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SUPPORTING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS: PARENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Abstract

This qualitative single-case study examined how parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students (FGCS) describe their role in supporting their students through the college admissions process and how students perceive and experience that support. Grounded in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, this study challenges deficit-oriented narratives that position first-generation families as lacking the knowledge necessary to support college access. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with parents/legal guardians and their students who had recently completed the admissions process. Using a single case study approach and multi-cycle coding, the analysis identified key themes across participant experiences.

Findings demonstrate that parents/legal guardians were active and engaged participants in the admissions process, drawing on aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital to support their students. Families fostered early college-going expectations, provided consistent emotional encouragement, and engaged in collaborative problem-solving alongside their students, highlighting college navigation as a shared family process rather than an individual endeavor. Institutional and community-based supports, including school counselors and college access programs, served as critical mediators in this process. Students described internalizing familial aspirations while also exercising agency in navigating admissions systems. These findings reframe family involvement as relational, culturally grounded, and asset-based, with implications for more family-inclusive college access practices and policies that reduce structural barriers while recognizing diverse forms of family engagement.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Jennifer. Thank you for every sacrifice you made to ensure I had what I needed to succeed. Your love, support, and unwavering belief in me carried me through every stage of this journey. You were always my number one cheerleader.

When I was applying to college, you proudly told anyone who would listen that I was going to be a doctor. You believed in my future in ways I didn't always know how to believe in myself. That belief shaped me, and it lives at the heart of this work. This research is personal, as it reflects the kind of love, encouragement, and sacrifice you gave so freely.

Although you are not here to witness this moment, I know this would have meant the world to you. You always called me "Hollywood," and now I finally get to live up to that name. I carry you with me in everything I do. It is my prayer that your legacy lives on through this work and the impact it will have on others.

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Chapter I Introduction

In an era where obtaining a college degree is increasingly linked to economic mobility, the value and significance of higher education cannot be underestimated (Chetty et al., 2020). This is especially true for first-generation college students (FGCS) whose pursuit of higher education is not only an academic achievement, but also a transformative opportunity to break generational cycles of poverty and the lack of educational attainment within their family (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Amidst a national debate about the value of a college degree, the most recent data from the Common Application shows a 67% increase in first-generation college student application rates since the 2019-2020 academic year (Heseung Kim et al., 2023). Despite this rise in applicants, FGCS tend to have vastly different experiences than their non-first-generation peers, particularly in navigating the college application and admissions process.

Literature indicates that FGCS encounter a plethora of barriers that make their experience more difficult than that of their non-first-generation peers, both during the admissions process and once they have transitioned into college as students. Because many FGCS navigate higher education systems without prior familial exposure to college-going processes, they may encounter additional challenges adjusting to the academic and social expectations of college environments (Stephens et al., 2014). FGCS are also less likely to perceive their professors to be as invested in or concerned with their development, are less likely to receive support and encouragement from their friends to continue their studies and enrollment in college, complete fewer hours of coursework during their first semester and are more likely to work off-campus jobs at least part time, cutting into the time that they have to dedicate to coursework and outside

studies (Pascarella et al., 2004; Schelbe et al., 2023; Terenzini et al., 1996). These experiences shared among FGCS present as barriers to success, but there are even more barriers encountered before these students even make it to college, particularly during the college admissions process. These barriers, also shared among many FGCS, have the ability to prevent college access entirely.

During the admissions process, these barriers include accessing information about college admissions, understanding how to navigate the financial aid process, feelings of unpreparedness, or inability to successfully navigate the admissions process. Findings from Ko et al. (2023) indicate there are four subgroups of barriers that FGCS encounter: social, financial, academic, and cultural. Ko et al. explored the barriers faced by 382 FGCS, and while multiple subgroups of the barriers encountered arose, the four mentioned above were consistent across most of the experiences shared. During the admissions process, it was found that FGCS may encounter social barriers related to limited access to institutionally recognized admissions knowledge and guidance about navigating college-going processes. Financial barriers included difficulty accessing and interpreting information about financial aid processes, potential lack of financial support to make paying for college possible, and fear of student loan debt that may discourage them from pursuing college attendance. Academic barriers were often connected to inequitable access to advanced coursework, academic support programs, and college preparation resources. Cultural barriers included the internal pull of needing to choose their familial needs over their academic goals, being concerned about leaving home and not being present to support and engage with their families, sometimes experiencing resistance from family who do not see the

value of attending college, and hesitation about not fitting into the culture of the college they attend, specifically at predominantly white institutions (Ko et al., 2023).

Similarly, in their study exploring FGCS' adjustments to college, Gibbons et al. (2019) found that many FGCS struggled with accessing information on application procedures, understanding how to complete the application and/or the importance of meeting college application deadlines, understanding the complexity of the financial aid process, and navigating the intricacies of varying admissions requirements. They also often worked at least part-time during their high school careers, leaving less time to focus on academics and college preparation. Further, FGCS often receive emotional support from their parents/legal guardians but must seek outside assistance in the college admissions process because their parents/legal guardians may not possess the institutionally recognized admissions knowledge traditionally associated with navigating the college-going process (Gibbons et al., 2019).

In their study exploring FGCS as academic learners, Ives and Montoya's (2020) systematic review found that, in addition to less access to academic preparation and more financial barriers, FGCS may have less access to institutionally valued forms of cultural and social capital related to college-going processes, despite possessing other forms of capital rooted in their families and communities. They may also have less access to mentors, teachers, or other community partners that can provide direction for the college admissions process, serving as yet another barrier to college access (Ives & Montoya, 2020). Additionally, according to FirstGen Forward (formerly known as the National Center for First-Generation Students), because FGCS' parents/legal guardians did not attend college, these students may have limited access to the institutionally

recognized forms of cultural capital traditionally associated with navigating college admissions systems (NASPA, 2017). Much of the research supports the claim that, though parents/legal guardians of FGCS may be unable to provide guidance and support throughout their college tenure, they offer essential support to their students, whether that be financial support or emotional support (Carballo, 2022).

In a recent study conducted by Edge Research and HCM Strategists and supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a mixed-methods approach was used to understand the reasons why so many high school graduates chose not to attend college or drop out of their college programs (Bryant, 2022). The national study included 11 focus groups, and an online survey administered to 1,675 high school graduates who either never enrolled in college or dropped out before attaining their degrees, and found that half of all polled students who had no plan to attend college indicated that their reason for not attending was that they were unsure of how to apply and pick the right classes, they did not feel prepared for college, and/or they did not feel like they would be supported through the process by their families and communities. Knowing that support, specifically that which comes from parents/legal guardians, is a crucial factor in first-generation student success (LeBeouf & Dworkin, 2021), the importance of involving them in the college admissions process and beyond cannot be overstated.

Unfortunately, much of the literature surrounding parental support of FGCS focuses on the role they play in their students' understanding of and decision to attend college. Said literature fails to explore the specific experiences of these parents/legal guardians and their perceptions of their ability to support their students throughout the admissions process, which could help inform institutions of higher education's efforts to better engage parents/legal

guardians in the admissions process. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the experiences of parents/legal guardians of FGCS by exploring how they understand their role and influence in supporting their students, how they access and mobilize community resources throughout the admissions process, and how students perceive and experience that support.

Defining First-Generation College Students

Over the course of academia, FGCS have been classified and defined in many ways by many different entities. The defining characteristics of FGCS have evolved to reflect the shifting trends and demographics of those who identify as first-generation. The term first-generation was originally defined by Adachi (1979) as students who did not have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree. The term was then widely popularized by Billson and Terry (1982), who defined them as students whose parents/legal guardians never attended college. Later, Engle (2007) defined FGCS as those students whose parents/legal guardians do not have a college degree. In his book addressing FGCS and providing implications for the field, Davis (2010) asserted that an individual can claim first-generation status if neither of their parents/legal guardians possesses a four-year degree. Davis (2010) also made it clear that there are many definitions of a first-generation college student, which poses a problem to institutions of higher education working to support these students, as multiple definitions may make it difficult to accurately gauge the needs of the population.

Toutkoushian et al. (2015) analyzed eight different versions of the definition of FGCS. There were four main definitions that were used, based on varying education levels of the students' parents/legal guardians/legal guardians, with two versions for each, depending on whether at least one or both parents/legal guardians needed to meet the education criteria:

(1) parent(s) have at most a high school degree;

(2) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) an associate's degree;

(3) parent(s) have at most completed an associate's degree; and

(4) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) a bachelor's degree.

Most recently, the Higher Education Research Institute defined a first-generation college student as any student from a family in which both parents/legal guardians have no education beyond high school (Demetroiu et al., 2017). According to federal guidelines for TRIO program eligibility, FGCS are defined as those who have neither a parent/legal guardian who have completed a baccalaureate degree (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2024). Even still, the definition of FGCS varies, depending on who you ask.

While all the definitions can be perceived to mean similar things, and many of them can still be found in practice today, they are not the same, and the differences in definitions create a point of contention. Definitions range from as specific as that used by Harvard University, defining FGCS as students whose parents/legal guardians have not completed a four-year degree to as broad as that used by Brown University defining FGCS as students who self-identify as not having any prior exposure to or knowledge of navigating higher education institutions", and many variations in between (Blake 2023). In turn, these inconsistent definitions can be harmful to research and to an institution of higher education's ability to effectively serve the population.

Due to the varying definitions, the percentage of students considered first-generation could range from less than a quarter, 22%, to more than three quarters, 77%, making it somewhat difficult to understand the needs and experiences of such a broad range of students (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). So, while the term first-generation aims to reflect the full

experiences of students, Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) claimed that it fails to capture the actual richness and complexity of students' lives. Despite the varied definitions, the term first-generation college student itself often reflects assumptions about students' access to institutionally recognized admissions knowledge and familiarity with higher education systems. For the purposes of this study, I used the operational definition of FGCS that is used by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, which defines FGCS as "one whose parent (s) /legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree" (FirstGen Foward, 2017).

Demographics of First-Generation College Students

According to FirstGen Foward (n.d.), as of 2020, just over half of the undergraduate population, 54%, identify as FGCS. In the 2015-2016 academic year, 24% of students attending institutions of higher education indicated that they were the first in their family to attend college of any sort (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In addition, another 32% indicated that their parents/legal guardians may have had some college experience, but never graduated with a four-year degree, making more than half of the current college-attending population (56%) FGCS (FirstGen Forward, 2019).

Research also shows that many FGCS have intersecting identities and characteristics (e.g., race, social class, education, etc.), and identify within a multitude of underrepresented groups that further contribute to the obstacles that they may face in the pursuit of higher education (Kinney-Walker, 2015; Schuyler et al., 2021). FGCS are disproportionately female, and many come from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, identifying as African American, LatinX, Asian American, and Native American (FirstGen Forward, 2019). Data from the Department of Education found that of college-going individuals in that academic year, 37%

of White, 19% of African American, and 33% of LatinX students attending institutions of higher education identified as first-generation. For Tribal Colleges attended largely by American Indian and Native American students, an estimated 67 % of the student body population identifies as first-generation (FirstGen Forward, 2019; Schmidt & Akande, 2011). Just under a third of FGCS indicated coming from a single-parent household (Mowreader, 2024).

Socioeconomically, many FGCS come from low-income households. With the median household income of roughly $38,000 for FGCS, compared to an average of $100,000 for families with college degrees, funding a college education is many times an obstacle. As for age, many of the college students who are older than the traditional 19-24 college-going age range, as well as those who have children and/or dependents, also identify as first-generation, creating yet another obstacle for these students (FirstGen Forward, 2019; Choy, 2001). In their chapter examining the utility of the definition of FGCS, Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) suggested that FGCS must be understood by their relationships to other identities and to institutions, and that those associations cannot be captured by their marginalized status alone. Therefore, when exploring the experiences of FGCS, it is important to consider how their identities may intersect with different aspects of their lives, including but not limited to race, gender, and socioeconomic class.

Understanding First-Generation College Student Experiences

Given the vast and varied backgrounds and identities of FGCS, it is important to recognize and understand their multifaceted experiences. Many FGCS experience a plethora of barriers and challenges when considering and taking part in the college admissions process, such as academic barriers and lack of academic preparation, financial barriers and lack of awareness

of the financial aid processes, social barriers and lack of awareness of the college-going culture, and cultural barriers and feeling the need to choose between their familial needs and their desire to go to college (Ko et al., 2023). In exploring their experiences, it is clear that FGCS have unique experiences that, together, have the capacity to make navigating the landscape of the college admissions process extremely difficult.

While FGCS face all the anticipated anxieties and general experiences that come with the college admissions process, their experiences often tend to be more stressful, due to the multiple underrepresented identities they may hold (Schuyler et al., 2021; Kinney-Walker, 2015). In addition to fear, anxiety, dislocation, and difficulty, FGCS' experiences often include a social and academic transition and a cultural transition (Weis, 1985). Because families and communities of this population of students are often unaware of the intricacies of navigating a college campus, FGCS also struggle to disclose stressful situations, contributing to even higher stress levels (Barry et al., 2009).

Throughout the college-going process, FGCS often lack access to vital information about the admissions procedures and expectations, which results in confusion and creates barriers to access (Stebleton et al., 2014). They tend to feel less academically prepared for the admissions process and the transition into an institution of higher education, are more concerned about financial aid and how they are going to fund their college education, fear that they may fail in college, feel as if they need to dedicate more time to their studies, and indicate not knowing enough about the collegiate social environment (Bui, 2002; Choy et al., 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019; Stebleton et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2014). Once they get to college, FGCS are less likely to perceive their professors to be as invested in or concerned with their development, are

less likely to receive support and encouragement from their friends to continue their studies and enroll in college, complete fewer hours of coursework during their first semester, and are more likely to work off-campus jobs at least part-time, cutting into the time that they have to dedicate to coursework and outside studies (Pascarella et al., 2004; Schelbe et al., 2023; Terenzini et al., 1996). They are also less likely to live on campus, have lower levels of student involvement and participation in extracurricular activities, athletic participation, and volunteer work, and tend to have lower grades than their non-first-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Although many of these experiences are shared among FGCS and can make the admissions process difficult, it is important to note that FGCS are not a monolith. While the experiences and barriers mentioned above are quite prevalent, there are many FGCS who experience no difference in feelings of college-related decisions on their own, knowing about majors and academic programs at their universities before enrollment, making friends with others, enjoying being a student, or ultimately feeling accepted (Bui, 2002). Bui (2002) found that while many FGCS come from low-income backgrounds, are racially/ethnically diverse, are more likely to work part-time and help with familial needs, they are also more extrinsically motivated than their non-first-generation peers, seeing college as a means to create financial stability, set an example for their families, and to give back to their communities through fields such as healthcare, education, and social work. Knowing the extrinsic motivations that push FGCS forward may help explain how this population of students overcomes some of the barriers they encounter. And while all of these aspects of FGCS' backgrounds and identities shed light on the disparate experiences of this population, one variable that remains consistent in terms of influence is parental support for FGCS in their quest for higher education.

Conceptualizing Parental/Legal Guardian Support

While there may be varying perceptions of what parental support looks like based on one's parents' educational attainment level (Wilkins, 2018), one of the most important indicators of success for FGCS is parental support (Alwin & Thornton, 1984; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997). Though parents/legal guardians of FGCS lack the experience to be able to aid in the technical aspect of the college admissions process, parental support comes in many different forms including, but not limited to creating a positive and affirming environment for continuing education, providing moral and emotional support, visiting their students when they are able to, and contributing financially (Kolkhorst et al., 2010). It is these other aspects of support, the encouragement and motivations, that will benefit their students as they navigate the college admissions process and provide that extra push for them to get through their first year of college (Alipio-Palbusa 2016; Nichols & Islas, 2015). Ultimately, though there is not a cookie cutter definition of parental support, we know that it cannot be categorized by any one specific activity or contribution but should instead be conceptualized as parents/legal guardians being available for, interested in, and willing to meet the needs of their students (Kolkhorst et al., 2010; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021).

In a critical review of empirical literature focusing on parental support of FGCS, LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) found a variety of measures of parental support ranging from the memorable messages received from parents/legal guardians about college, to different types of tangible support, such as emotional, financial, informational, and perceived social support. Emotional support was defined as the degree to which parents/legal guardians were able to understand their child's college experience, while parental informational support was defined as

the degree to which parents/legal guardians were able to help with or provide guidance to their children in their college decisions and preparation for college (Sy et al., 2011). Financial support was gauged by parents'/legal guardians' ability to contribute financially to their students' college tuition and fees, housing costs, books, and/or other supplies needed for college (Roksa & Kinley, 2019).

Lastly, social support was measured by using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, a 12-item measure of perceived adequacy of social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others (Jenkins et al., 2013; Zimet et al., 1990). Despite the different measures of parental support outlined in these studies, the findings remain consistent- regardless of the type of support provided, parental support is a key influencer for FGCS in their decisions to attend college and their persistence to graduation. With that in mind, I will consider parental support as any actions or communications that indicate an availability for, interest in, and/or willingness to meet the varying needs of their FGCS.

Problem Statement

FGCS encounter many obstacles and barriers in their pursuit of higher education, including but not limited to lack of access to information about the admissions process , lack of academic preparation (Ives & Montoya, 2020), financial constraints, and cultural barriers that leave them feeling like they have to choose between familial needs and their own academic pursuits (Ko et al., 2023). Many of these barriers are compounded by the fact that parents/legal guardians may also be navigating unfamiliar admissions systems and institutional expectations (Dennis et al., 2005; Korsmo, 2014) and may feel unsure about their ability to support their students throughout the college admissions process. This uncertainty can then influence their

engagement in the admissions process, potentially affecting their student's success (Stephens et al., 2014).

In the admissions process, the lack of parental experience may prevent them from being able to provide adequate information to help prepare their students to meet university requirements for acceptance (Torrez, 2004). Additionally, when parents/legal guardians reach out and seek information about the process to aid their students, they tend to be met with a myriad of barriers to that information such as the inability to work around university schedules and their individual work schedules, lack of knowledge about available resources and programs/services to aid in the college preparation process, and potential language barriers for those with lower levels of English proficiency (Falcon, 2015; Torrez, 2004).

Despite the existence of ample research that explores the barriers and challenges that FGCS encounter, there is less attention given to the parents/legal guardians of these students and their perceptions and experiences of their ability to support their students. Although their support is considered a key indicator of their students' success, dominant narratives frame parents/legal guardians of FGCS as not having the appropriate knowledge and experience, described as cultural capital, to support their students in the college admissions process.

While parental support is a main contributing factor to student success, existing research either focuses on parental support and engagement during K-12 years or on parents/legal guardians of non-FGCS once those students have matriculated to college (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988; Epstein, 1995). Little research has been done that explores parents/legal guardians of FGCS' involvement and support before matriculation to college or the many ways that parents/legal guardians support their students in their collegiate aspirations, outside of

simply having knowledge of and being able to directly help with the college admissions process. Research also lacks studies that explore ways to better prepare parents/legal guardians to support their students directly throughout the process. Fortunately, many parents/legal guardians are committed to seeing their students be successful in their academic pursuits and will find other ways to be supportive of their students during the college admissions process, with or without the support of institutions of higher education.

