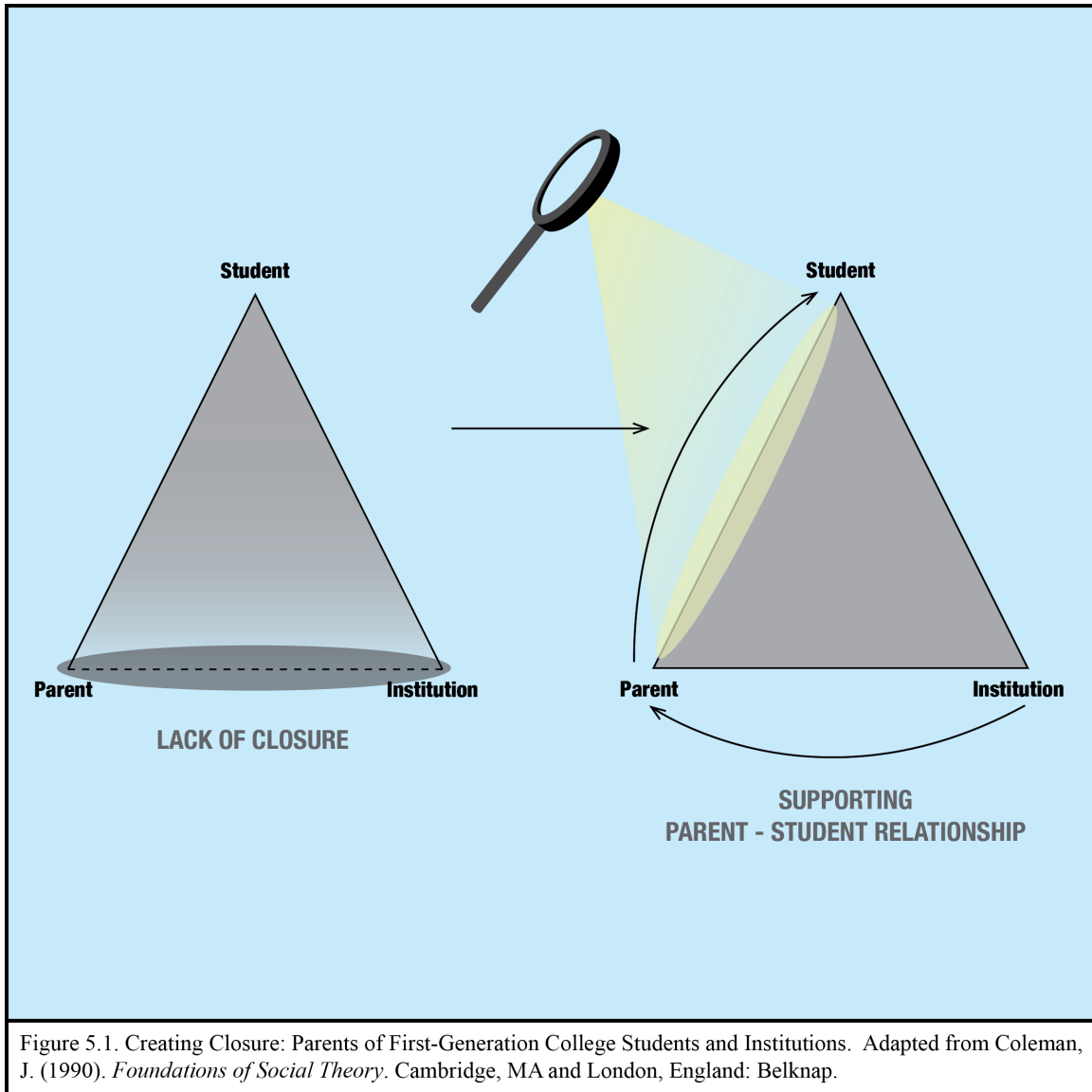
Second, higher education institutions must increase the work to develop closure with parents of first-generation college students. Institutions should do so by focusing efforts on supporting the parent-student relationship. This study highlighted the importance of the close connection between parents and first-generation college students.