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to understand how parents/legal guardians of FGCS describe how they support their students through an exploration of their first-hand experiences. In doing so, institutions of higher education can develop programs and initiatives that address the needs of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and provide them with more targeted support in their quest to support their students through the college admissions process and beyond.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to examine how parents/legal guardians of FGCS describe their role and influence in supporting their students through the college admissions process. This study also explored how students perceive and experience that support. Situated within the institutional context of Middle Country University (MCU), this study explored how families navigate the transition to higher education despite limited prior experience with college systems. This study addressed the following questions:

1. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students conceptualize and enact their role as primary agents in their children's college admissions journeys?

2. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students identify, access, and mobilize available resources to support their students through the college admissions process?
3. How do first-generation college students perceive and experience parental support during the college admissions process?

Study Significance

As previously stated, much research has been done on FGCS, their background characteristics, and the barriers they encounter, both in the college admissions process and once on campus (Billson & Terry, 1981; Engle, 2007; Gibbons et al., 2019; Ko, et al., 2023; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2015). Research also clearly indicates the important role that parents/legal guardians play in a first-generation student's decision to attend college and their overall success in college (Herndon, 2004; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Sy et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, an apparent gap in the literature exists when exploring how parents/legal guardians of first-generation college-going students perceive their ability to support their students in the admission process, outside of the knowledge of how to navigate said process. Because they may not possess institutionally recognized admissions knowledge to pass down to their students, parents/legal guardians may not be able to directly aid in the college admissions process in terms of the hands-on activities of helping with college applications, applying for financial aid and scholarships, selecting majors, and other aspects of the process. However, parents/legal guardians still provide support in non-navigational ways, such as emotional, social, aspirational, and familial, most of which are aspects of support explored by Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth (CCW).

Therefore, my research is significant because it addresses the gaps in the literature and sheds light on the different means of support that parents/legal guardians of first-generation college-going students provide to their students throughout the college admissions process. My research also explored the experiences of parents/legal guardians of first-generation college-going students through the lens of cultural capital and CCW, thereby adding to the theoretical significance of both theories for FGCS. The findings of my research have practical implications for institutions of higher education seeking to better support the parents/legal guardians of first-generation prospective students by providing an understanding of their firsthand experiences and by addressing their needs through programming, communication, and partnership. Finally, the societal implications of my research are significant because they speak to a larger need to more actively engage the parents/legal guardians of FGCS in all aspects of the college process, both before the student begins the application process and all the way through to college graduation.

Methodology

The research questions posed are exploratory and qualitative in nature (Merriam, 1998); therefore, I designed this study as a single case study to examine the complexities of parental roles and influence, the processes through which parents access and mobilize community resources, and how students perceive and experience that support throughout the college admissions process. Case studies require researchers to go beyond thick descriptions of data and encourage the development of conceptual categories and/or illustrate, support, and challenge preexisting assumptions (Merriam, 1998).

The study is bound by time and activity. My research focused on a specific population of individuals- parents/legal guardians of FGCS, whose students all chose to attend, a specific

institution, MCU. Using a single case study approach, I explored parents'/legal guardians' roles and perceptions in supporting their FGCS through rich data collection, as this design allowed for an in-depth examination of these experiences within a bounded institutional context. Using Merriam's (1998) case study approach allowed for a contextual understanding of the unique contexts, experiences, and nuances of parents/legal guardians of FGCS as they provided details of their experiences supporting their students through the college-going process. These details provided real-life context that contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex experiences of these parents/legal guardians and directly contributed to my research questions.

The focus of this case study was parents/legal guardians of FGCS whose students applied for and matriculated into a single, mid-sized, public, land grant institution in the Central United States, referred to for the purposes of this study as MCU. MCU is a Research 1 university, offering more than 170 degree programs, accepting an average of 77% of applicants, and known for its efforts in serving FGCS. Annually, MCU has a matriculation rate of approximately 25% FGCS, and 27% of the total student population identifies as first-generation, making it an ideal host institution for my research.

To recruit participants for my study, I used purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling, in line with the case study approach (Saldaña, 2021). This allowed me to select my participants intentionally, based on specific inclusion criteria. To be considered participants in my study, individuals must have identified as the parent or legal guardian of a first-generation student who was a first-year student at MCU. They must not have completed a bachelor's degree, cannot have gone through the admissions process with any other students before, must have supported their student through the admissions process within the last year, and must have been

willing to participate in at least one semi-structured interview via phone or video call. Using criterion sampling and the inclusion criteria listed above, participants provided more in-depth, relevant data based on their experiences (Saldaña, 2021) and were more likely to contribute useful information that is relevant to my study and directly addressed my research questions.

As described in case study research guidelines, I aimed to have 7-10 participants, which allowed for diverse experiences shared, rich data, and feasibility of collecting and analyzing in-depth interview data (Saldaña, 2021). Participants were recruited directly and indirectly through a partnership with MCU's Office of Admissions and their Office of Family Programs, which allowed me to contact admissions representatives who shared my study details with parents/legal guardians of first-year students who identified as first-generation. I shared information via email first, and then by phone as needed for additional participation. I also indirectly recruited participants through their students, visited FGCS-specific first-year learning course sections, and encouraged students to ask their parents/legal guardians to participate in the study. Potential participants were given a demographic questionnaire before their interviews to collect additional information that helped contextualize the participant pool. Questions asked gauged age, race/ethnicity, gender identification, household size and income, employment and marital status, and primary language spoken at home. The demographic survey also asked about family dynamics and participation in MCU recruitment events and programs.

Data were collected through 60-90-minute semi-structured interviews with parents/legal guardians and 45-60-minute semi-structured interviews with FGCS, conducted via Zoom for direct or video calls. Interviews were recorded for transcription and review purposes, and translation services were available if needed. After the initial review, I cleaned up the data to

ensure that what was transcribed was consistent with what was shared by participants and then began the coding process. Because CCW (Yosso, 2005) was used as the theoretical framework for my research and guided my analysis, I identified themes that aligned with this framework in my first cycle of coding. During my second cycle of coding, I identified additional themes not tied to CCW and assigned codes to be able to begin grouping codes into larger patterns. I finished with axial coding to identify existing relationships between the patterns identified. Through my data collection and analysis, I aimed to capture a more holistic view of the college recruitment and admissions process that considers parental support and deepens our insight into the overall experiences of FGCS.

Theoretical Framework

Community Cultural Wealth

While parents/legal guardians of FGCS may not possess the institutionally recognized admissions knowledge traditionally associated with navigating college admissions systems, preventing them from being able to aid and support their students through the college application and admissions process, other forms of capital that come as a result of a critical approach to the traditional forms of capital must be taken into consideration. Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) is a theoretical framework that describes the varying assets that underrepresented students bring with them to their educational spaces (Yosso, 2005). While traditional conceptions of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) have been used to explain disparities in educational access, this study centers a Community Cultural Wealth framework to better capture the strengths and resources within first-generation families.

CCW was conceptualized by Yosso (2005) and is used to understand the six types of capital that underrepresented students bring with them to be successful in college (i.e., aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, resistant). Yosso shifts the lens from a deficit perspective, a focus on that which students may lack, and instead urges institutions of higher education to consider the strengths and skills that students from underrepresented backgrounds and first-generation households may bring to the table because of their upbringing. Yosso defined CCW as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 154).

These forms of capital have gone largely unrecognized or unacknowledged, thus leaving those in positions of power at educational institutions with a perception that students and parents/legal guardians are to blame for their lack of academic preparation because they lack the traditional knowledge and skills to navigate these settings and/or parents/legal guardians do not value their students' education enough to be actively involved (Yosso, 2005). This results in educational institutions assuming the work that needs to be done is the responsibility of the students and parents/legal guardians, and they should conform to the flawed, inequitable system, instead of assessing ways the institution can work to better serve these students and parents/legal guardians.

Using a CCW lens, one is left to explore ways in which to evaluate parental support, the different ways that this support may manifest for FGCS, and the different types of capital that students have acquired that are used in the college application and admissions process. My research considered the six types of additional capital outlined in CCW and how they presented

themselves in the interactions of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS supporting their students through the college admissions process.

Key Terms and Definitions

To streamline language across this dissertation, I have provided a list of key terms and definitions I used.

- First-generation College Students: students whose parent (s) /legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree (FirstGen Foward, 2017). This is the definition being used by the institution where this research was conducted. For this paper's duration, first-generation college students will be referred to as FGCS (First-Generation Students, 2024).
- Parent/Legal Guardian: anyone responsible for the care and upbringing of a first-generation college student who has navigated the college admissions process. Parents/legal guardians can include biological or adoptive parents/legal guardians and/or those granted legal custody or guardianship. For this paper's duration, parents/legal guardians will be referred to as parents/legal guardians.
- College Admissions Process: refers to the steps that prospective students take to get into college, including everything from building their grade point average to be admissible, choosing the right fit, applying for admission, navigating financial aid applications and applying for housing (if applicable), and registering for classes (College Board, 2025).
- Parental Support- Any actions or communications that indicate an availability for, interest in, and/or willingness to meet the varying needs of their first-generation college students,

including but not limited to memorable messages, financial, informational and social support (Kolkhorst et al., 2010).

- Student Success- There are many varying definitions of student success across the literature, all based on different outcomes, leaving the ultimate definition dependent on context and who you ask. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, I chose to use a holistic approach, which defines student success as how well students are prepared to accomplish their current and future academic, personal, and professional goals through the development of knowledge, a sense of responsibility and self-reliance, and a connection to the college and wider community (Oh & Kim, 2016; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Weatherton & Schussler, 2021).

Chapter Summary

In Chapter 1, I provided background information for the varying definitions for FGCS across the literature and explained the barriers that come as a result of multiple definitions (Billson & Terry, 1981; Davis, 2010; Engle, 2007; Fuji Adachi, 1979; NASPA, 2017; Toutkoushian et al., 2015). Multiple definitions make research on FGCS difficult to conduct consistently, as it impacts the findings and prevents generalizability. I described the definition being used by the institution where my research is being conducted as the definition that will be used for this research: students whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree (FirstGen Foward, 2017).

I also provided background and demographic information about FGCS, allowing the reader to conceptualize the vast identities and experiences of FGCS. Many FGCS come from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, low-income families, and/or are considered non-

traditional students, being between the ages of 19 and 24. These characteristics directly impact the FGCS experience, as many of them will experience obstacles when preparing for and making decisions about college (FirstGen Forward, 2019; Kinney-Walker, 2015; Schmidt & Akande, 2011; Schuyler et al., 2021).

Once in college, many FGCS experience both an academic and a cultural transition, feel less academically prepared, are less likely to live on campus and more likely to work part-time jobs alongside their studies, making their overall experiences somewhat different than that of their non-FGCS peers (Bui, 2002; Choy et al., 2020; Stebleton et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2014). While many factors contribute to the FGCS experience, one consistent factor that arises in the literature is parental support (Alwin & Thornton, 1984; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997).

I then laid the foundation for my research questions, providing an in-depth overview of the varying ways parental support is provided. Parents/legal guardians of FGCS may have limited familiarity with the institutional processes associated with college admissions, thus making it difficult to support their students who are going through the college admissions process themselves (Falcon, 2015; Torrez, 2004). Because parental support is a key indicator of first-generation student success, understanding how parents/legal guardians perceive their roles as supporters of their students is important to understanding how institutions of higher education can more holistically support FGCS and their parents/legal guardians.

The approach to studying research questions, focused on examining the experiences of both parents/legal guardians of FGCS and exploring how their perceptions impact their engagement in the process, is rooted in Merriam's (1998) case study approach. Using Yosso's

(2005) theory of CCW, this study sought to provide a more holistic understanding of the college admissions process from the perspectives of parents/legal guardians of FGCS.

Chapter II Literature Review

Within this chapter, I introduce literature that provides a holistic understanding of first-generation college students (FGCS) and the parental support that they receive to set the foundation for understanding the relevance of my research. As a reminder, my research questions are as follows:

1. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students conceptualize and enact their role as primary agents in their children's college admissions journeys?
2. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students identify, access, and mobilize available resources to support their students through the college admissions process?
3. How do first-generation college students perceive and experience parental support during the college admissions process?

To support my research questions, this literature review describes the landscape of higher education admissions, the varying definitions of FGCS and the implications of those definitions, the experiences of FGCS and barriers that they encounter, the roles and responsibilities of parents/legal guardians in higher education, mechanisms of support provided by parents/legal guardians to FGCS, systemic barriers to parental involvement, strategies for enhancing parental support, and ends with an explanation of gaps in the literature.

I also provide an overview of the theoretical framework that will guide the research: Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). To offset traditional deficit perspectives and highlight the types of capital that FGCS and their parents/legal guardians bring to the college

experience, I introduce Yosso's (2005) theory of CCW as the guiding framework for my study. By describing the six types of additional capital that Yosso claims aid college students in their success (i.e., aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, resistant) I address the limitations of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital and provide an additional lens through which to view the experiences of FGCS and their parents/legal guardians as they navigate the college admissions process. By the conclusion of this literature review, the reader should have a thorough understanding of the existing research, trends that have arisen, recommendations that have been made, theoretical frameworks guiding the current study, and apparent gaps within the literature, ultimately making the importance of my research clear.

Understanding College Admission in Higher Education

To understand college admissions in higher education, one must recognize the sophisticated and complex process that determines how students are evaluated and who ultimately gains access to these institutions. There are many different factors that contribute to a student's admissibility in the eyes of college admissions officers, and over time, those factors have evolved. Traditionally, colleges have focused on six major factors when considering students for admissions: (1) graduation from high school, (2) completion of minimum course requirements in designated subjects, (3) class rank, (4) recommendation letters from the school principal or counselors, (5) essays or interviews, and (6) academic aptitude and standardized test scores (Beale, 2012). Within the last 30 years, admissions requirements have evolved to take a more holistic approach to admissions, considering additional factors, such as personal characteristics beyond academics, recommendation letters, extracurricular activities,

demonstrated leadership abilities, student interest in attending the university, student portfolio, and work experience (National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to academic testing centers being closed and many students' inability to take their college entrance exams, many institutions transitioned to a test-optional admissions approach, allowing students to choose whether to submit their SAT/ACT scores (Reed, 2021). In doing so, more weight was placed on the other academic aspects of the admissions process, such as GPA, class rank, and completion of college-level courses and/or participation in concurrent enrollment programs (Bauer-Wolf, 2021). Gooch et al. (2024) found that though the goal may have been to create more equitable access to higher education, these policies did not uniformly do so, and equitable access varied based on institutional context and how each institution implemented its test-optional policies. While application rates of students of color, FGCS, and those from underrepresented backgrounds increased, there was no significant difference in admissions and retention rates (Gooch et al., 2024). Since going test-optional, many colleges have returned to requiring standardized college entrance exams, and those that have remained test-optional now place more weight on the scores of students who choose to submit them, inherently communicating that, though they are not required, test scores should still be submitted (Sawyer, 2024).

Though institutions of higher education are considered to be a mode of upward mobility for first-generation students (Chetty et al., 2017), one must first gain access to these institutions through the rigorous admissions processes, which can be a challenge in themselves. In an evaluation of 368 institutions of higher education across the country, Rosinger et al. (2021) found that institutions differ greatly in the levels of weight placed on the different aspects of the

admissions process, ultimately limiting access for FGCS, lower-income and racially minoritized students. The study examined how across institutions the importance of different admissions factors was categorized on a scale of one (1) to four (4). Factors categorized as one were factors that were not even considered in the admissions process, and those categorized as four were deemed very important to the admissions process. Results indicated that institutions that failed to consider first-generation status or a racialized minority identity had lower levels of enrollment for FGCS, lower-income, and racially minoritized students, supporting the claim that placing varying levels of importance on different aspects of factors considered in college admissions resulted in reduced access to higher education for FGCS and a reproduction of existing social inequalities (Rosinger et al., 2021).

Definitions of First-Generation College Students

Historically, the definition of FGCS has evolved based on the time at which the phrase was being used. When the term was first introduced by Adachi (1979), FGCS were defined as students who did not have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree. Billson and Terry (1982) popularized the term, defining FGCS as students whose parents/legal guardians never attended college. More than two decades later, Engle (2007) defined FGCS as students whose parents/legal guardians do not have a college degree. Not long after, Davis (2010) not only claimed that a student could claim they were a FGCS if neither of their parents/legal guardians have a four-year degree, he also made it clear that there were multiple varying definitions of FGCS, making it somewhat difficult to accurately identify the needs of the population, and posing a problem to institutions of higher education seeking to support FGCS.

Toutkoushian et al. (2015) conducted a study examining the different definitions of FGCS and how the percentages of students identifying as first-generation varied across these definitions. There were four main definitions that were used, based on varying education levels of the students' parents/legal guardians: (1) parent(s) have at most a high school degree; (2) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) an associate's degree; (3) parent(s) have at most completed an associate's degree; and (4) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) a bachelor's degree.

On the contrary, the Higher Education Research Institution defined FGCS as one who comes from a family where both parents/legal guardians have no education beyond high school (Saenz et al., 2007). More recently, the federal guidelines for TRIO (2024) programs (i.e., federal programs and outreach designed to identify and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds) defined FGCS as students whose parents have neither completed a baccalaureate degree. As the variations indicate, the definition of FGCS depends on who defines it at the time and for what purposes.

Although all the definitions referenced above can be thought to mean similar things and many are still in active use today, their specific differences lead to disagreements about how to narrow that definition down to one that effectively captures and allows us to serve the true population in need. In a follow-up study, Toutkoushian et al. (2021) found that, due to varying definitions, outcomes for FGCS also varied. Using data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, which tracked students from their tenth-grade year through college, Toutkoushian et al. explored the relationship between parental educational status and graduation rates. There were eight definitions of FGCS based on the level of education obtained by both parents/legal

guardians, ranging from having one parent completed high school or less, to having both parents/legal guardians completed a bachelor's degree or more. They found that there were significant differences in graduation rates based on the levels of education that a student's parents/legal guardians achieved. FGCS, across definitions, were less likely to obtain a four-year degree, but the less education one's parents/legal guardians achieved, the less likely they were to obtain a four-year degree (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Here, we see the direct implications of varying definitions of FGCS. For the purposes of this study, I used the definition that is used by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators which defines FGCS as "one whose parent (s) /legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree" (FirstGen Foward, 2017).

First-generation College Students' Experiences in Higher Education

Due to their lack of college-educated parents/legal guardians and a likely intersection of underrepresented identities, FGCS tend to have vastly different experiences in higher education than their non-first-generation counterparts (Schuyler et al., 2021). In addition to lacking critical insight into the college admissions process and the knowledge, resources, and skills that are passed down from parents/legal guardians with college degrees to aid in applying to college, many FGCS identify as lower-income students of color, which further contribute to the difficulties they may encounter in their higher education experiences (Ko et al., 2023; Nyugen & Nguyen, 2018). During the college exploration and admissions process, FGCS experience a variety of anxieties and worries about the possibility of attending college. They may feel as if they are not as prepared for the admissions process as their counterparts whose parents/legal guardians went to college and can aid them in applying, they feel as though they may fail once

they get to college, they tend to be concerned about how they are going to be able to pay for college, and ultimately feel as if they do not know enough about the college atmosphere to be able to be successful once they get there (Bui, 2002; Choy et al., 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2014).

Once they get to college, FGCS tend to have less access to academic resources and social support, resulting in lower grades than their non-first-generation counterparts, struggle with the college-level expectations, feel as if their professors are not as invested in or concerned about their development as non FGCS and therefore are less likely to take advantage of office hours and course study halls, take on part-time and sometimes full-time jobs to help pay for their college expenses, and are less involved in extracurricular activities, which are shown to enhance the overall college experience (Pascarella et al., 2004; Schelbe et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021; Terenzini et al.,1996). Schuyler et al. (2021) found that FGCS tend to struggle with the academic transition to college, have difficulty navigating predominantly white institutions (PWIs), experience isolation and marginalization, and experience disproportionate mental health issues compared to their non-first-generation peers as a result of racial discrimination, academic pressures, and cultural dissonance. Additional literature speaks to the ways that cultural mismatch, described as a difference, or mismatch between one's home or family culture and the culture of the institution they are interacting with (Chang et al., 2020), contributes to how FGCS experience higher education.

Barriers Encountered by First-generation College Students

FGCS may encounter many barriers preventing success in accessing and navigating higher education (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Brookover et al., 2021; Nichols & Islas, 2015). It is

important to note that the definition of success varies in the literature, with some considering success as academic achievement and adjustment (Dennis et al., 2005; O'Neal et al., 2016) or as retention and proximity to graduation (Demetriou et al., 2017; McCallen et al., 2020; Odgen et al., 2024). There is also literature that alludes to academics and retention as success but lacks a formal explanation of how exactly success is being defined (Macias, 2013).

Though a multitude of things have been identified as detracting factors in the pursuit of higher education, some of the most prominent and important of these barriers include lack of cultural and economic capital, which manifest in the form of lack of awareness in navigating the college admissions landscape, financial instability, and inconsistent family support (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Brookever et al., 2021; Lippman, 2008; McSwain 2008). Because they lack experience in applying to college themselves, parents/legal guardians of FGCS lack cultural capital to pass down to their students and tend to struggle when it comes to aiding their students with the application and financial aid process (Brookover et al., 2021; McSwain, 2008). This lack of cultural capital also contributes to parents/legal guardians of FGCS' lack of understanding of funding a college education and a decreased willingness to contribute to their students' education compared to non-FGCS (Lippman, 2008). Financial constraints were also cited as one of the most significant factors in FGCS departures from college for first-generation community college students (Bers & Schwetz; 2014). Lastly, Brookover et al. (2021) found that parental and familial support were one of the main indicators of FGCS readiness for college. For the scope of this research, I look specifically at factors that had to do with or were related to parental involvement and support.

Navigating the College Admissions Landscape

With the ever-evolving structure of college admissions, navigating the college admissions landscape can be difficult for even the family of non-FGCS, but without knowledge of the process, applying to college is a barrier in itself for FGCS (Brookover et al., 2021). Brookover and colleagues (2021) found that, among other aspects of the college preparation process, having parents/legal guardians who lack knowledge of the admissions process and are confused about what courses to take and how to adequately prepare for college serve as primary barriers to access for this population. Because of this, it is imperative to consider the extended school community as an active partner in the college admissions process, particularly with FGCS.

Amaro-Jimenez and colleagues (2020) noted the importance of community collaboration in preparing culturally and linguistically diverse students for life after high school, particularly accessing higher education and being prepared for the workforce for students who chose not to pursue higher education. They found that while many of the students that the program serves, who also happen to identify as FGCS, lack direct knowledge of the college preparation process due to being the first in their families to navigate it, they tend to heavily rely on their school communities to fill the knowledge gap (Amaro-Jimenez et al., 2020).

Griffin and colleagues (2011) examined how rural students, many of whom also identify as first-generation, seek and receive guidance about the college admissions process. Among a group of almost 9,000 rural students across the country, almost half indicated that their primary source of knowledge about the college admissions process was their teachers and school counselors. Additionally, just under half of the participants also indicated that they sought guidance and information from at least four other sources, not including their parents/legal guardians, many of whom did not attend college themselves. So, while the literature indicates

FGCS lack a thorough understanding of how to navigate the college admissions landscape, they rely on sources outside of the home to aid in the process of accessing higher education.

Lack of Financial Support

When making decisions about college, another very important aspect for any student is securing a financial aid package that makes college possible. For FGCS, funding colleges serves as a prominent barrier. College is not free, and very rarely is it cheap. Because many FGCS also come from low-income households, there is usually very limited financial assistance coming from the family, so funding college is largely dependent on scholarships, grants, loans, and jobs held before and during college (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). According to the Pell Institute (YEAR), first-generation freshmen come from families with a median income of roughly $38,000 compared to the median income of non-first-generation college freshmen's families averaging close to $100,000. Of those first-generation students, 27% of them come from families whose median income is under $20,000 (FirstGen Forward, 2019). Nationally, the average cost of attendance for freshman year ranges anywhere from $17,000 to $44,000 depending on student's residency status, the type of institution being attended, degree program, etc., therefore making funding college for FGCS largely impossible without aid and funding from outside sources (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Unfortunately, due to lack of experience navigating college, parents/legal guardians and students are also less likely to be aware of sources of scholarships and grant money available to them or how to navigate the complex financial aid process. Though Pell Grant-eligible students are largely first-generation, those same individuals lack vital information about financial aid (McSwain, 2008), whereas students whose parents/legal guardians have received at least a

bachelor's degree report higher levels of awareness of and willingness to pay college costs (Lippman et al., 2008). Because of this, lack of knowledge about financial aid and lack of funds coming from family may prevent many FGCS from accessing higher education.

Cultural Mismatch

The impact of cultural mismatch for FGCS also serves as a barrier that they experience. In transitioning into a new space that no one in their family has been to or experienced before, FGCS experience cultural mismatch, described by Chang et al. (2020) as a difference between the culture of a FGCS's home life and the culture of institutions of higher education, which leads to a sense of discomfort and difficulty in the college transition. Chang et al. (2020) focused on the cultural mismatch between the interdependent values (focus on giving back to the community, doing things for the greater good) often learned in underrepresented communities and the independent values (individual academic success, college for the one's individual gain) often engrained in the university culture. Through in-depth interviews and quantitative surveys, it was found that underrepresented students, including FGCS, often exhibited increased anxieties about looking like they did not know something or disrupting the harmony of their group, which then discouraged them from seeking help, whether academically, psychologically, or personally. They also reported a stronger sense of responsibility toward their families than their non-underrepresented peers, which further negatively influenced their coping and help-seeking behaviors (Chang et al., 2020).

Phillips et al. (2020) examined how the cultural mismatch of interdependent norms held by FGCS and the independent norms dominating institutions of higher education impacts the academic experiences and outcomes of FGCS. Using a combination of quantitative measures to

gauge students' cultural norms upon entry to college, their subjective sense of fit during their college years, and their academic outcomes upon graduation, and additional measures gauging their independence and interdependence, it was found that upon entrance into college, FGCS held more interdependent cultural norms and values, which predicted a reduced subjective sense of fit four years later and was associated with decreased academic performance and lower subjective social status upon graduation (Phillips et al., 2020). It was also found that this cultural mismatch led to increased psychological and academic costs for FGCS, causing worse experiences and outcomes compared to their non-FGCS peers that persisted throughout their college tenure to graduation (Phillips et al., 2020).

Sociopolitical Climate and Admissions Anxiety

Because FGCS often navigate college admissions, lacking knowledge about the higher education landscape and advising resources, the current sociopolitical climate, and recent shifts in national higher education governance and regulations, such as the *Students for Fair Admissions* (SFFA) decision, may also intensify uncertainty and concern as they consider whether or not to apply to college at all, and if so, where to apply. On June 29, 2023, through the cases of *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023) and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina* (2023), the United States Supreme Court overturned affirmative action in college admissions decisions. As a result, the consideration of race in admissions was ruled unconstitutional, and institutions of higher education were forced to apply a race-neutral approach to gauging admissibility. Consequently, prospective students nationwide were faced with major shifts in their approach to applying to college.

Gallup (2024) asked participants about their perspectives of the SFFA ruling in relation to higher education equality and access, and implications highlighted that when admissions expectations feel shifty or unclear, underrepresented students may be more likely to interpret selective institutions as unpredictable or inaccessible, particularly if they do not have consistent access to teachers/counselors, mentors, or college-educated family members who can help them interpret the new rules and admissions messaging. This uncertainty matters because the post-SFFA environment has created both real and perceived changes in how students assess their competitiveness, evaluate institutional fit, and determine which parts of their identity and lived experience are safe to communicate in applications (Monares, 2025; Warikoo, 2025).

Interestingly, in the immediate period following the decision, early national application trend analyses suggest that though the implications remain complex and evolving, as of now, the end of race-conscious admissions has not negatively impacted application activity across groups (Common App, 2024). For FGCS, whose college planning decisions often occur within constrained informational and financial contexts, even seemingly small shifts in institutional climate or admissions parameters can influence how broadly they apply, whether they pursue selective institutions, and how they approach key components of their applications (Lumina, 2024).

This shifting context may also shape FGCSs' emotional experience of applying to college, particularly through heightened anxiety about belonging, fairness, and opportunity. Gallup's (2024) survey research following the SFFA decision showed how perceptions of the ruling differ greatly across racial groups, highlighting broader social debate and uncertainty that can trickle down into student and family decision-making. In this sociopolitical climate, FGCS

may also feel additional pressure to successfully navigate the college admissions landscape on their own without the resources to do so, which potentially reinforces the caution that they take when applying to college such as applying to fewer institutions, avoiding highly selective institutions, or watering down their lived experiences to be understood and valued in the admissions process.

In a national study of 1,044 high school juniors and seniors intending to enroll in a four year institution within the next one to three years, it was found that approximately 25% of students expressed concerns about attending college in a specific state based on its political climate, and many students expressed concerns about potential harassment, fear for their safety, and uncertainty about whether or not they would feel a sense of belonging (Echo Delta, ADV Market Research, 2024). As FGCS navigate this heightened uncertainty, the role of family becomes even more significant in shaping how they gauge risk, explore what's possible, and make decisions about where to apply and enroll.

Familial Support and Involvement

Lastly, but to some, most importantly, lack of familial support and involvement serves as a key barrier to FGCS and their access to higher education. We know that family demographics play an important role in college success for students of all backgrounds, first-generation and non-first-generation, and from a child's first introductions to education, parents/legal guardians are the most influential individuals when it comes to their child's educational decisions (Alwin & Thornton, 1984; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997). Additionally, regardless of educational background, parental support remains an important factor contributing to late adolescent adjustment (Rodriguez et al., 2003; Dennis et al., 2005). For students of color specifically,

parental support is directly related to adjustment in college (Dennis et al., 2005; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Hurtado et al., 1996; Solberg & Villarreal, 1997).

Unfortunately, parents/legal guardians of first-generation prospective students usually lack experiential skills, preventing them from being able to help with college tasks (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Dennis et al., 2005). Research shows that due to the lack of knowledge regarding the college process, parents/legal guardians are largely unable to support their students in the tasks associated with college-going, but focus their support on the basic needs of their students, such as emotional support, letting students navigate the technical side of college on their own (Nichols & Islas, 2015).

While one might think that, regardless of educational background, parents/legal guardians would be supportive of a child's educational ventures, Korsmo (2014) found differing responses from over 200 interviews with FGCS. Of participant interviews, many low-income parents/legal guardians considered college to be something that only the wealthy pursue, or noted that college was not worth the hype. Conversely, for FGCS coming from middle-income families, their parents/legal guardians were reported to value and encourage higher education. Fortunately, none of the FGCS from low-income families reported their parents/legal guardians' desire (or lack thereof) for them to go to college as an important factor in their decision to pursue higher education.

After accounting for high school GPA, ACT and SAT scores, and other formal indicators of college success, Stephens et al. (2014) found that parents/legal guardians of FGCS lacked the experience to be able to understand the academic and emotional labor that is required of students, making it even more difficult for them to support their children. This lack of support may cause

FGCS to lighten their course loads or drop out altogether. While the above studies tend to focus on the lack of parental knowledge and support as a barrier to college access, other literature focuses on the different types of involvement and support that parents/legal guardians provide in contributing to their students' collegiate success.

LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) examined existing research to identify gaps in the literature and provide insights for future research. An initial search of 550 peer-reviewed articles were considered, and 12 articles were included in the final review based on the following inclusion criteria: studies conducted with students attending four-year universities in the United States, published between 2010 and 2019, fell into the combined search categories of (1) FGCS, (2) family relationships, and (3) support. The review found that while existing research presented a deficit perspective of FGCS and what they may lack in terms of resources, skills, and support, specifically regarding familial interactions, there are many ways that FGCS receive support from their parents/legal guardians.

Though not always in the form of cultural capital, or knowledge and skills passed down to aid in navigating the college landscape, parents/legal guardians provide a variety of support in the form of memorable messages (Wang, 2014) and tangible support including emotional support (i.e., the degree to which parents/legal guardians were able to understand their students' college experience), informational support (i.e., help or guidance that parents/legal guardians are able to contribute to college preparation and decisions), financial support (i.e., the amount of financial help received from parents/legal guardians for college expenses such as tuition and fees, housing costs, and other indirect expenses), and perceived social support (i.e., social encouragement and support received from family, friends, and significant others) (Jenkins et al.,

2013; Roksa & Kinley, 2019; Sy et al., 2011). Regardless of the specific type of support, it was clear that parents/legal guardians play a key role in supporting their students (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021).

Also highlighting the positive aspects of parental and familial support of FGCS, Capannola and Johnson's (2022) phenomenological study explored how familial support influenced the experiences of FGCS throughout their transition to and tenure in college. Through in-depth interviews with eight students, three main themes regarding familial support were made apparent: (1) the importance of being a role model for their younger siblings and other family members looking to them with support and pride, (2) feeling that though they were the first and largely only person in their family to attend college, the support and encouragement they received from their parents/legal guardians and families made it clear that they were not going through the process alone, and (3) experiencing the best of both worlds (their college life and their familial atmospheres) by being able to take advantage of all of the opportunities college had to offer while still maintaining strong family bonds by going home to recharge and spend time with loved ones. The results of their study indicate that, though parents/legal guardians and families may not have gone to college themselves, parents/legal guardians and families were still able to provide tangible support in the form of financial assistance and encouraging communications.

Although much of the existing literature categorizes FGCS as lacking cultural capital that is passed down from their parents/legal guardians to aid them in navigating the college admissions process, there are many models of and perspectives about the types of support that parents/legal guardians are able to provide to their students, both during their K-12 education and

into college that provide vital insight into understanding the crucial roles and responsibilities that parents/legal guardians do play in their child's educational evolution, parents/legal guardians of FGCS included.

Understanding Parental Involvement During K-12 Education

Across grade, geography, and school type, parental involvement in their child's K-12 education has been proven as a positive indicator of educational success (Kantova, 2024; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). In a longitudinal study of parents/legal guardians across the United States, Kantova (2024) employed a logistical regression model to examine the relationship between parental involvement and the educational outcomes of their children. She found that across the participants, the higher the level of involvement parents/legal guardians had with their child's education, the increased probability of high school graduation was for their child (Kantova, 2024).

Barger et al. (2019) found that when parents/legal guardians are actively involved in their children's educational endeavors, students experience higher levels of academic achievement, school engagement, and educational motivation, further indicating the importance of parental involvement during the formative K-12 years. Additionally, parents/legal guardians who are actively involved with school programs such as the Parent-Teacher Association and volunteering for open houses and classroom activities gained social networks that better equip them to support their children's education (Berger et al., 2019).

Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) utilized semi-structured focus groups to gauge how parents/legal guardians, educators, and community members perceived parental involvement and familial engagement during a child's K-12 education. Several themes that proved significant for

parental involvement emerged, including building relationships between schools and families, creating engagement opportunities that were accessible to all types of families, providing clear, culturally appropriate communication to families, the intentional creation of programs and resources that cater to the needs of parents/legal guardians, and facilitating programming and events that promote family participation in a child's educational experiences (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

Self (2013) found that while most parents/legal guardians are involved in their student's K-12 education, they tend to be even more involved in their student's higher education. Due to their increased financial investment, their students being in between childhood and adulthood, and the increased access they have to their students as a result of advancements in technology, parents/legal guardians of college students are sometimes even overly involved and seen as *helicopter parents* by college officials (Self, 2013). It was also found that while parental involvement varied by race, gender, and socioeconomic status, white, upper-middle class college females experienced the highest levels of support from their parents/legal guardians and Latino students experienced lower levels of parental involvement when it came to making decisions about what college to attend, interacting with college officials, making course selections, and choosing college activities (Self, 2013). Regardless of how involved one's parents/legal guardians were in their higher education, it was evident that parental involvement positively supported a student's adjustment to college and their overall success.

Understanding Parental Support in Higher Education

Despite being in a more independent setting, parental involvement in higher education is just as important as it is during K-12 education and has been associated with a plethora of

positive outcomes such as higher levels of social adjustment, more positive relationships with peers (Mounts et al., 2006), less psychological distress, and less feelings of loneliness (Hall et al., 2017). For FGCS, emotional support from their parents/legal guardians is associated with more positive academic outcomes, such as grade point average, credit accumulation, and retention, higher levels of psychological well-being, and higher student engagement (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019).

Benito-Gomez et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 53 college students who shared insights into their experiences with parental support throughout their college tenure. Three main levels of parental support were identified: (1) supportive parents/legal guardians (i.e., those parents/legal guardians that exhibited active involvement and were a constant beacon of emotional and practical support), (2) ambivalent parents/legal guardians (i.e., those whose support was inconsistent or uncertain), and (3) unsupportive parents/legal guardians (i.e., those who provided minimal support or were disengaged altogether). These differentiated levels of support resulted in differentiated levels of adjustments to college life and overall experiences, with students who indicated having supportive parents/legal guardians reporting better adjustment to college and more positive experiences, while students indicating ambivalent or unsupportive parents/legal guardians reported facing greater adjustment challenges and more negative college experiences (Benito-Gomez et al., 2021).

Wartman and Savage (2008) provided an overview of how parents/legal guardians, students, and institutions of higher education interact with one another, how parental involvement has evolved over time, and the implications of parental involvement for student development. In addition to exploring the increase in parental involvement in the lives of college

students, Wartman and Savage (2008) examined student identity variables such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, which impact the relationships that students have with their parents/legal guardians. They found that for gender, daughters tend to receive more emotional support from their parents/legal guardians, whereas sons receive more instrumental support. In terms of race, Wartman and Savage (2008) described how different cultural backgrounds have different impacts on what parents/legal guardians expect of their students and how involved they are in their students' education. With socioeconomic status, it was found that parents/legal guardians with higher levels of education tend to have higher socioeconomic statuses which impact the levels and ways they can support their students' college education, whereas with FGCS, the lack of higher education may result in lower socioeconomic status and a more limited ability to support their student's education (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

The conclusion of the monograph provided an overview of implications of parental involvement in higher education, focusing on the ways that institutions can shift their perspectives to view parents/legal guardians as partners in college students' success, particularly in the transition to college (Wartman & Savage, 2008). It also advocated for more intentional communication strategies that provide parents/legal guardians with relevant, timely information and the implementation of programming that invites parents/legal guardians to be more involved with the college community. Across the literature, it is clear that parental involvement in higher education is vital to student success and that institutions of higher education should work to better involve parents/legal guardians in their student's educational experience in a way that is engaging but still provides the students with autonomy and privacy.