Therefore, higher education institutions should focus their efforts on working with parents of first-generation college students in ways that benefit both parents and their students. Parents are eager to use what they learn from institutions to strengthen their relationships with students. For example, parents discussed how information received from the institution can become a communication tool with students. By supporting the parent-student relationship through education, communication, targeted outreach, and programming, parents are likely to feel more supported, and recognize the institution as a valuable resource, thereby enhancing the information potential form of social capital and connectedness between parents and institutions. Data from this study suggest that by providing information and resources to parents, a direct connection is made to increasing parents' ability to support students, thus, greater closure with institutions may follow. In turn, the relationship between parents and institutions will strengthen, further increasing closure and increasing parents' social capital. Social capital is found in the connectedness of relationships (Coleman, 1990). In the study, parents reported that students are performing well and experiencing educational success and achievements. However, increased closure between parents and institutions will allow parents to pull from the relationship to enhance their positive impact on students.

Figure 5.1 depicts a model for creating closure between parents of first-generation college students and institutions. As demonstrated in the first image within the figure, the strength of the connection between parents and first-generation college students is represented by a solid line. Also, the relationship between first-generation college students and the institution is represented by a solid line. However, lack of closure between parents of first-generation college students and the institution, as conveyed by

parent and professional reports of disconnectedness, is represented by a dotted line. The second image within the figure shows the importance of institutions initiating efforts which support the parent-student relationship. Through this approach, institutions will shine a light on the parent-student relationship, allowing parents to access the institutional support of their relationships with students as a resource to increase support. As mentioned in the implications, institutions have power in being able to provide valuable information to parents which supports their relationship and involvement with students. Institutions must realize that creating closure between parents and institutions is a by-product of supporting the parent-student relationship.

Further, higher education institutions can impact intergenerational closure between parents of first-generation college students by facilitating more opportunities for them to connect through formal and informal networks, enhancing the intentional organization form of social capital. These opportunities can promote community building and promote parents of first-generation college students supporting and tapping into each other as resources, thus building their social capital. Coleman (1988) suggested that intergenerational closure provides a greater level of social capital to parents. When closure does not exist, as reported by parents in this study, common norms are less likely to exist, as well (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Vorhaus, 2014). Common norms in the higher education context might be insight on what to expect regarding students' development and behavior during college.



*Figure 5.1. Creating Closure: Parents of First-Generation College Students and Institutions.*

Third, institutions should consider a new model of reaching parents of first-generation college students. A one-size fits all approach to meeting the needs of parents is not appropriate (CAS Standards, 2012; Kiyama et al., 2015). Data from the professional participants highlighted some institutional limitations as barriers, but these

limitations provide some direction as well. Institutions should allocate financial and human resources to explore the specific needs of this population at every institution. Further, the results suggest that disparate efforts may cause confusion and duplication of efforts. Therefore, parent and family program professionals should lead efforts in reaching and meeting the needs of parents of first-generation college students. Perhaps parent and family programs can begin to develop specific resources to work toward enhancing relationships with parents of first-generation college students. Best practices in the field of parent and family relations should absolutely inform these efforts. Still, higher education institutions are cautioned to always consider the population and include them in the design of programming to be sure that their specific needs are being met and that developing programs are resonating with them. This recommendation is in line with the CAS Standards for parent and family programs. In particular, this recommendation will align with CAS Standards by “promoting respect for commonalities and differences among people within their historical and cultural contexts,” and “addressing the characteristics and needs of diverse constituents when establishing and implementing culturally relevant and inclusive programs, services, policies, procedures, and practices” (CAS Standards, 2012). Kiyama et al. (2015) reminded parent and family programs that “it is important to keep demographic and developmental needs of students and parents in mind so that services and resources offered are inclusive and able to be utilized by as many families as possible” (p. 50).

Fourth, institutions should embrace a new definition of parental involvement in the higher education context. The study results showed that involvement of parents of first-generation college students is complex and that professionals were not completely

aware of the extent of parents' involvement. Therefore, it is suggested that higher education professionals remain open to adding to their own definitions as they continue to recognize parents of first-generation college students as a resource and learn from them. Based on the findings of this study, possible components of a new evolving definition of involvement of parents of first-generation college students include recognition of parents' expectation that children attend college and history of involvement beginning in early education. Further, a new definition might expand the definition provided by Wartman and Savage (2008). Parent participants were not just actively involved in students' lives, but parents of first-generation college students actively provided academic support to students. Often, higher education has not recognized or otherwise overlooked these components of involvement for parents of first-generation college students. However, being unaware of this type of involvement does not mean that it does not exist.