Critiques of Traditional Perceptions of Parental Support

Traditional understandings of parental involvement in education have often been shaped by dominant frameworks that privilege specific forms of engagement aligned with middle-class, Eurocentric norms. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, these models emphasize the value of institutional knowledge, familiarity with educational systems, and visible forms of engagement—such as attending school events, communicating directly with educators, and advocating within formal institutional structures. Within this framework, families who possess these forms of capital are often viewed as more involved, while those who do not are positioned as less engaged.

Johnson (2015) challenged these traditional definitions by exploring parental involvement among African American families in urban settings through a critical race lens. His findings suggest that dominant models of parental involvement fail to account for the cultural beliefs and practices of communities of color, often overlooking the ways parents/legal guardians support their students through non-traditional forms of engagement. Johnson also identified systemic barriers—such as socioeconomic constraints, inflexible work schedules, and limited access to culturally responsive resources—that shape how families are able to engage with schools. These barriers not only limit participation in traditionally recognized forms of involvement but also contribute to deficit-oriented narratives that frame these families as disengaged. As a result, Johnson called for a reconceptualization of parental involvement that more accurately reflects culturally diverse practices.

Kiyama and Harper (2018) describe traditional conceptualizations of parental support that focus on helicopter parents/legal guardians- those that are overly involved in their students' education experiences, hovering to a point of hindering their students' success- and encourage a

more holistic understanding of parental support to include the experiences of underrepresented and diverse families. Over the course of the last 20 years, higher education officials have deemed overly involved, overprotective, and invasive parents/legal guardians as helicopter parents/legal guardians and have worked to create boundaries and stress the need for parents/legal guardians to take a step back and allow their children to find themselves as young adults on their own, through their experiences in college.

Similarly, Kiyama and Harper (2018) critiqued dominant narratives of parental support that center the concept of "helicopter parenting," which characterizes parents/legal guardians as overly involved and intrusive in their students' educational experiences. These narratives, often based on the experiences of affluent, predominantly White, college-educated families, have shaped institutional approaches that encourage parents to disengage in order to promote student independence. However, Kiyama and Harper (2018) argued that such perspectives fail to capture the experiences of underrepresented families, particularly families of first-generation college students, for whom ongoing parental involvement may serve as a critical source of support.

By privileging narrow definitions of involvement rooted in dominant forms of cultural capital, these traditional frameworks risk overlooking the strengths and resources that families bring to the college-going process. Rather than viewing parents/legal guardians as barriers to student success, Kiyama and Harper (2018) emphasized the importance of engaging families as partners and recognizing their contributions as assets. They further recommended that institutions adopt culturally responsive outreach strategies that acknowledge diverse forms of support and address structural barriers that limit engagement. Collectively, these critiques highlight the limitations of traditional frameworks that define parental involvement through a

deficit-oriented lens. In doing so, they underscore the need for alternative approaches that more fully capture the knowledge, resources, and strategies that families draw upon to support their students. This need is addressed through Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, which expands the concept of capital to include multiple forms of knowledge and strengths embedded within communities of color.

Gaps in Literature

Considering different models and perceptions of parental involvement and the critiques of them, it is important to also consider the many ways that culturally diverse, and in this case, first-generation parents/legal guardians, are involved in their students' educational experiences and support their educational endeavors. To date, studies have primarily focused on the role of parental support for first-generation students in their higher education journeys and experiences (Amaro-Jimenez et al., 2020; Brookever et al., 2021; Dennis et al., 2005; Engle 2007; Nichols & Islas, 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Tate et al., 2015), and have found that though parents/legal guardians of FGCS may not be able to provide the cultural capital in the form of knowledge and skills that aids in the accessing higher education, there are many other types of support that they are able to provide that still positively contribute to their student's experience in the college-going process.

Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) found that there were parental factors that both positively influenced their students' motivation to access higher education and undermined their students' motivation. When parents/legal guardians were overbearing and sought to control their students' sense of autonomy over the college-going process or were, conversely, absent from the process

entirely, students experienced less motivation for the process. But when parents/legal guardians provided emotional support and encouragement, helped their students seek out resources and guidance outside of themselves, and allowed their students to make their own decisions about the college-going process, students felt more motivation to pursue their educational goals through to college (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Further research shows that due to the lack of knowledge regarding the college process, parents/legal guardians are largely unable to support their students in the tasks associated with college-going, but focus their support on the basic needs of their students, such as emotional support, letting students navigate the technical side of college on their own (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Despite not having the institutional knowledge to contribute their students' higher education pursuits, Roska et al. (2021) found that parental validation, parents/legal guardians actively validating their students' college pursuits and providing verbal encouragement and moral support, positively contributed to their students' social and academic engagement and success. Additionally, Martin et al. (2014) found that parental involvement that fostered encouragement and success directly influences student success, even if the parents/legal guardians do not have knowledge of how to navigate the higher education landscape.

While the research available clearly points to the many ways that parents/legal guardians of FGCS support their students outside of the ability to help in navigation of the college admissions process, most of the peer-reviewed literature available fails to acknowledge the ways that institutions of higher education can provide resources and programming that complements the nontraditional support given and help equip them with knowledge and skills to better support their students tangibly through the college admissions process. Chlup et al. (2018) discuss the

lack of focus on pre-collegiate programs that focus positively on working with parents/legal guardians. Their study took an in-depth look at Latino/a mothers' perceptions of and experiences with accessing information and resources to support their students through the college admissions process.

Most of the participants indicated that their children will be the first in their families to go to college, making this study relevant to FGCS. Findings indicate that parents/legal guardians understand the importance of a higher education, want their students to go to college, want information to better support their students, and want to be involved in the college process with their students, but simply lack the skills to be able to do so, due to a lack of intentional interactions with high school and college officials. Findings also indicate institutions can do a better job of meeting parents/legal guardians of FGCS where they are and working to provide guidance and information with the specific needs of the population in mind, in this case, being the Spanish language barrier, and the lack of understanding of the United States education system.

Alipio-Palbusa's (2016) study exploring parent-student communication about college supports this notion, finding that many challenges arise for parents/legal guardians of FGCS throughout the college preparation and college-going process. Some of these challenges include a language barrier or lack of English proficiency, demanding and conflicting work schedules preventing attendance at events and programs providing vital information about college, and unfamiliarity with some of the resources and services that are available to aid in college preparation. She notes that "better understandings of these challenges can inform college

preparation programs about the different ways they can provide useful information to students' families" (Alipio-Palbusa, 2016, p. #).

With this existing literature in mind, my research aims to contribute to the gaps in literature and provide insight into the perspectives and experiences of parents/legal guardians of FGCS with the ultimate goal of identifying ways to better support them in their support of their students through the transition to higher education. These findings underscore the significance of identifying frameworks that recognize not only the types of parental support that may be missing for FGCS but also highlight the often-overlooked cultural wealth and knowledge that these parents/legal guardians already possess and pass down to their children. For that reason, Yosso's (2005) theory of CCW will serve as the foundational framework for my research study.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves as a foundational lens through which to examine and interpret a research study. It guides the organization of the study, informs data interpretation, and ensures alignment across all aspects of the research process. This study is guided by Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework to explore the experiences of parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students (FGCS), including how they understand their role and influence in supporting their students, how they access and mobilize resources, and how students perceive that support throughout the college admissions process.

Cultural Capital and Its Limitations

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital has been widely used to explain disparities in educational access and outcomes. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors that align with dominant institutional norms and are often rewarded within

educational systems (Bourdieu, 1986). Within the context of college admissions, this includes familiarity with application processes, financial aid systems, institutional expectations, and effective communication with educational professionals. Families who possess this knowledge are often better positioned to support their students in navigating the complexities of the college-going process. However, while cultural capital provides insight into how institutional norms shape access to higher education, it has been critiqued for privileging dominant, middle-class forms of knowledge and framing marginalized communities through a deficit lens (Yosso, 2005). Such interpretations risk positioning first-generation families as lacking, rather than recognizing the diverse ways they support their students. This perspective can obscure the strengths, knowledge systems, and adaptive strategies that families employ as they navigate unfamiliar educational systems.

Community Cultural Wealth

In response to these limitations, Yosso (2005) introduced the Community Cultural Wealth framework, which reconceptualizes capital by recognizing multiple forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities cultivated within communities of color. Rather than focusing on what families do not possess, CCW centers the assets and resources that individuals and communities draw upon to navigate institutions such as higher education.

Yosso (2005) states that though underrepresented communities, FGCS included, may lack cultural capital, there are other strengths and resources that these students have access to that have the potential to offset the lack of cultural capital and aid in the success of these students. She describes six different types of capital that underrepresented students bring with them to college (i.e., aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, resistant). Aspirational

capital refers to the hopes and dreams that students have. Linguistic capital refers to the different language and communication skills students bring with them. Familial capital refers to the social and personal resources that students have drawn from their extended familial and community networks. Social capital refers to the students' social contacts and the knowledge acquired from these contacts. Navigational capital refers to the student's skills and abilities to navigate social situations. Lastly, resistant capital refers to the experiences that communities of color have in securing equal rights and collective freedom (Yosso, 2005).

By centering these forms of capital, CCW provides a more expansive and strengths-based framework for understanding how first-generation families support their students throughout the college admissions process. This framework allows for a deeper examination of how parents/legal guardians draw upon community resources, provide emotional and cultural support, and work alongside their students to navigate complex systems, even in the absence of direct experience with higher education.

Prior research has applied CCW to examine the experiences of students of color and first-generation students across educational contexts (Gil & Parnther, 2024; Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Liou et al., 2023; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Norodien-Fataar, 2016; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016; Smith, 2022; Washington et al., 2024; Whitehead, 2019). Given the intersection of race and first-generation status, and the disproportionate representation of students of color among FGCS (Schuyler et al., 2021), CCW offers a critical lens for examining how families navigate the college admissions process. As such, this study adopts CCW as its primary theoretical

framework to better capture the ways parents/legal guardians of FGCS leverage and develop multiple forms of capital to support their students.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an in-depth summary of the existing literature surrounding the experiences of FGCS navigating the college admissions process, the parental support they receive, and the various barriers they encounter in accessing and navigating institutions of higher education. I also revisited definitions of FGCS and provided implications for the varied definitions in use, explored the different ways in which parents/legal guardians play a role in their students' education, and shared models that described the roles and responsibilities of parents/legal guardians in their students' educational experiences.

I provided an overview of gaps in the literature that emphasized the importance of my research study and highlighted the recommendations made in the literature for supporting the needs of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS. I concluded this chapter by providing contextual information for the theoretical framework, Yosso's (2005) CCW, that guided my research and explained their use in the scope of my research questions. Through the thorough examination and articulation of the existing literature and opportunities for further exploration, one should have a clear understanding of the importance of understanding the experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and their perceptions of their ability to support their students through the college admissions process.

Chapter III Methods

FGCS are a unique population of students who experience a variety of obstacles and challenges that have the capacity to limit their access to higher education. One of the main challenges encountered is a lack of knowledge about the college admissions process and how to successfully navigate it (Gibbons et al., 2019). Because of their lack of experience navigating college admissions themselves, FGCS parents/legal guardians tend to lack an understanding of the college admissions landscape and are largely unable to provide instrumental support when it comes to exploring college options, applying to college, navigating financial aid and scholarship packages, and choosing an institution that will best fit the needs of their student (Dennis et al., 2005). Due to this lack of understanding of college admissions, parents/legal guardians of FGCS may not be as involved in their student's college admissions process, which has the potential to impact the student's success (Stephens et al., 2014).

While much research has focused on the barriers that FGCS encounter, highlighting the lack of parental support and involvement, less attention has been given to the experiences of these parents/legal guardians during their students' college admissions process and to how they perceive their ability to support their students. Research also lacks that explores ways that institutions of higher education can better support this population of parents/legal guardians, providing guidance and resources to equip them with the necessary knowledge of how to successfully navigate the admissions process with their students. Luckily, despite not having a thorough understanding of the process, many parents/legal guardians of FGCS are still able to provide support for their students in different ways, many of which remain unacknowledged or

deemed not of value in the eyes of institutions of higher education. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and analyze their perceptions of their ability to support their students through the college-admissions process.

Research Questions

This single case study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students conceptualize and enact their role as primary agents in their children's college admissions journeys?
2. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students identify, access, and mobilize available resources to support their students through the college admissions process?
3. How do first-generation college students perceive and experience parental support during the college admissions process?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an in-depth explanation of the methodology used to examine the experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS attending Middle Country University and explore how they perceived their role in supporting their students through the college admissions process. Because the study aimed to capture the depth and richness of participants' lived experiences, I chose a single-case study approach. By doing so, I was able to examine the meaning-making among parents/legal guardians of FGCS within a real-world context and explored the nuances of their perspectives. Yosso's (2005) theory of CCW framework informed the way participant experiences and perspectives were viewed and understood.

In this chapter, I outline my research questions and the rationale for selecting qualitative research, specifically a single case study approach, as the most appropriate mode of inquiry for my study. I then provide a detailed description of the data collection and data analysis procedures and address trustworthiness in the study. I discuss my researcher positionality to illuminate how my own experiences, values, biases, and beliefs are connected to the topic, findings, and analysis of my study. Lastly, I address the potential limitations of the study before exploring the findings.

Understanding Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 6), and is best applied in research that seeks to analyze expressive information about beliefs, thoughts, values, feelings, and motivations not conveyed through quantitative data (Berkwits & Inui, 1998). Merriam's (1998) qualitative work emphasized deep understanding over broad predictions and identified five important characteristics of qualitative research: (1) focus on participant meaning and understanding (i.e., maintaining a main goal of making meaning of participants' experiences and how they make sense of them), (2) the researcher as a key instrument (i.e., identifying the researcher as the primary facilitator of data collection, interpretation, and analysis, with special attention to researcher reflexivity) (3) capturing rich descriptions (i.e., describing findings with detailed narratives and direct quotes, attempting to capture the context and nuance of the experiences shared), (4) utilizing an inductive research process which starts with a theory and builds from data, allowing the natural emergence of themes and patterns, and (5) keeping a flexible, adaptive research design, avoiding rigidity and allowing adjustments to the research design as necessary.

According to Merriam's (1998) approach, knowledge is shaped by context and perspective, and meaning is made through the evaluation and understanding of one's lived experiences. Qualitative research produces "knowledge about the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 3), and describes qualitative research as a method of inquiry that seeks to explore how humans make meaning of their experiences within a certain context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Merriam, 1998). Because my research seeks to explore personal experiences and perceptions of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and create further knowledge of how to best support these parents/legal guardians in their quest to support their students, the most appropriate choice for this study was a qualitative approach. Under the umbrella of qualitative research are multiple research designs aimed at collecting rich, descriptive data in search of answers to research questions, including but not limited to ethnography, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, grounded theory, and case study. Because of the exploratory nature of my research questions, I used a case study approach.

Case Study Research

A case study "allows for a level of understanding and explanation not possible through conventional experimental or survey designs" (Merriam, 1985, p. 204). A case study is the study of the particularity, specificity, and complexity of a single case and allows the researcher to capture said complexity and come to an understanding of its activity and importance within a specific context. Furthermore, there are dual aims of case studies- to come to a comprehensive understanding of a particular group that is under study and to construct theoretical frameworks that capture recurring patterns in social systems and interactions (Merriam, 1985).

Case studies can serve multiple functions and have the capacity to not only provide an in-depth reflection of the case at hand, but can also generate hypotheses, test theory, confirm

theory, inform theory, and establish a deviation from established generalizations. Case studies are characterized by thick description and intensely examine the interplay of different variables to allow for a complete understanding of the case being studied (Merriam, 1985). Case studies are used to explore *how* and *why* questions and get as close as possible to the case or subject of interest, by means of direct interaction or observation and by accessing the subject's thoughts, feelings, and desires (Merriam, 1998).

According to Merriam (1998), case studies are highly suitable when the researcher is interested in the process of a case, describing a process as follows: first, the monitoring and describing of the context and population of focus, and second, the causal explanation of the discovery through the process. Ultimately, case studies are best selected for the "very uniqueness for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to" (Merriam, 1998, p. 33). While there are multiple subcategories of case studies, I used a single case-study approach, focused on a specific group of parents/legal guardians of FGCS whose students were first-year freshmen at Middle Country University (MCU).

Single Case Study

Because I focused on one specific group of individuals (i.e., parents/legal guardians of FGCS whose students are in their first year of college) at one specific site (i.e., MCU), I employed a single case study approach, defined by Merriam (1998) as an in-depth description and analysis of a single, bounded system. Single case studies are most useful when the research aims to explore and understand a particular phenomenon in-depth and within a specific context. They are even more relevant when "the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). In other words, it is difficult to separate the

phenomenon of interest from the environment in which it occurs because they do not exist in isolation. These phenomena are shaped by the context around them, which emphasizes the importance of studying cases as a whole, in their natural setting, as opposed to trying to isolate specific variables.

To be considered a single case study, a study must have the following characteristics: (1) the case must be a bounded system, having clear boundaries for the focus of inquiry, (2) must be particularistic, focusing on a specific situation, group, or phenomenon and offering a detailed description and analysis of that particular case, (3) must be descriptive in nature, providing rich, thick-description of the case of focus, using multiple sources of data, (4) must be heuristic, aiming to bring new meaning to one's understanding of the phenomenon to further confirm what is already known about the phenomenon, and (5) must be inductive, building themes, concepts, or theories from their inception as opposed to testing pre-existing hypotheses (Merriam, 2009). In summary, a case study can be defined by its process of investigation, the bounded system (case), or the end product, depending on one's approach. Ultimately, a case study is an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 2009, p. 34).

There is current literature in which case studies are used to explore the lived experiences of particular populations, in this case, FGCS, and provide a basis for my research exploring the lived experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS (Harrel-Hallmark et al., 2002; Means & Pyne, 2017; Renbarger et al., 2023). Harrel-Hallmark et al. (2002) explored the experiences of FGCS who were new members of Greek letter organizations and how their participation in these organizations contributed to their sense of belonging. Because the authors were focused on a

specific population of students at a single university and wanted to explore participation in Greek letter organizations as opposed to participation in any student organization the campus offered, the single case study was determined to be the best methodological approach.

In another study, Means and Pyne (2017) used a case study approach to explore lower-income, FGCS' perceptions of institutional support and sense of belonging. The study focused on 10 FGCS, all of whom participated in and completed a college access program and were now in their first year of college. The specific phenomenon of focus in this study was the college access program and though students were at different institutions across the country, each student was considered a case of their own and their experiences were analyzed independently from their peers, equating to a total of 10 individual case studies that culminated into a multiple case study product (Means & Pyne, 2017).

In another study, Tichavakunda and Galan (2023) used a case study approach to investigate the challenges faced by urban FGCS during the transitional period after high school graduation and before college enrollment, aiming to understand how these challenges influenced the FGCS's college readiness and ability to successfully transition to college. The case study focused on 33 students who had just graduated from the same public, urban high school and were preparing to transition to college. From exploring FGCS's use of the on-campus writing center (i.e., Bond, 2019) to examining the doctoral degree attainment of first-generation students who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program (i.e., Renbarger et al., 2023), and a variety of topics in between, case study research has proved beneficial in exploring specific phenomena in relation to FGCS and their lived experiences.