**Executive leaders.** The findings of this study highlight the importance of exploring the lived experience of a marginalized population. Not only were those experiences illuminated, but primacy was given to the perspectives of parents of first-generation college students. There are specific recommendations for executive leaders to continue promoting social justice. First, executive leaders should regularly create opportunities to connect with underrepresented populations to explore needs and concerns, while uplifting the strengths of the population. Second, executive leaders should acknowledge the significant contributions that parents of first-generation college students add to the student experience. This is recognizing the funds of knowledge as a source of capital for this population (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Acknowledgement may

require leaders to reflect on the essentialness of meeting people where they are and avoiding assumptions sometimes made in higher education. Third, charged with leading institutions and organizations, executive leaders must set the tone by demonstrating their critical investment and buy-in into the importance of supporting this population. They can do so by embracing more of a human resource perspective (Bolman & Deal, 2013). A human resource frame would promote more acceptance of parents of first-generation college students as valued members of the institutional community and seek to meet their needs, perhaps positively impacting the overall relationship between these parents and institutions. Literature reflects the assumption that parents of first-generation college students are not helpful (Choy, 2001), disconnected from the academic experience of students (Engle, 2007) and provide minimal support (Sy et al., 2011; Thayer, 2000). The findings of this study demonstrate the opposite, these parents are not a disconnected, disinterested, monolithic group. In fact, parent participants were actively engaged, interested in receiving more relevant information, and had deep emotional connections to the students' experience. Embracing an anti-deficit approach is essential (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011).

Fourth, executive leaders should be mindful of the impact of social class. In this study, parent participants represented various social classes. The study revealed commonalities across all classes. That is, parent participants on the lower and higher end of annual income and socioeconomic status still reported similar experiences as parents of first-generation college students, as detailed in the results. However, leaders must assess the role that aspects of social class, such as power and prestige (or lack thereof), has on the experience of parents of first-generation college students (Allen, 2009). Social

class and education status may impact an individual's experience on a college campus, as indicated by a parent's recollection, "people like us don't belong in a school like this." Working to create a more receptive environment or an environment where all parents and students feel they belong, could combat forms of classism based on educational status. All students and their parents deserve to feel like they are a part of the institutional community. Further, Aristotle's theory of justice might suggest that all parents, including those who did not earn a college degree, should be recognized and valued for their contributions to students' college experience (Sandel, 2009).

**Parents of first-generation college students.** The parent participants in the study were an essential, invaluable component to the study. Their strength and willingness to share their lived experience is an important contribution to research. Other parents of first-generation college students are encouraged to openly share their experiences, expectations, and concerns with institutions. An increasing number of institutions have developed offices to work with parents of undergraduate students. While these offices service the larger parent population, they are charged with becoming more aware of and addressing unique needs and desires. Some assumptions may exist about who parents of first-generation college students are, where their interests lie, and what abilities they have. Still, they are encouraged to be willing to share their stories, in an effort to hold institutions accountable, and to continually enhance the essential support that they provide to first-generation college students.

## **Conclusion**

The study explored the involvement of parents of first-generation college students using social capital theory as the framework. Social capital theory suggested that the



social resources and assets within families may impact students' educational experiences and success (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). Importantly, social capital theory emphasized the importance of relationships within and outside of the family context. The findings of this study uncovered information about the relationship between parents and first-generation college, as well as the relationship between parents and the institution.

Qualitative methodology was used for the study. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted employing a two-phase process. First, the researcher interviewed parent participants and completed data analysis. In phase two of the study, professionals were presented with parent perspectives in order to explore similarities and differences in the perceptions of involvement. Then professionals were asked about feasibility of parent ideas.