To contribute to the literature, this case study examined the experiences of parents/legal guardians of FGCS by exploring how they conceptualize their role and influence in supporting their students, how they access and mobilize community resources, and how students perceive and experience that support throughout the college admissions process. My specific group of focus was parents/legal guardians of FGCS whose students were enrolled in their first year at MCU.

I chose MCU specifically because they are known for their targeted efforts to support FGCS and their desire to involve the parents/legal guardians of FGCS in the process as much as possible. Through a combination of targeted communication to parents/legal guardians of FGCS and their special programming that intentionally invites parents/legal guardians of FGCS to campus with their students for a day of workshops aimed at equipping them with knowledge to aid their students in the admissions process, MCU works diligently to partner with these parents/legal guardians and contribute to their success in gaining college access. These aspects of the target population and specific aspects of support provided by MCU made this the perfect setup for a case study approach.

Theoretical Framework

Yosso's (2005) CCW was the theoretical framework that guided my study. CCW directly informed my methods by guiding how I selected my participants, formulated my interview questions, and analyzed the data I collected. The single case study approach aligned with my theoretical framework by focusing specifically on how parents/legal guardians of FGCS perceived their ability to support their students throughout the college admissions process, a perception that tends to be tied to the capital that they possess and the resources that they have

access to. CCW gave weight to the different forms of non-traditional capital that parents/legal guardians of FGCS bring to the process (e.g., aspirational, familial, navigational, social, resistant), all of which contribute to their support of their students navigating the college admissions process (Yosso, 2005). Using a single case study approach allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of parents/legal guardians of FGCS's experiences and perceptions, rather than merely making assumptions about their experiences and perceptions, as is a guiding foundation of Merriam's (1998) definition of qualitative research.

Institutional Context and Case[1]

MCU is a research 1, public, state-funded university located in the Central United States. With more than 170 academic degree programs, an acceptance rate of 77%, and an average of approximately 4800 incoming freshmen students over the course of the last eight years, MCU is one of the most sought-after universities in its home state (Middle Country University, 2025). In terms of the admissions process, MCU practices a holistic admissions approach, considering multiple factors predicting academic success, including high school GPA, academic rigor, standardized test scores, participation in academic and non-academic activities, writing ability, leadership capability, and letters of recommendation, emphasizing a student's overall academic performance. Stated directly from their admissions website, the "primary factor in [MCU's] first-year admissions decisions is demonstrated academic achievement. The academic review focuses

[1] Date were obtained from reports produced by MCU. To maintain confidentiality, identifying details have been removed. However, my dissertation chair reviewed and approved the documents to ensure their reliability and relevance to the study.

on three criteria: Grade point average (GPA) in core academic courses, rigor of course selection and ACT and/or SAT scores (encouraged)" (Middle Country University, 2025). Applications are also reviewed for academically rigorous courses such as AP, IB, and college preparatory courses in English, mathematics, social studies, sciences, and foreign languages.

MCU makes it clear that high school grades carry the most weight in "determining a student's ability to compete for admission to [MCU]" (Middle Country University, 2025). MCU also practices test-optional admissions, but weighs those test scores in a way that subtly communicates that the tests are not actually optional to be admissible. In addition to academic performance, MCU communicates an appreciation for importance of considering other factors to discern an applicant's overall abilities and provides a comprehensive review of their entire application including the essays and short answer questions, school and community activities and leadership positions, and participation in extracurricular activities.

Each year, an average of 25.4% of the freshman class identifies as first-generation and including undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, 27.1% of the overall student population identifies as first-generation (Middle Country University, 2024). A member of the FirstGen Forward Network, a national coalition of institutions of higher education committed to FGCS and their success, MCU has been recognized as one of the more successful higher-education institutions in attracting first-generation students (Middle Country University, 2024).

MCU has multiple resources and mechanisms of support available specifically for FGCS, proving its commitment to FGCS success. Every year, MCU hosts Rooted Day, an on-campus recruiting event for prospective FGCS, rural students, and transfer students and their parents/legal guardians to explore campus, the resources available, and get connected to the

university at large in order to ensure a smooth transition to the university for the entire family (Middle Country University, 2024a). Additionally, MCU's Graduation Support Office offers personalized support for FGCS through partnership with the Academic Center, Life Coaching Center, MCU Health Services, Financial Aid Services, Financial Aid Mentors, and the Underrepresented Student Support Center (Middle Country University, 2024). MCU also participates annually in honoring National First-Generation College Day by hosting a week full of events for FGCS, faculty, and staff, providing educational sessions, gratitude and self-care events, and community celebrations that honor and recognize the contributions of FGCS across its campus (Middle Country University, 2024b).

While MCU does an excellent job of providing resources and support for its enrolled FGCS, the only perceived purposeful interaction with and support for the parents/legal guardians of FGCS is during the Rooted Day event, which is aimed at yielding FGCS to the university. Once enrolled, FGCS gets specialized support, but parents/legal guardians and families fall into the larger category of *MCU Parents* and a pseudonym for the parent programs hosted by MCU, which lack specialized attention to the experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS. This is noted in the scheduling of things such as Family Weekend and Family Send-Off programs hosted by MCU Parents, which include events that are tailored to the more affluent parents/legal guardians and lack bilingual programming for non-native English speakers (Middle Country University, 2025).

Participants

I drew participants from parents/legal guardians of FGCS students enrolled in their first year at MCU. Participants must have identified as a parent or primary legal guardian to a FGCS,

including biological, adoptive, or foster parents, legal guardians, or other primary caregivers. Participants must not have completed a bachelor's degree, must not have gone through the admission process with any other students before, and must have supported their students through the admissions process during the last year. They must also have played an active role in the admission process with their student(s) and have been willing to participate in at least one semi-structured interview via phone or video call. I excluded participants whose student(s) went through the admissions process but did not enroll in college, and parents/legal guardians who played no role in supporting their student(s) through the admissions process.

To account for recall bias, the systematic error occurring when a participant cannot remember or reconstruct past experiences or events leading to inaccurate or biased responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I limited the target population for my study to the parents/legal guardians of FGCS who were currently enrolled in their first year of college at MCU. In line with my single case study approach (Merriam, 1998), I combined purposive, specifically criterion, and maximum variation sampling strategies to recruit participants for my study.

Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling where the researcher intentionally selects participants who are particularly experienced or knowledgeable with the phenomenon of focus and is described by Merriam (1998) as taking place before data collection. Criterion sampling, a type of purposive sampling that requires participants to meet a predetermined set of criteria, allowed me to intentionally select participants who could provide rich, in-depth, relevant data and were most likely to contribute appropriate and useful information that addressed my research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In using criterion sampling, I purposefully selected my participants based on my inclusion criteria (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). To represent a diverse group of parents/legal guardians, I also employed maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling strategy that allowed me to intentionally pick "a wide range of variation on dimensions of interest... to document diversity and identify important common patterns that cut across variations" (Patton, 2015, p. 267). To do so, I selected parents/legal guardians from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic representations, including both urban and rural parents/legal guardians. This aligned with case study research because it allowed me to develop a rich, contextualized understanding of the experiences of parents/legal guardians of FGCS within their real-life settings.

Recruitment strategies included both direct solicitation of participation through social media platforms and indirect solicitation through communication with FGCS currently enrolled in their first year at MCU and word of mouth. For direct strategies, I reached out to parents/legal guardians in the MCU Parents 2029 Facebook group to identify the parents/legal guardians of FGCS who are enrolled during the current academic year. For indirect strategies, I worked with the department of First Year Success to disseminate information to students through their Freshmen Success courses, explained the purpose of my research, and asked them to ask their parents/legal guardians to participate in the study.

I also posted my recruitment flyer in student support offices across campus that served FGCS and underrepresented students, posted on social media, and asked my network to share with parents/legal guardians of FGCS who qualified for the study. Additionally, I reached out to specific community partners that I knew worked directly with this population of parents/legal

guardians, and asked them to share the information as well. For the recruitment of FGCS, I worked directly with the department of First Year Success, visited the sections of the Freshmen Success course specific to FGCS, and solicited participation in the same way I asked them to recruit their parents/legal guardians. Recruitment emails, flyers, and messaging can be found in the Appendix A. The final sample for my study included 14 total participants, eight of whom identified as a parent/legal guardian and six of whom were FGCS.

Data Collection

Collecting data for qualitative case studies involves interviews, observations, and/or document analysis, with interviews being the primary source of qualitative data. Merriam (2009) noted that "it is necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" and described interviews as "the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals" (p. 88). Interviews are conversations between an interviewer and interviewee and can take different forms depending on researcher positionality (Bhattacharya, 2017). It is important to note that though they can be considered conversations, qualitative interviews are intentional in their approach, with very specific ways of inquiring about interviewees' lived experiences, thoughts, values, and beliefs.

According to Bhattacharya (2017), these conversations can be approached in many ways. One approach involves formal, semi-structured interviews in which questions are prepared in advance and the interview follows a specific set of predetermined questions. Another approach involves in-depth, open-ended interviews that focus on exploring the interviewee's experiences in greater detail, typically with only a few guiding questions prepared beforehand. Researchers may also use informal open-ended interviews, which involve more casual conversations about

the interviewee's experiences in a less structured format. Finally, some interviews may take the form of natural conversations that involve a more equal exchange between the interviewer and interviewee. For my case study research, I used a formal, semi-structured interview approach.

I collected my second form of data through interviews with FGCS whose parents/legal guardians were primary participants in my study. Through these interviews, I aimed to gauge how FGCS experienced support from their parents/legal guardians and what they wished their parents/legal guardians could have provided that they were unable to. I used information from these interviews to further illuminate the lived experiences of the parents/legal guardians in the study. While there is no fixed number of participants in case study research, the sample size should be specific to the scope and purpose of the study and guided by the desired depth of inquiry and richness of data (Bhattacharya, 2017). I anticipated approximately 10 parents/legal guardians of FGCS as primary participants, and five FGCS whose parents/legal guardians were participants, which allowed for rich data, and the feasibility of collecting and analyzing in-depth data provided by my participants.

Demographic Questionnaire and Consent

I created a demographic survey to collect essential background information that ensured a comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences of the participants in my study (see Appendix B). I asked questions about age, race/ethnicity, gender identification, household size and income, employment and marital status, and primary language spoken at home. I also asked questions about family dynamics, parent and student participation in campus-specific recruitment events, and student participation in college preparation programs. All of the information collected from the demographic survey aimed to conceptualize the experiences of the

parents/legal guardians of FGCS and their perceptions of their ability to support their students through the college admissions processes, with the goal of identifying patterns among my group of participants. Gathering this demographic data allowed for a diverse representation of perspectives and experiences among participants and provided important context for my data analysis. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of participant demographic information.

Table 1

Parent/Legal Guardians

Pseudonym	Relationship to Student	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Highest Level of Education
Candie	Mother	African American	Woman	Vocational school
Angela	Mother	African American	Woman	Some college
Kiesha	Mother	African American, Native American	Woman	Some college
Sally	Mother	African American	Woman	Some college
KayKay	Mother	Native American	Woman	Vocational school
Veronica	Mother	Latino/a	Woman	Less than high school
Magaly	Mother	Latino/a	Woman	Less than high school
Alejandra	Mother	Latino/a	Woman	Less than high school

Table 2

First-generation College Students/Children

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Birth Order	High School Type
AB	African American	Woman	Youngest	College Prep, Biomedical Sciences
Aaron	African American, Native American	Man	Oldest	Large, Public

Yvonne	Native American	Woman	Middle	Small, Rural
Jared	Latino/a	Man	Middle	College Prep, STEM
Lonnie	African American	Woman	Youngest	Large, Public
Maria	Latino/a	Woman	Oldest	Small, Private

Upon completion of the demographic questionnaire and prior to the scheduled interviews, participants were sent a copy of the informed consent form and information sheet (see Appendix C). This informed consent form and information sheet included information about the nature and purpose of the research, the estimated amount of time required for participation in the study, and noted the fact that the interviews would be conducted and recorded via Zoom. The consent form and information sheet also explained confidentiality measures taken to protect participant data. The consent form was reviewed with all participants prior to the start of every interview, and participants provided their verbal consent.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To provide a structured set-up for my participants while also allowing me to capture in-depth information about them, I collected data by conducting formal semi-structured interviews, defined by Bhattacharya (2017) as a conversation between an interviewer and interviewee in which questions are prepared in advance to guide the flow of the interview. My interview protocol (see Appendix D) included a pre-set list of open-ended questions guided by Yosso's (2005) CCW to systematically address the ways that cultural capital and the different aspects of CCW manifested in the experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and the college admissions process.

I scheduled interviews for 60-90 minutes for parents/legal guardians and 45-60 minutes for FGCS via Zoom. Upon confirmation of schedules, I sent a Zoom link to participants. By using Zoom, I hoped to be as accessible as possible, alleviating the need for parents/legal guardians to go out of their way to drive anywhere and giving them the option to log on with their phones. The Zoom platform also allowed parents/legal guardians to call in if they are unable to access the Zoom app, further increasing accessibility. Interviews were recorded, and the transcription service provided by Zoom was enabled for all interviews. I speak fluent Spanish and offered interviews in Spanish for those who needed it.

Data Analysis

All of my interviews were transcribed by Zoom and cross-referenced using transcription services offered by Otter.ai. I used thematic analysis as a basis for analyzing my data. Saldaña (2021) described thematic analysis as a process of identifying themes or patterns within the data that emerge from the codes developed and applied during data analysis. For my first coding cycle, I employed an open coding approach, as described by Saldaña (2021) as initial coding: "breaking down of qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (p. 115). This process involved closely examining the data to begin identifying emerging patterns or themes. To do this, I read all the transcripts once to review the information and familiarize myself with the each participant's interview data.

During this first round of review, I also completed my data cleanup, ensuring that the information collected and noted was in line with the information that participants shared. I then went back and used a combination of *in vivo* and descriptive coding. Saldaña (2021) describes in vivo coding as "a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data

record" (p. 136) and using direct quotes to indicate words or phrases taken directly from the participant's responses. Descriptive coding is the summarization of the basic topic of the data through the use of words or short phrases and helps to identify what the data is about rather than an attempt at interpreting meaning or emotion (Saldaña, 2021).

In vivo coding is considered useful when doing research that focuses on lived experiences, cultural practices, or social constructs, and descriptive coding is useful when aiming to summarize large amounts of data and working to build more pattern-based codes (Saldaña, 2021). Using both types of coding together provided a more balanced approach. By beginning with in-vivo, I captured and preserved the authenticity of the language and expressions shared by my participants, and following up with descriptive coding helped me better organize and summarize participant responses by creating labels and codes based on the topic of response.

Because my data analysis was driven by CCW, but I wanted to still allow for additional themes to emerge naturally, I used theoretical coding for my second round of coding. Theoretical coding, as described by Saldaña (2021), links and refines categories developed in first-cycle coding, bringing me to a broader understanding of how theories may emerge. This allowed me to begin identifying themes tied to my theoretical frameworks, while taking notes of my own observations. I used Yosso's (2005) CCW as the foundation to guide this portion of my data analysis. I used pre-set codes from the theory, such as aspirational, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). These codes were established before data analysis and provided themes for me to identify during my second round of coding. As I reviewed my in vivo codes and the labels created from descriptive coding during my first round, I identified which themes and labels coincided with the codes specified from CCW (Yosso, 2005). Doing so

allowed me to identify how my participants' responses either reflected or rejected themes that coincide with CCW (Yosso, 2005).

I concluded my data analysis with pattern coding. Saldaña (2021) defined pattern codes as "explanatory or inferential codes that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation... and pull together a lot of material into more meaningful units of analysis" (p. 278). Pattern codes tend to take the form of phrases or labels that caption a theme, belief, or value (Saldaña, 2021). For example, individual codes such as "I did not know where to start," "I asked my coworkers for advice," and "I googled everything I had questions about" might coincide with a code of "self-directed strategies for navigating college admissions" and/or be in line with the theoretical code of "navigational capital."

At this point, there were multiple themes and codes that emerged that coincided with CCW, so this last step allowed me to account for any additional themes outside of the theory. Once identified, I grouped related codes into larger patterns, revealing broader ideas explaining the deeper meaning behind the experiences and perspectives shared by my participants, and began to apply the emergent codes across the data (Saldaña, 2021). This allowed me to identify the relationships between patterns and highlight the main themes that guided my findings.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in my study, I used a combination of validation strategies, including triangulation, member checking, peer review, and reflexivity (Merriam, 1998, 2016). Merriam (2016) described trustworthiness as the ability to provide credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability within one's research study. Credibility is the extent to which

the researcher can accurately use their study findings to represent participants' realities and lived experiences (Merriam, 2016).

I used triangulation, the use of multiple forms of data (CITE), to strengthen the credibility of my study. I did this by using a combination of the data collected from the formal semi-structured interviews with the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and the experiences shared from the interviews of the FGCS themselves, the demographic questionnaire, and my observations collected during reflexive journaling. This combined approach allowed me to cross-reference my data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of my participants.

I also practiced member checking by asking follow-up questions during the interview to ensure I was accurately interpreting what my participants were sharing and provided a summary of my interpretations and themes for their review before finalizing my data analysis (CITE). My reflective journaling also contributed to the dependability of my study, described by Merriam (2016) as a process used to ensure the research is consistent and traceable. This required me to keep a written log of my thoughts, decisions, and challenges encountered throughout the research study.

To ensure confirmability, a concept that refers to the neutrality and objectivity required for qualitative research (CITE), I maintained hyperawareness and clearly communicated my biases and beliefs because of my inherent positionality as an FGCS who had minimal parental support during my college admissions process (Merriam, 2016). Through reflexive journaling, I tracked my thoughts, reactions, assumptions, and perspectives. I also included a positionality statement and shared my experiences as an FGCS with my participants to build trust and maintain transparency win my study. For an additional layer of credibility, I had my dissertation

chair conduct an external audit of my methodological approach, coding mechanisms, and data interpretations. This ensured that my findings aligned with the best practices of qualitative case research.

Unlike quantitative research, which aims for generalizability, qualitative research aims to achieve transferability. Transferability is achieved through the provision of in-depth, rich descriptions that allow readers to determine whether the research findings are applicable to their own contexts (Merriam, 2016). According to Merriam (2016), "it is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to their context" (p. 245). Therefore, I provided in-depth, detailed descriptions of my participants' backgrounds and lived experiences that influenced how they supported their students in the college admissions process. This included sharing direct quotes from participant interviews and framing findings within the context of Yosso's (2005) CCW, to aid other researchers in determining if my findings are applicable to similar populations. By using these combined validation strategies, I enhanced the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of my study (Merriam, 2016).

Researcher Positionality

In conducting research focusing on the experiences and perception of parents/legal guardians of FGCS, I acknowledge that my personal and professional background intimately shape my approach to and interpretation of this topic. First and foremost, I am an FGCS myself and though I knew from an early age that I wanted to go to college, my mother made it very clear that she was proud of me and would cheer me on but would not be able to help me through the process. She did not believe that she had anything to offer me because she had not been through the process herself and had no educational experience beyond her high school graduation.