Professionals shared their own perspectives on parental involvement of first-generation college students. Then they were asked to respond to the parent participants' responses. Comparisons were made between parents and professional data. Further, professionals' perspectives were provided regarding the ideas and needs presented by parents. In addition, parent and professional participants' perspectives regarding how institutions can facilitate more effective parental involvement were captured.

Professionals acknowledged the existence of institutional issues and barriers directly impacting their current and desired efforts with parents of first-generation college students.

The two-stage sampling and data collection process allowed triangulation of parents' perspectives with institutional perspectives. This not only provides two perspectives, but puts them in conversation with one another because of the sequential

design of the study and the focus of the institutional protocol allowed professional who were interviewed to provide a direct response to the experiences and expressed needs of parents. This triangulation through the sampling and data collection procedures reduced the bias and error that might be introduced had only one of the samples been used.

Further, the use of analytic induction as the method of analyzing qualitative data provided a clear and systematic way of testing the conclusions against the data. This increases the internal validity of the findings.

The study addressed a significant gap in the literature by including parents in the methodological design, as they are often absent. The study accomplished giving primacy to the voice and perspective of parents of first-generation college students in exploring parental involvement. This approach shifted the focus of the prior research and uncovered parents' deep connections to students' education experience. For many parents, they always expected their students to enroll in higher education. Some of those expectations were borne out of the parents' own desire to attend college. Parents and students remain deeply connected, but parents and institutions lack connection. The disconnection between parents and institutions is described as a lack of closure and it is considered a source of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Revealing this disconnection from the parent and institutional perspectives creates an opportunity to forge a new relationship; students are at the heart of that relationship. Institutions and leaders have a chance to utilize the findings of this study to impact the experience of parents of first-generation college students and the experience of students themselves. With this, stronger institutional connections can be realized.

This study may serve as a model for engaging other disconnected, underrepresented, or otherwise marginalized populations. As suggested by Jehangir (2010) “making changes in how higher education invests in historically underrepresented students is critical. . .” (p. 186). This study provides some direction for how higher education can invest in students by investing in their parents. It highlights the importance of valuing individual stories and tapping into the collective strengths of a population.

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## Appendix A

### Data Collection Tools: Parent Interview Protocol

#### **Introduction:**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am interviewing parents of current students at Upstate University who are the first (or one of the first if there are siblings) to go to college. I am interested in learning about your experience as a parent of a first-generation college student. College is transition for students, but it is a transition for families, as well. Therefore, I want to know more about your journey.

I have written information for you that gives a full explanation of my study. It is stated in the information, but I want to emphasize that what you share with me will remain confidential. To ensure confidentiality, I will assign pseudonyms to participants, focus on overall study themes, and avoid linking any statements to individual names. In addition, when not in use, related interview documents will be secured in a locked file for three years after the completion of the current research.

I want to be sure to capture all of your responses and also review the interview at a later time. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

#### **Opening Statement**

*Tell me about your experience as a parent now that your son/daughter is in college.*

#### **Main Questions**

**Parent Interview Question (PaIQ) 1:** *How would you say that you are involved with son/daughter as a college student?*

Probe: How often do you talk to him/her about classes or major? What about his/her social life?

**Parent Interview Question 2:** *What does being involved as a parent mean to you?*

Probe: When your son/daughter was in elementary or high school, did you help with homework? Attend school events?

**Parent Interview Question 3:** *What are some things in your life that impact how much you are involved?*

**Parent Interview Question 4:** *Now that he/she is in college, what do you think the college experience is like for him/her at Upstate University?*

Probe: How do you find out?

Follow up: Can you give an example? How does he/she usually respond?

**Parent Interview Question 5:** *What can you tell me about your relationship with Upstate University?*

Probe: Have attended events, such as Orientation or Family Weekend? If yes - Did you enjoy those programs? If no – Can you tell me why you did not attend these programs?

Follow up: Are you familiar with university websites, e-newsletters or other resources?

**Parent Interview Question 6:** *What type of connection do you have with parents of other college students?*

**Parent Interview Question 7:** What were some of the expectations, needs, or hopes that you had regarding your relationship with Upstate University?

Follow up: Were those expectations/hopes met by the university?