I remember doing most of the background research for college on my own or with the advisement of my college counselor or my Godparents who were college graduates. I wrote scholarship essays that she did not even feel comfortable reading because she did not feel like her input had any value. I vividly remember taking a campus tour of MCU, my now alma mater, and though she came along, she made it a point to stay at the back of the tour group and not engage with the tour at all.

When it came time to move in, she made the drive with me, but stayed behind, almost like a shadow, as the move-in crew helped me get all my things into my dorm. Before she left, she simply told me how proud of me she was, but then, and throughout the rest of my higher education career, her approach to support was purely motivational. Though her doubt in her ability to support me didn't negatively impact my application and transition process, I cannot help but think how much more of a positive experience I could have had if she were more involved. This personal experience directly impacts and shapes how I engage in this research.

In addition to my personal experience, my former roles as a Director of Equity and Inclusion for a private, college-preparatory high school and Admissions Counselor for MCU serving underrepresented and first-generation prospective students and their families, have allowed me to witness firsthand the multifaced, nuanced experiences FGCS and their parents/legal guardians encounter in the quest for higher education. This awareness is not only the result of my observations, but it reflects my own experiences with how parental support and engagement, cultural capital, and CCW play out in the college admissions process. I come to this study with a commitment to understanding the experiences of parents/legal guardians of FGCS

and their perceptions of their ability to support their students throughout the college admissions process.

Epistemologically, I consider myself a constructivist, seeing each participant's story as an essential source of understanding. Constructivism is the belief that reality is not objective or fixed but is instead constructed through one's lived experiences and interactions with the world (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). This means that knowledge is based on one's context and is co-created between the researcher and study participants. According to Merriam and Tisdale (2015), qualitative research that is rooted in constructivism focuses on how individuals interpret their lived experiences and construct their world, and the meaning that one attributes to their experiences.

I believe the experiences shared by parents/legal guardians of FGCS are more than just data, but rich, meaningful narratives that reveal their unique challenges. I approach each story as a unique experience shaped by an individual's environment and journey, rather than trying to generalize. Similarly, I lean toward a relativist ontology, recognizing that in addition to there not being one single, objective reality, each person's reality is shaped by their identities and context (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). I believe FGCS and their parents/legal guardians experience a complex, varied reality that looks different for everyone, which allows me to better appreciate the experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and their perceptions of their ability to support their students through the college admissions process.

My approach to this study is guided by Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, which centers the assets, knowledge, and resources embedded within communities of color. I view the experiences of FGCS and their families through this strengths-

based lens, recognizing that parents/legal guardians draw upon multiple forms of capital—including aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital—as they support their students. This perspective shapes how I interpret participants' narratives, allowing me to focus on the ways families actively leverage community-based knowledge, relationships, and experiences to navigate the college admissions process. My understanding of CCW is informed not only by theory but also by my personal and professional experiences working with FGCS and their families. These experiences have reinforced my belief that parental support extends beyond traditional definitions of involvement and is deeply rooted in cultural values, community networks, and shared aspirations. As a researcher, I remain intentional about centering these strengths in my analysis and resisting deficit-oriented interpretations of participants' experiences.

I also recognize that my roles in Equity and Inclusion and Admissions and Recruitment also shape my approach to this research. My commitment to providing equitable access to higher education for underrepresented students aligns with my dedication to highlighting the experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS. I understand that my proximity has given me an insider's perspective, helping me empathize with participants, but it also requires me to be hyperaware of the potential biases that come from my own experiences. To combat this, I commit to a reflexive approach, regularly checking my assumptions and staying open to the diverse perspectives of FGCS and their parents/legal guardians.

My awareness of the broader institutional and societal factors that impact FGCS and their parents/legal guardians also informs my approach to this research. I am aware of the different challenges encountered during the college admissions process for those who have never navigated it before, including, but not limited to lack of access to vital information about the

college admissions process, unawareness of higher education expectations, and concerns about financial aid and how to fund a college education. It is essential that institutions of higher education not only recognize the complex experiences of parents/legal guardians of FGCS but also take active steps to meet them where they are at and seek to alleviate some of the structural barriers that prevent them from supporting their students through the college admissions process.

In positioning myself within this research, I acknowledged that my interpretations were not neutral but shaped by my lived experiences, theoretical knowledge, and professional values. My intention was to approach the stories of FGCS and their parents/legal guardians with respect, humility, and a commitment to amplifying their voices. By bringing my positionality into the open, I aimed to foster transparency and trust with participants and readers. I am committed to building a research narrative that goes beyond just focusing on obstacles parents/legal guardians of FGCS encounter but also highlighting the strengths, motivations and resilience that these parents/legal guardians bring to the college admission process to support their students. This research is both an intellectual inquiry and a personal mission to contribute to a better understanding that can help create a more supportive and accessible environment for parents/legal guardians of FGCS as they strive to be active supporters of their students seeking to attend college.

Limitations

As with any research, there were multiple limitations to be aware of in my study. A main limitation was my purposive sampling approach, which could lead to limited generalizability and potential sampling bias. This means that my participants were intentionally chosen for the purposes of this research and though the experiences shared may be in-depth and rich, they are

based on a smaller, non-random sample of participants and may not be applicable to a larger population of parents/legal guardians of FGCS. Additionally, it is possible that my own interpretations and biases of the data collected as the researcher may serve as a limitation. As addressed in my positionality statement, I am aware of how my experiences as a FGCS who had limited tangible support from my mother shaped my understanding of this topic and worked to ensure my bias did not interfere with the research through consistent personal reflexivity and member checking with my participants.

Another limitation was the potential for recall bias and the ways that my participants may have interpreted their own experiences differently based on their personal experiences, emotions, and beliefs. Participants were recalling their experiences from almost a year prior to data collection, meaning they may potentially have reconstructed certain memories and aspects of the admissions process differently now that their student is in college. Additionally, social desirability could be seen as a possible limitation, as some parents/legal guardians may not have wanted to be seen in a negative light or perceived as if they did not have the knowledge needed to effectively support their students or were disengaged in their students' college admissions process, so they may have unconsciously framed themselves in a more positive light than that which they experienced. To account for both possible limitations, I used a variety of open-ended interview questions that positioned my participants to think deeper about their experiences and reflect more in-depth about them, as well as questions framed in a way that were non-judgmental and encouraged honesty in their responses.

Time and resource constraints were also limitations. Things such as recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and analyzing data had to be done in a timely manner which

had the potential to limit my sample size and my ability to do in-depth follow-ups with my participants. All of my interviews took place virtually or over the phone, which may have prevented me from being able to fully gauge participant body language, reactions, and non-verbal cues which may have provided deeper insights into my participants' emotions. Virtual interviews also have the capacity to limit the trust I was able to build with my participants, as they may have found themselves disconnected because of the virtual setting or distracted by their own surroundings. This means that they may have been less inclined to share their experiences than they would be if we were meeting in person.

Lastly, MCU is an institution known for its efforts to support FGCS and that cannot be said for all other institutions of higher education across the country. With that, is the understanding that admissions criteria, processes and policies vary by institution type, size, state, and public/private designation, so experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS may vary across institutions.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the rights, confidentiality, and well-being of the participants, my study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, including securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and minimization of potential risks. Prior to collecting my data, my study was submitted for review and approval from the IRB to make sure the study procedures were in line with ethical research standards. The IRB process helped ensure my study prioritized the rights and well-being of those who choose to participate.

Before participating in an interview, each participant received an informed consent form that provided detailed information about the study, protocol, risks, and benefits. The informed

consent process ensured that participants understood their rights as participants. To protect the identities of the participants, I removed all identifiable information during data collection, analysis, and reporting and replaced it with pseudonyms. All the interview transcripts and demographic surveys were stored using password protection through Microsoft Office.

Although this study involved minimal risks to begin with, during the interviews, participants were asked questions about experiences that may have been sensitive and/or difficult to share. To mitigate this potential risk, I reminded participants that they had the right to choose not to answer any question(s) that they found uncomfortable and/or could choose to withdraw themselves from the study at any time.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the methodology that I used to conduct this single case study exploring experiences of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS and their perceptions of their ability to support their students in the college admissions process. I chose this approach to allow for the in-depth examination of the lived experiences of my participants.

Grounded in Yosso's (2005) theory of CCW, my study aimed to understand the different ways parents/legal guardians of FGCS use the resources and networks available to them to support their students. In alignment with these theories, I used purposive sampling to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria and collected data through demographic surveys and semi-structured interviews. The interview questions for my study were directly informed by the theoretical frameworks that guided my research. This approach to data collection allowed for the rich, in-depth exploration of the diverse experiences and perceptions of the parents/legal guardians of FGCS.

I detailed how trustworthiness was ensured through a combination of validation strategies such as triangulation, member checking, external auditing, and reflexivity, and explained the limitations of the study including purposive sampling, researcher positionality, recall bias, time and resource constraints, and the potential for limited generalizability. I also addressed how these limitations were addressed, provided an in-depth positionality statement, and described the ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, minimizing potential risks, ethical use of technology, and IRB approval. Overall, this chapter served as a roadmap for the data collection and analysis process, effectively ensuring a rigorous approach to addressing the research questions. In my next chapter, I present the findings of the study and provide insights into the patterns and themes that were identified in the participant interviews.

Chapter IV Findings

The college admissions process is often framed as an individual endeavor, requiring students to navigate complex systems of applications, financial aid, and institutional decision-making. For first-generation college students (FGCS) and their families, this process can be particularly challenging, as it frequently unfolds without prior experience or familiarity with higher education systems (Perna, 2006). Despite these structural barriers, families remain actively engaged in supporting students' college-going journeys in ways that are not always recognized within dominant narratives of college access. While existing research has often focused on gaps in knowledge or resources among first-generation families, less attention has been given to how parents/legal guardians and students themselves describe and experience support throughout the admissions process.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to examine how parents/legal guardians of FGCS describe their role and influence in supporting their students through the college admissions process. This study also explored how students perceive and experience that support. Situated within the institutional context of Middle Country University (MCU), this study explores how families navigate the transition to higher education despite limited prior experience with college systems, and how support is enacted within and beyond the family unit throughout the admissions process.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students conceptualize and enact their role as primary agents in their children's college admissions journeys?

2. How do parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students identify, access, and mobilize available resources to support their students through the college admissions process?
3. How do first-generation college students perceive and experience parental support during the college admissions process?

Interpretation of Findings

Community Cultural Wealth

The analysis of this study was grounded in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), which challenges deficit-oriented interpretations by centering the assets and strengths embedded within marginalized communities. Rather than focusing on what families lack, CCW highlights the various forms of capital that families draw upon to persist, adapt, and support educational attainment. For my findings section, theory is not presented as a separate analytic layer. It is instead embedded throughout the findings to illuminate how families experience and respond to the college admissions process. Parents/legal guardians' encouragement, sacrifice, and persistence are understood as expressions of aspirational and familial capital, while their engagement with counselors, programs, and networks reflects the activation of navigational and social capital.

Similarly, students' growing independence and problem-solving behaviors demonstrate how these forms of capital are internalized, adapted, and enacted across generations. The findings presented in this chapter are organized into two primary sections to reflect the perspectives of both parents/legal guardians and students. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how support is both provided and experienced within the college admissions

process. The first section focuses on parents/legal guardians and is organized around three themes: (1) intergenerational aspirations and early college expectations, (2) collective family support, sacrifice, and faith, and (3) navigating college admissions through institutional and community support. The second section centers on the student perspectives and includes themes related to (1) the internalization of familial aspirations and (2) student agency in navigating the admissions process.

Within each theme, participants' experiences are used to illustrate how families interpret their roles, mobilize resources, and navigate structural barriers in higher education. Instead of presenting forms of capital as independent categories, this chapter demonstrates how they operate dynamically and often simultaneously within participants' experiences. By examining both parent/legal guardian and student perspectives within a single institutional context, this chapter provides a comprehensive account of how support is constructed, negotiated, and experienced throughout the college admissions journey.

Introduction to Parents

To provide deeper context for the findings presented in this chapter, this section introduces narrative profiles of the parents/legal guardians who participated in this study. Consistent with qualitative case study methodology, these introductions are intended to situate participants within their lived experiences, offering insight into the social, educational, and familial contexts that shaped how they understood and enacted their roles in supporting their students through the college admissions process.

Rather than presenting demographic characteristics in isolation, these introductions highlight key aspects of participants' backgrounds, including their own educational experiences,

family structures, cultural contexts, and approaches to parenting. While the focus of this section is on parents/legal guardians, brief references to their children are included to contextualize family dynamics and college-going trajectories. These introductions provide a foundation for understanding how participants' experiences informed the themes presented in the subsequent findings sections.

Candie. Candie is a single mother of two daughters who resides in a large metropolitan area outside of the state in which MCU is located. Her youngest daughter, AB, is currently attending MCU as a non-resident student. Although Candie did not attend a four-year college or university, she pursued cosmetology training and built a successful career as a licensed hairstylist, owning and operating her own salon for over two decades before transitioning into her current full-time role. Her educational experiences reflect nontraditional pathways that shaped her understanding of work, independence, and financial stability.

As a parent, Candie consistently emphasized the importance of education as a means of expanding opportunities and avoiding financial hardship. Candie described herself as a supportive and engaged parent who reinforced college-going expectations while allowing her daughter to take initiative throughout the admissions process. While her oldest daughter did not pursue college, Candie recognized early on that her younger daughter, AB, had both the academic ability and desire to attend college. She supported AB's decision to attend an early college high school focused on biomedical sciences and remained actively involved, despite acknowledging limited familiarity with the admissions process. AB ultimately applied to MCU as a non-resident student, reflecting both her academic preparation and Candie's sustained encouragement toward higher education.

Kiesha. Kiesha is the mother of two children, with her son Aaron being the oldest. They reside in a metropolitan area surrounding MCU, where Aaron applied as an in-state student. Kiesha was raised in a household where education was expected and initially aspired to become a lawyer. However, her educational trajectory was disrupted during high school when her mother became ill, requiring her to shift her focus toward family responsibilities. Although she later pursued a certificate program at a for-profit institution, she was unable to complete it due to institutional closure and financial barriers. These experiences shaped her understanding of education as both valuable and, at times, precarious.

As a parent, Kiesha emphasized discipline, work ethic, and the long-term value of higher education, frequently distinguishing between having a job and building a career. She consistently communicated the expectation that her children would pursue pathways that created stability and opportunity. Kiesha described Aaron as a high-achieving and motivated student, and she viewed college as an inevitable next step in his trajectory. Aaron's strong academic performance, leadership involvement, and early interest in MCU reflected both his individual commitment and the expectations Kiesha cultivated within the household.

Sally. Sally is a single mother of two daughters, with her youngest, Lonnie, applying to MCU as an out-of-state student. They reside in a large metropolitan area outside of the state in which MCU is located. Sally was raised in a family where education was encouraged, though direct knowledge of the college-going process had not been sustained across generations. While earlier generations had attained degrees, this knowledge had not been passed down, leaving Sally to navigate the process with limited institutional familiarity. She briefly attended community college but was unable to continue due to caregiving responsibilities for her oldest daughter.

Despite these challenges, Sally maintained high educational expectations for her daughters and consistently encouraged academic effort and persistence. She described Lonnie as a strong student who demonstrated an early interest in learning and a clear inclination toward higher education. Sally supported this trajectory by reinforcing the importance of education and encouraging early exploration of college pathways. Lonnie's participation in the TRIO Upward Bound program beginning in middle school further supported this process, providing both exposure to college and additional guidance as she prepared to apply to MCU.

KayKay. KayKay is a single parent of three children, with her youngest daughter, Yvonne, applying to MCU as an in-state student. The family resides in a small rural town approximately one hour from the university. KayKay was exposed to educational opportunities through both her family and her Native community, but she did not pursue college due to external influences and life circumstances. Instead, she attended a vocational school after high school, earning multiple certificates, and has since expressed intentions to complete her associate's degree. Her educational experiences reflect alternative pathways that informed her understanding of both opportunity and missed access.

As a parent, KayKay established clear expectations that her children would pursue productive paths following high school, whether through college, vocational training, or employment. She emphasized accountability and independence while maintaining strong support for her children's goals. KayKay recognized early on that Yvonne demonstrated both the motivation and capacity for higher education and consistently reinforced that trajectory. Yvonne's academic success, leadership involvement, and commitment to attending MCU

reflected a combination of her own initiative and the structured expectations and encouragement provided within the household.

Veronica. Veronica is a mother of three children, with her middle child, Jared, applying to MCU as an in-state student. The family resides in a metropolitan area approximately two hours from campus. Veronica immigrated from Mexico and experienced a significant disruption to her education when her father passed away, requiring her and her siblings to leave school and enter the workforce to support their family. Although she aspired to become a paramedic, these goals were never realized. Her experiences shaped her understanding of education as both valuable and, at times, inaccessible, particularly within the context of economic and familial responsibility.

As a parent, Veronica emphasized the importance of education as a pathway to opportunity, particularly within the context of her family's immigration experience. She and her husband consistently encouraged their children to take advantage of the educational opportunities available in the United States, framing college as both possible and important. Veronica actively sought out resources to support her children, including working with a social worker to ensure access to state-sponsored college funding programs. While Jared initially questioned whether college was attainable due to limited family knowledge of the process, Veronica's encouragement and persistence contributed to his strong academic engagement and eventual application to MCU.

Alejandra. Alejandra is the mother of two daughters, with her oldest daughter, Maria, applying to MCU as an in-state student. The family resides in a metropolitan area surrounding the university. Alejandra immigrated from Mexico at a young age and was unable to complete

her formal education, leaving school after middle school to contribute financially to her household. Growing up in an environment where immediate work was prioritized over schooling, she had limited exposure to higher education as a viable pathway. These experiences shaped her perspective on education as an opportunity she was not afforded but deeply valued.

As a parent, Alejandra was intentional about ensuring her daughters were exposed to educational opportunities and consistently reinforced the belief that college was both attainable and worthwhile. She and her husband integrated conversations about college into their daughters' upbringing, encouraging them from an early age to think about their futures and potential career paths. Alejandra emphasized both support and autonomy, expressing a commitment to doing everything within her capacity to help her daughters pursue higher education if they chose to do so. Maria's eventual interest in college, along with her academic preparation and intentional course selection during high school, reflected both her individual motivation and the consistent encouragement she received at home.

Angela. Angela is a single mother of two children, with her son Seb applying to MCU as an in-state student. The family resides in a small rural town approximately 90 minutes from campus, and Seb attended a virtual charter high school. Angela was raised during a time when higher education was widely promoted as essential for long-term success, and she internalized the belief that education was necessary for upward mobility. Although she began college, she was unable to complete her degree after exhausting her financial aid, an experience that shaped her understanding of both the value of education and the financial barriers associated with it.

As a parent, Angela emphasized informed decision-making and exposure to multiple postsecondary pathways. She encouraged her children to consider both college and alternative

options while highlighting the long-term financial and professional benefits associated with earning a degree. Angela balanced encouragement with flexibility, encouraging her children to pursue paths aligned with their interests while still recognizing the advantages of higher education. In Seb's case, she recommended taking a gap year to allow for further exploration before committing to college. She described him as academically capable and self-directed, expressing confidence in his ability to succeed while also acknowledging concerns about his transition to independence away from home.

Magaly. Magaly is a single parent of two children, with her oldest daughter, Dora, applying to MCU as an in-state student. The family resides in a metropolitan area approximately two hours from campus. Magaly immigrated from Mexico at the age of 16, which required her to discontinue her education and begin working. Coming from a large family in which formal education was not emphasized and high school completion was uncommon, she had limited exposure to academic pathways. These experiences shaped her understanding of education as both unattainable in her own life and deeply important for future generations.

As a parent, Magaly expressed a strong commitment to ensuring her children had access to educational opportunities that she did not have. She consistently framed education as a critical resource and positioned herself as fully invested in supporting her daughter's pursuit of a college education. Magaly encouraged Dora to pursue a field of study aligned with her interests while reinforcing the importance of academic effort and preparation. She recognized early on that Dora had strong academic potential and supported her enrollment in a college-preparatory academy, which contributed to her readiness for the admissions process. Dora's academic success and clear

pathway to college reflected both her individual abilities and Magaly's sustained encouragement and commitment to her educational future.

Parents/Legal Guardians' Findings and Interpretations

Intergenerational Aspirations and Early College Expectations

Parents/legal guardians in this study consistently described educational aspirations as deeply rooted in their own interrupted or unrealized educational journeys, which shaped their commitment to ensuring that their children had access to opportunities that they themselves either did not have access to or were unable to pursue. The aspirations parents/legal guardians had for their children's education were not abstract hopes but actively communicated expectations that shaped how they understood their role in supporting their students through the college admissions process. In this way, parents/legal guardians demonstrated aspirational capital through their sustained belief in their children's educational futures, even in the face of structural, financial, and experiential barriers.

For participants Magaly, Veronica, and Alejandra, these aspirations were shaped by immigration experiences and early educational disruption. Magaly, Dora's mother, reflected on how immigrating from Mexico and leaving school at a young age influenced her commitment to her daughter's future:

> In my family, there are 10 siblings, and honestly, no one graduated or completed any education. We all immigrated to the United States from Mexico, and I was very young when I came. I left school at 16. One of my goals was to study, but because I immigrated alone without my parents, it became impossible to stay in school, so I could not. I always wanted to continue my studies and graduate, but it was not possible. But I want the best

> for my children, and one of my goals has always been to give them the best education possible, even if I have to do the impossible.

Magaly's experiences show how aspirational capital was extended beyond her own personal ambition and became something that she passed down to her daughter. Despite limited formal education and structural barriers, Magaly maintained a strong belief in the transformative power of education and positioned her child's success as a continuation of the aspirations she herself was unable to fulfill.

Similarly, Veronica, Jared's mother, described her experience as an immigrant and how her own inability to finish school and pursue her educational goals served as motivation for her desire for her children to go to college. She encouraged Jared to explore education and take advantage of the opportunities available to him:

> In Mexico, you were in school all day, so I could not work *and* study. So I had to leave school. So since [Jared] was a small boy, and even now, I told him, you have the opportunity to go to college. If you want to put in the effort to go to college and get an education, we will support you.

Veronica further reflected on the pride she feels watching her son, Jared, successfully navigate his first year as a student at MCU, pursuing an educational path she once hoped for but was unable to complete:

> It is a beautiful emotion to see your children achieve something you could not. You say to yourself, "This will serve them, they will enjoy it." You feel so proud because it is an achievement you couldn't reach, and now you are seeing it through your children.

This further illustrates how aspirational capital often functioned across generations, with parents'/legal guardians' interrupted or unrealized educational experiences shaping their commitment to their children's success.

For both Magaly and Veronica, education represented more than individual achievement; it symbolized opportunity, mobility, and the fulfillment of aspirations that had previously been out of reach. Participants described similar experiences in which parents/legal guardians viewed their children's educational journeys as both a continuation of their own hopes and a pathway toward expanded possibilities for the family as a whole. These narratives suggest that aspirational capital did not merely reflect hope for the future, but functioned as an intergenerational transfer of unrealized opportunity.

This intergenerational framing of aspiration was also evident in how parents/legal guardians intentionally cultivated college-going expectations early in their children's lives. Alejandra, Maria's mother, who also immigrated from Mexico at a young age and was unable to continue her studies, described how college was consistently positioned as both possible and expected through ongoing family conversations from an early age with her children:

> Because we couldn't do it for ourselves, we wanted her to know that she could. So, between her father and me, in our conversations since she was little, we always included questions like, "Would you like to go to college?" "Would you like to go to school?," and "Which university would you like to attend?" We always encouraged her, even when she was little, to go to college. It was always part of our approach, and I think that helped her a lot from a young age.

Alejandra's reflection illustrates how aspirational capital was not situational but socially constructed within family environments over time, shaping students' expectations of higher education long before the admissions process formally began. Rather than emerging only during the admissions process, college-going expectations were introduced early and reinforced consistently, shaping how her daughter Maria viewed higher education as both possible and attainable.

Other participants described how their own educational and financial experiences shaped when and how they communicated the value of college. Kiesha, Aaron's mother, explained how early conversations about college were rooted in helping her child understand the broader opportunities connected to higher education:

> School has always been a focus when I talk to my kids. I just try to tell him, I mean, it's either you want a job or a career. You can see what you get with the career, with the degree, versus not with the degree, and how far you can go. So I push him, whatever it is he wants to do, I'm on board. I just want him to be successful and work hard at whatever he chooses to become.

Similarly, Angela, Seb's mother, framed higher education as one of several possible pathways while still emphasizing its long-term benefits:

> I'm an '80s baby, so the message [growing up] was that you needed an education or you wouldn't go far. So, I always made it clear to my kids that I wanted them to make their own choice—whether that was college, tech school, or starting a career. I talked with [my son] about how many paths require a degree, but I also made sure he understood that not

every career is college-based. I emphasized that college is still extremely helpful because, even if you don't work in your field, you generally earn more.

These reflections highlight how aspirational capital was shaped not only by unrealized educational goals but also by parents'/legal guardians' practical understandings of work, stability, and opportunity.

Across participants, parents/legal guardians consistently reinforced the importance of education while also encouraging their children to pursue pathways aligned with their individual interests. Together, these findings demonstrate that aspirational capital was both intergenerational and intentionally cultivated. Parents/legal guardians drew upon their own lived experiences to shape how they encouraged, motivated, and prepared their children for higher education. These aspirations were introduced early, reinforced consistently, and ultimately positioned college as both an attainable goal and a shared family achievement.

Collective Family Support and Sacrifice

Parents/legal guardians in this study described supporting their children through the college admissions process as a collective family effort, characterized by emotional encouragement, financial prioritization, and a shared commitment to educational attainment. Parents/legal guardians described their role as one of steady encouragement paired with active involvement, positioning themselves as both emotional anchors and practical supports throughout the admissions process. Alejandra, Maria's mother, reflected on the collaborative nature of her and her husband's approach, explaining, "Maria, her dad, and I have always had good communication. We always ask, 'Maria, how can we help you?' Even when difficulties arise, we stay united to solve whatever she needs." Her reflection illustrates how parents/legal

guardians often positioned themselves as partners in the process, working alongside their children rather than directing them.

This partnership was particularly significant within the context of first-generation college access, where parents/legal guardians remained deeply engaged despite limited familiarity with institutional systems. Rather than withdrawing, they adapted their involvement to meet their students' needs. Angela, Seb's mother, for example, described her role as responsive and supportive, noting:

> I was backup and support… Sometimes, especially if documents were needed, I would make sure I could find the documents… A lot of times, even if he was doing everything himself, he'd still be in the room with me and ask random little questions.

This highlights how parents/legal guardians maintained an active presence, even as students assumed greater responsibility for navigating admissions requirements.

For participants in the study, encouragement functioned as a consistent and central form of support. KayKay, Yvonne's mother, captured this sentiment succinctly, stating, "I'm just a cheerleader… whatever you need me to do, I'm here." While described simply, this role reflects a broader pattern in which parents/legal guardians reinforced confidence, affirmed their students' goals, and remained emotionally available throughout the process. These findings demonstrate that parental support within first-generation contexts was not diminished by a lack of institutional knowledge, but instead reconfigured through partnership, adaptability, and sustained encouragement.

For most participants, support also extended beyond individual acts of assistance, reflecting a broader sense of responsibility rooted in family values, cultural practices, and long-

term investment in their children's futures. In this way, parents/legal guardians demonstrated familial capital not only through relational support and tangible sacrifice, but also through shared cultural meanings and spiritual frameworks that shaped how educational attainment was understood and pursued. For families of FGCS, pursuing a higher education was not viewed solely as an individual accomplishment, but as one shared by the family and broader community. This collective framing was particularly evident among participants who described how cultural traditions reinforced recognition of educational milestones. These assertions relate to how Yosso (2005) highlights how cultural traditions and collective understandings of achievement shape, especially among first-generation families, aspirations to attend college. KayKay, Yvonne's mother, described how her tribal community celebrates educational achievement:

> Our tribal culture plays a big part in all of this. When it comes to powwows or ceremonies, it is just part of everything that comes with being Native American. This graduation is going to be a big celebration for everyone… we even have prayer services for the graduates… because it means they have earned something in life.

Her reflection illustrates how familial capital extended beyond the household and into cultural and community spaces, where educational attainment carried spiritual meaning and collective significance.

Similarly, faith as a part of one's culture emerged as an important source of support that shaped how parents/legal guardians helped their children navigate uncertainty throughout the admissions process. For some families, spiritual belief informed both decision-making and reassurance, particularly when outcomes felt uncertain or beyond their control. Veronica, Jared's mother, described how she relied on faith when supporting her son's college journey:

> So, I told him, ok, we are going to put everything in God's hands, and if God says there, then there you go. Thank God, God gave us the blessing that yes he was able to go, that yes we can pay what must be paid… Everything is possible, the Bible says everything is possible if we believe in God, and we believe in God, and God will do it.

Veronica's reflection illustrates how faith functioned as both a coping mechanism and a framework for understanding possibility, allowing families to navigate uncertainty with a sense of trust and optimism. Instead of eliminating the challenges associated with the admissions process, spiritual belief provided a way to make sense of those challenges while reinforcing persistence and hope.

For some participants, faith operated as an additional layer of familial support, shaping how parents/legal guardians encouraged resilience, framed opportunity, and maintained confidence in their children's ability to succeed. Faith also shaped how parents/legal guardians helped their children manage stress and uncertainty, particularly in relation to financial concerns. Candie, AB's mother, described how she responded when her daughter became overwhelmed while reviewing her financial aid package:

> When she was looking at her stuff, she said, 'Mama… I might need $3,000…' And I said, "What are you stressing for?… We are gonna pray about this thing, and we are gonna keep it pushing, because you are going to college."

These reflections illustrate how spiritual practices such as prayer functioned as sources of reassurance, emotional grounding, and resilience. Across participants, faith operated as an additional layer of familial support, reinforcing hope and persistence while helping families navigate challenges associated with the admissions process.

In addition to these relational and cultural forms of support, parents/legal guardians also demonstrated familial capital through financial prioritization and sacrifice. For many families, supporting their child's transition to college required intentional decision-making and, in some cases, significant personal sacrifice. Kiesha, Aaron's mother, described how prioritizing her son's education influenced household financial choices, "We sacrifice certain things… I'm constantly saying I don't have money, but it's not that I don't have it for you… I'm trying to make sure my son gets through college." She further emphasized the extent to which she was willing to support her son's education:

> I'm happy my child is in college… I told him going into his first year, if it's not for you, let's not waste time, because we don't want to be in debt if we don't have to be. But I also told him, "I don't want money to be the reason you feel like you have to finish. I want you to finish because you want to. Whether I have to take a loan out on the house, or whatever I have to do, I'm going to do it. I'm going to find it. One way or another, we're going to make it work."

Kiesha's reflection highlights how familial capital was manifested through sacrifice, as she stressed her willingness to put herself in financial discomfort to ensure her son had access to college. This suggests that familial capital operated not only through emotional encouragement but through material and relational investment, reinforcing college as a collective family endeavor rather than an individual pursuit.

Parents/legal guardians were often willing to take on financial risks to support their children's education, while also striving to ensure that this sacrifice did not become a source of pressure or obligation for their children. Across participants, financial commitment was framed

not simply as investment, but as an expression of belief in their children's potential and a shared determination to make higher education possible. Alongside these sacrifices, parents/legal guardians also worked to reduce their children's stress and uncertainty, particularly around finances. Many described intentionally shielding students from these pressures so they could remain focused on their education. Magaly, Dora's mother, shared in relation to her daughter's path to college:

> We always knew that she wanted to go. When she tells me she wants to go, I tell her, everything you set out to do, you can achieve it. I am going to be here 100% for whatever you need, but you have to be 100% focused. I tell her, don't worry about how it's going to be paid… yes, sometimes money is a challenge, but I tell her, no, don't worry. You focus on your school. Take advantage of this opportunity. And we are going to do it. We are going to achieve it.

Similarly, Sally, Lonnie's mother, detailed the challenges of navigating loan processes without prior experience, and Alejandra, Maria's mother, reflected on financial uncertainty as a central concern, noting that although her family was not fully prepared to support a child in college, they remained committed to doing whatever was necessary to ensure access.

These findings illustrate that familial capital operated as a multidimensional foundation of support, encompassing emotional encouragement, cultural meaning, spiritual grounding, and financial sacrifice. Within first-generation contexts, this support was not diminished by limited institutional knowledge but instead expanded through collective effort, adaptability, and a shared commitment to educational attainment. While these relational and cultural resources were central to families' experiences, parents/legal guardians also engaged with institutional and community-

based supports to navigate systems that were often unfamiliar and complex. The following section explores how these external supports functioned as key navigational tools for families.

Navigating College Admissions Through Institutional and Community Support

Within the context of MCU, a large public flagship institution with complex admissions, financial aid, and enrollment systems, parents/legal guardians consistently described the college admissions process as unfamiliar and difficult to navigate, particularly given their limited prior exposure to higher education. While they demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting their students, many acknowledged that they lacked prior knowledge of higher education systems and therefore relied on external resources to guide their decision-making. As a result, parents/legal guardians engaged with a range of institutional and community-based supports to access information, interpret requirements, and ensure their students remained on track throughout the admissions process.

For many participants, school-based supports served as primary entry points into the college admissions process. Counselors, teachers, and school-affiliated programs played a critical role in providing guidance related to applications, scholarships, and college preparation. KayKay, Yvonne's mother, described how both school personnel and the Indian Education program provided consistent and accessible support:

> We have a tribal program and an educational coordinator who is really good with our Native American students. She was helping us get started with scholarships and things like that… she always had her door open for us anytime. Sometimes she worked late into the evening, and we would go over there, ask questions, and figure it out.

These structured and relational supports functioned as key navigational tools, helping families access critical information and feel supported throughout the process.

Similarly, Sally, Lonnie's mother, emphasized the role of counselors and TRIO Upward Bound staff:

> They were a big help, even with the Upward Bound, the TRIO program. When I got to speak with them, they let me know that I could call them at any time to ask whatever. Anything that they could do to help, they were willing. So I used them as often as I needed.

This demonstrates how parents/legal guardians' reliance on navigational capital was often developed through relationships with knowledgeable school representatives. Counselors and school staff helped parents/legal guardians interpret unfamiliar processes, reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence as families moved through the admissions journey.

In addition to formal institutional supports, participants also relied heavily on informal networks and community-based relationships. Sally also described the extent to which she actively sought guidance, explaining, "I spoke with every person possible. We had a lot of different people that we could reach out to and ask questions, and we utilized them all." Her reflection illustrates how parents/legal guardians mobilized social networks to fill knowledge gaps, particularly when navigating unfamiliar processes. Veronica, Jared's mother, similarly described drawing on community-based support through a long-standing relationship with a social worker, who provided information and guidance, sharing:

> There is a social worker from my kid's elementary program that we have known for a long time. Every time I had a question about my son going to college, she would send a

> large list of information and resources. We took that information, went through it together, and started the process.

She also noted that her son's college preparatory school provided exposure to key admissions information:

> He went to [a science academy] meant to prepare kids for college, so they were very helpful. They would provide information, bring in speakers and college representatives to teach us about their schools, and explain FAFSA and scholarships.

Family networks also played a critical role in supporting navigation, particularly for parents/legal guardians with limited prior experience with higher education systems. Magaly, Dora's mother, described how her nieces, who had recently completed college, helped guide them through the process:

> My nieces were the first in my family to graduate, and they began helping us. It felt easier because my nieces were there to help us as parents. Since Spanish is our first language, they made things feel very simple. I think I would go crazy if it were not for my nieces having already gone through the process. Without them, I would be like someone with a blindfold over my eyes, not knowing what to do. They opened the path so we could follow it.

This reflection underscores how intergenerational knowledge-sharing functioned as a critical form of navigational support.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that supporting FGCS through the admissions process is both a relational and a strategic endeavor. Parents/legal guardians drew upon their own lived experiences to shape early expectations about higher education, actively reinforced these

aspirations through emotional encouragement and financial sacrifice, and engaged with institutional and community-based supports to navigate complex and unfamiliar systems. Across participants, these efforts were not isolated, but interconnected, reflecting the ways in which aspirational, familial, social, and navigational forms of capital operated simultaneously to support students' college-going trajectories.

While parents/legal guardians played a central role in shaping access to and engagement with the admissions process, students were not simply passive recipients of this support but instead interpreted, responded to, and, in many cases, extended the efforts of their parents/legal guardians in meaningful ways. These findings underscore that parents/legal guardians play a critical role in shaping how FGCS access and navigate higher education pathways, not only through the transmission of aspirations but through sustained engagement, sacrifice, and strategic use of available resources. The following section shifts focus to the perspectives of FGCS, exploring how they internalized familial expectations and exercised agency as they navigated the college admissions process.

First-Generation College Students/Children Findings and Interpretations

Internalizing Familial Aspirations and Educational Expectations

FGCS in this study described their college-going decisions as deeply shaped by the expectations, values, and encouragement communicated by their parents/legal guardians. Across participants, these messages were not merely received but internalized in ways that shaped how students understood their own potential, responsibilities, and future trajectories. In this way, aspirational and familial capital were not only transmitted within the family, but taken up by students as part of their own decision-making processes.

For many students, parental expectations became internalized over time, shifting from external encouragement to personal motivation. Lonnie, Sally's daughter, described how her mother's emphasis on education shaped her own sense of purpose and responsibility:

> College has always been a big thing for her… in my household, it wasn't really an option… but it didn't feel like a burden. It started to become not just her expectation, but an expectation for myself too… I wanted to be more and to also be able to pour out more. So I'm like, okay, I'm good at academics. I could do this college thing. I can make something for myself and my family.

Lonnie's reflection illustrates how familial expectations were not experienced as pressure alone, but were internalized as a desire for upward mobility and self-determination. This internalization also shaped how she approached the admissions process, as she described taking on academic and financial planning responsibilities early on:

> I'm taking all these things on myself… I need to get high grades, be in the top 10, get scholarships… but I knew I wasn't alone… my mentors… were actively involved… even though my mom couldn't tell me the answers, they showed me the ropes.