**Parent Interview Question 8:** *What would you suggest Upstate University do to make you feel more connected to the university?*

*Our interview is coming to a close. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience as a parent of a first-generation college student at Upstate University?*

## Appendix B

### Data Collection Tools: Professional Interview Protocol

#### **Introduction:**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I have interviewed parents of current students at Upstate University who are the first (or one of the first if there are siblings) to go to college. I am interested in learning your reactions to some of the themes and suggestions from the parents in phase one of the research. In addition, I would like to learn your perspective on the feasibility of the parents' suggestions within your current institutional context.

I have written information for you that gives a full explanation of my study. It is stated in the information, but I want to emphasize that what you share with me will remain confidential. To ensure confidentiality, I will assign pseudonyms to participants, focus on overall study themes, and avoid linking any statements to individual names. In addition, when not in use, related interview documents will be secured in a locked file for six months after the completion of the current research.

I want to be sure to capture all of your responses and also review the interview at a later time. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

#### **Main Questions**

**Professional Interview Question (PrIQ) 1:** *How do you define parental involvement?*

Follow up: *Does your definition of parental involvement differ for parents of first-generation college students?*

*Summarizing points of how parent participants in phase one define parental involvement are:*

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Professional Interview Question 2:** *What are your thoughts about these points?*

*Suggestions of how higher education institutions can facilitate more effective parental involvement in parents of first-generation college students included:*

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Professional Interview Question 3:** *What are your thoughts on the feasibility of each suggestion?*

**Professional Interview Question 4:** *In your opinion, how can higher education institutions facilitate more effective parental involvement with parents of first-generation college students?*

## Appendix C

### Introduction Email and Study Information (Parent)

Date,

Dear Parent,

My name is Dawn Bruner. I am director of Parent and Family Relations at Upstate University. In addition, I am a doctoral candidate in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. This letter is a follow up to my call earlier today. I am conducting a research study as a requirement of my Ed.D. degree in Executive Leadership. I would like to invite you to participate in the study by allowing me to interview you.

The topic of my study is the parental involvement of parents of first-generation college students. I plan to interview parents of current students at Upstate University who are the first (or one of the first if there are siblings) in their family to go to college. I am interested in learning about your experience as a parent of a first-generation college student. College is a transition for students, but it is a transition for families, as well. Therefore, I want to know about your journey.

The interview will take place at a place in a location where you are comfortable, and may take approximately 45 - 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio-recorded. There is no preparation required for the interview. Your participation or non-participation will not have any impact on your undergraduate student. In addition, your participation or non-participation in this research study will not impact any current or future services offered to the student or parents by the university.

If you participate and become uncomfortable answering the questions, you can choose not to answer. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time.

In appreciation of your willingness to meet with me for the interview and your time, you will receive a \$25 Visa gift card at the completion of the interview.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] to schedule an interview. Also, you may contact me with study related questions or concerns.

Please see additional information on the study and confidentiality attached. Also, this information will be reviewed at the time of the interview and you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form prior to participation.

Sincerely,

Dawn L. Bruner  
Education Doctoral Candidate, Executive Leadership  
St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY

## Appendix D

### Introduction Email and Study Information (Professional)

Date

Dear Professional,

My name is Dawn Bruner. I am director of Parent and Family Relations at Upstate University. In addition, I am a doctoral candidate in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. I am conducting a research study as a requirement of my Ed.D. degree in Executive Leadership. I would like to invite you to participate in the study by allowing me to interview you.

The topic of my study is the parental involvement of parents of first-generation college students. I plan to interview parents of current students at Upstate University who are the first (or one of the first if there are siblings) in their family to go to college. I am interested in learning about their experience as a parent of a first-generation college student. In addition, I plan to interview higher education professionals in the field of parent and family relations. I am interested in learning how you define parental involvement and your reactions to preliminary parent interview data.

The interview may take place at a place at your home campus, via skype, or telephone, and may take approximately 45 - 60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded. There is no preparation required for the interview. In addition to interview questions, I will ask a series of questions to complete a brief Institution Profile Form. Your participation or non-participation in this research study will not impact any current or future professional relationships or collaboration with your institution.

If you participate and become uncomfortable answering the questions, you can choose not to answer. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time.

In appreciation of your willingness to meet with me for the interview and your time, you will receive a \$25 Visa gift card at the completion of the interview.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] to schedule an interview. Also, you may contact me with study related questions or concerns.



Please see additional information on the study and confidentiality attached. Also, this information will be reviewed at the time of the interview and you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form prior to participation.

Sincerely,

Dawn L. Bruner  
Education Doctoral Candidate, Executive Leadership  
St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY

## Appendix E

### St. John Fisher College INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study:** Giving Primacy to the Voice of Parents: A Qualitative Study of the Involvement of Parents of First-Generation College Students

**Name(s) of researcher:** Dawn L. Bruner

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Marie Cianca

**Purpose of Study:** The purpose of this study is to learn the perspectives on parental involvement from parents of first-generation college students and higher education professionals.

**Place of study:** Various. The in person interviews with parents will take within a 100 mile radius of the institution, at locations chosen by participants. Interviews with professionals will take place, in person or via telephone.

**Length of participation:** One interview lasting no more than 60 minutes.

**Risks and benefits:** The expected risks and benefits of this study are explained below.

Minimal risk exists, as the probability of and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during routine tests. Participants will be audio-recorded during interviews. There are no additional anticipated emotional or physical risks associated with participating in this study. Participation or non-participation in this research study will not (1) impact any current or future services offered to the student or parents by the university; or (2) professional relationships or collaboration with institutions. By participating in this study, participants will contribute to study results, which will add to the current body of research on parental involvement.

**Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:** All consent is voluntary. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants. Participants name and identifying information will remain confidential and will not appear in transcripts, analysis, or the final study. Written transcripts will be stored in an office in a locked cabinet accessible only to the

researcher for a period of three years after the successful defense of the dissertation and then shredded. When not in use, the audio and electronic files of the data, as well as interview transcriptions, will be secured on a password protected hard drive in and office and will be placed in the same cabinet with access only to the researcher for a period of three years after the successful defense of the dissertation and then destroyed.

**Your rights:** As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that may be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above named study.

_____	_____	_____
Print Name (Participant)	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Print Name (Investigator)	Signature	Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Health and Wellness Center at 585-385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study and/or if you experience any physical or emotional discomfort, you can contact Jill Rathbun by phone at 585-385-8012 or by email at [irb@sjfc.edu](mailto:irb@sjfc.edu).

## Appendix F

### Parent Demographic Information Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Address

---

Telephone Number

---

Email

---

Gender: Male      Female

What is your race?

American Indian or Alaskan Native  
Asian or Asian American  
Black or African American  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander  
Hispanic or Latino  
White – Non- Hispanic

What is your marital status?

Married      Divorced      Widowed      Separated      Never Married

What is your highest level of education?

Elementary  
Some High School  
High School Graduate  
Technical or Trade Certificate

Some College  
Associate Degree  
Bachelor Degree  
Graduate Degree

**Family Information:**

**Children--including age, level of education, and/or occupation**

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**Professional Information:**

**What do you do for work?**

---

**How long have you worked in your profession?**

---

**How long have you worked for the same employer?**

---

**Do you have a second job?**

---

**If yes, what is that job?**

---

**Approximate Annual Household Income**

---

## Appendix G

### Institutional Profile Form

Institution Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Institution Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Total number of undergraduate students: \_\_\_\_\_

Acceptance Rate – percentage: \_\_\_\_\_

Amount of Tuition: \_\_\_\_\_

Percentage of first-generation college students: \_\_\_\_\_

Percentage of international students: \_\_\_\_\_

Points of Pride: \_\_\_\_\_

Does institution have a formalized first-generation program? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, which institutional office facilitates this program? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H

### Research Question - Interview Protocol Matrix

<b>R</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PaI</b>	<b>PrI</b>	<b>PrI</b>	<b>PrI</b>	<b>PrI</b>
<b>Q#</b>	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Q4</b>	<b>Q5</b>	<b>Q6</b>	<b>Q7</b>	<b>Q8</b>	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Q4</b>	
<b>1</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>						<b>X</b>			
<b>2</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>										
<b>3</b>					<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	