Her experience highlights how internalized aspirations were paired with strategic action, as students translated expectations into concrete academic and college-going behaviors.

Other students similarly described how parental messaging about education became embedded in how they understood their future. Yvonne, KayKay's daughter, explained that she "always knew" she would go to college, having grown up in an "[MCU] family" where the institution was a constant presence in her life. While her parents reinforced that a degree was not the only path to success, they consistently emphasized that education would "increase [her]

chances of doing better." This parental encouragement was paired with a push for geographic mobility; coming from a small town with limited opportunities, Yvonne noted that her parents "always wanted me to leave, go somewhere, and get an education," effectively framing college as the primary vehicle for her personal and professional growth.

For some students, internalizing familial aspirations was closely tied to a sense of responsibility to take advantage of opportunities their parents did not have. Maria, Alejandra's daughter, described how her parents' limited access to education influenced her own motivation, explaining that she viewed her college journey as an opportunity to "fulfill something that [her] parents didn't have the chance to do." This sense of purpose reflects how aspirational capital extended beyond individual goals, becoming connected to broader family narratives and experiences.

Similarly, AB, Candie's daughter, described how her desire to pursue higher education emerged from a deeply internalized sense of aspiration, rather than direct parental guidance. As a FGCS, she recognized early on that college would be necessary to achieve her goals, explaining that "no one in my family has ever been to school, but I was like, I want to do something different… I want to be a doctor." She further reflected that conversations about college were not prominent in her household, noting that "no one really talked to me about college… I just always knew I wanted to be a doctor, so I knew I had to go." Despite this, she described becoming intentional about her academic performance early on, recognizing as early as middle school that achieving her goals would require strong grades and preparation.

Students also described how parental sacrifice shaped the ways they understood and valued their own college-going experiences. Aaron, Kiesha's son, reflected on how his mother's

commitment to ensuring his access to higher education influenced his decision to pursue a traditional college pathway, emphasizing the extent to which she prioritized his success:

> She was like, 'I'm going to do this for my son. Whatever it takes. I'm going to make sure he has what he needs to be successful and enjoys every bit of this.' She told me, 'You could have stayed home and that would have been fine, but I wanted you to get that college experience.

Aaron's reflection highlights how parental sacrifice was not only observed but internalized as part of his own understanding of what it meant to pursue higher education. His mother's willingness to do "whatever it takes" reinforced the value of the opportunity, shaping how he approached his college experience and the decisions associated with it.

It is important to note that students did not internalize familial aspirations in identical ways, but they interpreted and applied these expectations in ways that aligned with their own interests, goals, and circumstances. Across participants, students described a balance between honoring their parents' encouragement and making independent decisions about their educational pathways. These findings demonstrate that familial aspirations were not simply communicated to students, but actively internalized and reinterpreted in ways that shaped their educational decision-making. Students drew upon these messages to construct their own sense of purpose, possibility, and responsibility, illustrating how aspirational and familial capital operated not only at the family level, but within students' individual meaning-making processes. While students internalized familial expectations in ways that shaped their beliefs about education and future possibilities, they also played an active role in navigating the admissions process, taking on responsibilities that extended beyond parental guidance.

Student Agency in Navigating the Admissions Process

Students in this study described themselves as active participants in the college admissions process, often taking on significant responsibility in researching information, completing applications, and ensuring that key requirements were met. While parents/legal guardians provided emotional support, encouragement, and expectations, students frequently assumed a central role in navigating the technical and procedural aspects of the process. As students gained access to counselors, mentors, and structured college preparation resources, many began to take an increasingly active role in managing applications, gathering information, and interpreting requirements. This shift toward student-led navigation of college admission reflected a growing sense of confidence, ownership, and preparedness as students learned to move through unfamiliar systems.

These findings highlight how student agency operated alongside familial support, reflecting a shared and adaptive approach to navigating higher education systems. Many students described independently seeking out information and taking ownership of key components of the admissions process, particularly when their parents/legal guardians had limited familiarity with college systems. The following reflections illustrate how students, supported by institutional guidance, began to emerge as primary navigators of their own college admissions journeys. Aaron, Kiesha's son, for example, described how he took on a leadership role within his family, navigating financial aid processes while also supporting his mother in understanding unfamiliar requirements:

> My mom was unfamiliar with all of this… so it was kind of like I had to figure it out on my own. But it was also like me teaching my mom… we walked the path together

> because I wanted her to be informed. If I need to get something, I'm going to go find that information… I kind of just had to network and use my resources.

Aaron's reflection illustrates how student agency extended beyond individual action to include collaborative navigation, as he worked to both gather information and ensure his family remained engaged in the process. Aaron's mom, Kiesha, further affirms her son's agency in the admissions process and how it bred her own confidence in him being successful:

> [When it came time to apply], I was confident 100 percent, because he did the work, he did the research, he worked with his counselors, he pretty much brought it to me. I had questions for him, and it was like he already knew. 'I knew you were gonna ask that, Mom.' So I was just 100 percent confident in him… As I said, I didn't do much of anything besides support him.

These experiences highlight how students not only accessed resources but actively mobilized them to support both their own success and their family's understanding of the admissions process.

Other students similarly described serving as intermediaries between their families and institutional systems. Veronica's son, Jared, explained how he took responsibility for completing application components, including those typically associated with parents, while also translating and interpreting information:

> I did most of it… even like FAFSA stuff for the parent's part, it was like me doing it. I would translate it or read it out loud and explain what they were looking for… and if we didn't understand something, I would search it and figure it out.

Jared's experience highlights how student agency involved not only completing tasks, but also navigating linguistic and informational barriers within the context of MCU's admissions and financial aid systems. As a FGCS, Jared assumed an active role in interpreting institutional processes that were unfamiliar to his family, reinforcing how students often functioned as key intermediaries between their households and higher education systems.

Similarly, Alejandra's daughter, Maria, described how her awareness of her parents' limited familiarity with the admissions process shaped her approach to completing applications and managing requirements. While she recognized that her parents were willing to help, she explained that she primarily took responsibility for navigating the process herself:

> I always knew that they didn't really understand the process. So that's why I just did it by myself. But I knew that if they could help me, they would. So that gave me reassurance. But obviously, some things are a little difficult to explain. So, I gave them the summary of it, but like most of it I just did on my own.

Maria's reflection illustrates a defining characteristic of FGCS at MCU, where students often assumed primary responsibility for navigating institutional processes due to their parents' limited familiarity with higher education systems.

These accounts illustrate how student agency extended beyond completing application-related tasks to include managing complexity within the admissions process. Students not only took responsibility for completing requirements, but also adapted to gaps in knowledge, language, and familiarity within their households, positioning themselves as active problem-solvers within the family context. Their experiences suggest that this sense

of responsibility was not confined to the application process, but was shaped by earlier decisions and sustained efforts that prepared them to navigate these challenges.

Students also demonstrated agency through their proactive engagement with academic preparation and strategic positioning for college access. KayKay's daughter, Yvonne, for example, described how her involvement in academics and extracurricular activities shaped her confidence in the admissions process:

> I was pretty confident preparing to apply for college, just knowing I did a lot in high school. I knew that doing so much in high school had to pay off one way or another. I was getting good grades and doing so much community service. I knew that I had to get good scholarships and that one school would admit me one way or another. So I did what I had to do.

Yvonne's reflection illustrates how student agency extended beyond navigating applications to include intentional preparation well before the admissions process began. Her emphasis on effort, strategy, and expected outcomes highlights how students actively positioned themselves for college access through sustained engagement in academically and socially meaningful activities.

Candie's daughter, AB, also reflected on how her college-going trajectory was shaped by early decision-making and sustained focus:

> I've always known I wanted to be in the medical field, so I knew I had to go to college. Even in middle school, I was like, I have to get good grades and go to a good high school. When I heard about a biomedical high school, I told my mom, "I have to go there." From that point on, I stayed focused on doing what I needed to do to get to college.

Candie reinforced this account, describing her daughter as the primary driver of the admissions process within their household:

> Between her auntie, her, and her school, pretty much [AB] did it all. She would just tell me, 'Mom, I need this. Mama, come here, we need to fill this out.' She was on it.

These experiences highlight how students made strategic choices about their academic environments in order to position themselves for future success.

For FGCS at MCU, agency was not simply about independence, but about necessity. In the absence of inherited institutional knowledge, students became key actors in interpreting, translating, and navigating the admissions process for themselves and their families. This sense of intentional preparation was echoed across participants, as students described understanding early on that their actions would directly shape their college opportunities. Students' accounts further illustrate that agency was not limited to navigating applications, but also included how they positioned themselves academically and socially in preparation for college. These patterns reflect a broader understanding among participants that access to higher education required both early preparation and sustained engagement.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of a qualitative single-case study examining how parents/legal guardians of FGCS and the students themselves described and experienced support throughout the college admissions process at MCU. Grounded in Yosso's (2005) CCW framework, the findings illustrate how families navigated the transition to higher education not through inherited institutional knowledge, but through the dynamic mobilization of aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital.

Parent/legal guardians in the study drew upon their own lived experiences, which were often shaped by interrupted or unrealized educational opportunities, to cultivate early college-going expectations and reinforce the value of higher education. These orientations were not simply expressed as hopes for the future, but were actively communicated, embedded in everyday interactions, and sustained through both emotional encouragement and tangible sacrifice. Within the context of MCU, where admissions, financial aid, and enrollment processes were often perceived as complex and unfamiliar, parents/legal guardians engaged with institutional and community-based resources to access information and support their students' transition to college.

Findings also demonstrated that parents/legal guardians understood their influence not primarily through direct expertise, but through the enactment of multiple, interconnected forms of capital within CCW. Aspirational capital was reflected in the sustained emphasis on educational attainment as both a possibility and expectation. Familial capital emerged through collective sacrifice, emotional encouragement, cultural values, and shared understandings of education as a pathway for family advancement. Social capital appeared through extended family members, school personnel, community members, and peer networks who provided information, reassurance, and access to resources. Navigational capital was evident in how families, often alongside institutional supports, learned to move through unfamiliar systems while gradually fostering student independence and agency. Together, these forms of capital illustrate that parents'/legal guardians' influence extended beyond direct guidance to include the values, resilience, relationships, and belief systems that shaped students' engagement with the admissions process.

These findings also highlight that FGCS were not passive recipients of parental support, but active participants in navigating the admissions process. Students described internalizing familial expectations while also exercising agency in ways that reflected both independence and necessity. Within MCU's institutional context, students frequently assumed responsibility for interpreting admissions requirements, completing applications, and translating information for their families. This dual role positioned students as both beneficiaries of support and key navigators of institutional systems, reinforcing the shared and adaptive nature of the college-going process for first-generation families.

Findings from this study challenge deficit-oriented assumptions associated with first-generation status that claim that families lack the necessary forms of capital to support students' navigation of higher education systems. While parents/legal guardians often lacked direct experience with higher education systems, they remained deeply engaged, resourceful, and committed to their students' success. Through the lens of CCW, their support can be understood not as limited, but as differently structured, rooted in resilience, relational strength, and a willingness to learn and adapt (Yosso, 2005). Similarly, students' agency reflects not a withdrawal of parental involvement, but an extension of family support into institutional spaces. Taken together, this study demonstrates that the college admissions process for first-generation students at MCU is both a relational and strategic endeavor, shaped by the interplay of family support, student agency, and institutional engagement. By centering both parent/legal guardian and student perspectives, these findings provide a more comprehensive understanding of how support is constructed, negotiated, and experienced within a specific institutional context. The following chapter builds on these findings by situating them within existing literature and

theoretical frameworks, offering implications for policy, practice, and future research related to supporting FGCS and their families in navigating the transition to higher education.

Chapter V Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students (FGCS) conceptualized and enacted their role as primary agents in supporting their students throughout the college admissions process; how they identified, accessed, and mobilized resources to support that process; and how FGCS perceived and experienced this support. Guided by Yosso's (2005) CCW framework, this study examined how families navigate unfamiliar higher education systems and how various forms of capital shape that navigation.

The findings from this study demonstrate that, despite lacking direct experience with college admissions processes, parents/legal guardians were anything but passive participants. Instead, they played active and meaningful roles in supporting their children's aspirations, providing emotional encouragement, leveraging family and community networks, and working alongside their children to navigate the admissions process. Together, these findings highlight the collaborative and resource-driven nature of college-going, as experienced by both parents/legal guardians and students.

For all participants, the admissions process evolved not as an individual journey undertaken by students alone, but as a collaborative effort among students, families, and the broader networks available to them. Parents/legal guardians frequently described approaching the admissions process with a teamwork mindset, positioning themselves as both supporters and partners in their children's pursuit of higher education. While many acknowledged their limited familiarity with institutional procedures such as completing college applications or navigating

financial aid systems, they remained deeply involved by asking questions, seeking resources, and reinforcing their belief in their children's ability to succeed.

These findings challenge longstanding deficit-oriented narratives that characterize parents/legal guardians of FGCS as disengaged or uninvolved due to their lack of institutional knowledge (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Wang et al., 2025), and highlight the ways that they draw on available resources and alternate forms of capital to support their students through the college admissions process, as is described in Yosso's (2005) CCW framework.

Additionally, across participants, aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital did not operate in isolation. Rather, these forms of capital functioned collectively, reinforcing one another and shaping how parents/legal guardians understood their role, influence, and impact throughout the college admissions process. In this study, aspirational capital sustained long-term educational hopes and future-oriented vision, while familial capital grounded students in shared values, sacrifice, and collective encouragement. Social capital connected families to knowledge, relationships, and critical resources, and navigational capital enabled families to move through unfamiliar systems with persistence and adaptability (Yosso, 2005).

These patterns also reflect broader scholarship on family engagement, which emphasizes that families contribute to students' educational pathways through relational, culturally grounded forms of support that extend beyond traditional definitions of involvement (Kiyama & Harper, 2018). Together, these interconnected forms of capital expanded families' capacity to support their students, even in the absence of the dominant cultural capital traditionally associated with college-going knowledge.

Reframing the Role of Parents/Legal Guardians of First-Generation College Students

Much of the existing literature surrounding parents/legal guardians of FGCS suggests that limited exposure to higher education systems constrains their ability to support their children through the college admissions process (Brookover et al., 2021; McSwain, 2008; Nichols & Islas, 2015). These deficit perspectives emphasize the advantages held by families with institutional knowledge of higher education, often positioning families without such knowledge as structurally disadvantaged in navigating college admissions systems and supporting their students through the process. While the structural barriers associated with limited access to institutional cultural capital are well documented, findings from this study complicate the assumption that these limitations translate to parental disengagement.

Participants in this study consistently described themselves as actively engaged in the admissions process, even when they lacked technical knowledge about institutional systems. Rather than withdrawing from the process, parents/legal guardians within this study described learning alongside their children, reaching out to counselors and community resources, and remaining emotionally present throughout the process. In doing so, they positioned themselves not as passive observers but as active supporters and teammates to their children, who contributed meaningfully to their children's college-going journeys.

The findings within this study align with emerging research that challenges deficit-based understandings of parental involvement among historically marginalized families. In this study, deficit perspectives refer to frameworks that position students and their families, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, as lacking the knowledge, skills, or resources necessary for academic success, often measuring engagement against dominant, middle-class norms (Yosso, 2005). For example, Cuevas (2023) found that Latina/o immigrant parents often

engage in their children's postsecondary planning through multiple forms of support, including emotional encouragement, moral guidance, and motivational messaging, even when they lack access to institutional knowledge about college systems.

Similarly, research on Latina/o family engagement highlights the importance of culturally grounded practices within families that reinforce educational aspirations and student identity development (Auerbach, 2006; López, 2001). Within these contexts, parental involvement is often expressed through encouragement, storytelling, and moral guidance rather than through direct management of institutional processes. Consistent with these findings, parents/legal guardians in this study described providing consistent encouragement, reinforcing the importance of education, and supporting their children through moments of uncertainty during the admissions process. Many participants, regardless of immigration status or race/ethnicity, framed their role not in terms of managing institutional procedures, but in terms of maintaining belief in their children's abilities and ensuring their children remained motivated throughout the process. In this way, parental support was not defined by procedural knowledge alone but by a combination of presence, encouragement, and sustained commitment to their students' aspirations.

Intergenerational Sacrifice and Educational Aspirations

Across participants, educational aspirations for their children were often rooted in parents'/legal guardians' own educational experiences and the sacrifices they had made throughout their lives. These patterns reflect an intergenerational process in which beliefs, values, and experiences, particularly those related to education, are carried across generations and shape how parents/legal guardians support their children's college-going pathways (Ceja,

2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Several parents/legal guardians spoke about beginning their own educational journeys but being unable to complete them due to financial constraints, family obligations, or the need to enter the workforce at an early age. Others described long work hours, economic instability, or prioritizing their children's opportunities over their own personal goals.

These experiences shaped the expectations parents/legal guardians held for their students and reinforced their belief that pursuing higher education could open doors that had not been available to them. Parents/legal guardians frequently connected their children's college aspirations to the opportunities they hoped their children would have access to. For some, this meant encouraging their children to take advantage of educational opportunities that they themselves had not been able to pursue. For others, it meant ensuring that their children did not feel limited by the same circumstances that had influenced their own educational pathways. These aspirations were not merely hopes for future success, but as expectations reinforced through consistent messaging about the importance of education and perseverance.

Existing scholarship on FGCS highlights the central role that family support and aspirational messaging play in shaping students' educational trajectories, even when parents/legal guardians lack familiarity with higher education systems (Dennis et al., 2005; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Wang, 2014). Studies have found that parents/legal guardians of FGCS often communicate the value of education through encouragement, moral guidance, and discussions about the opportunities that education can provide (Ceja, 2004; López, 2001). Even when parents/legal guardians do not possess direct knowledge of higher education systems, their expectations and encouragement contribute to the development of students' academic identities and college-going aspirations.

For example, Sally, Lonnie's mother, described how her own mother consistently reinforced the importance of pursuing higher education, often framing college as an opportunity to build a different future than the one she had experienced. Although Lonnie did not have firsthand knowledge of the admissions process, she remained actively engaged by offering encouragement, asking questions, and reminding her of the long-term benefits of earning a degree. This support helped sustain Lonnie's motivation throughout the admissions process and shaped her understanding of college as both an individual goal and a shared family aspiration.

Participants in this study further reflected these dynamics, as parents/legal guardians consistently emphasized the importance of education through everyday conversations, encouragement during moments of uncertainty, and reminders of the long-term benefits of earning a college degree. In many cases, these messages were rooted in parents'/legal guardians' own experiences with limited educational opportunities. Their encouragement was not simply about academic success but about creating possibilities for their children that extended beyond the circumstances they had experienced themselves. Rather than being understood as solely individual accomplishments, these aspirations were framed as collective family achievements. Many parents/legal guardians described college attendance as something that carried meaning for the entire family. Educational attainment was viewed as a shared milestone that reflected both the efforts of the student and the sacrifices made by family members who supported them along the way.

This collective understanding of educational success extends existing research on family engagement among FGCS by illustrating how parental expectations and encouragement are not only communicated through verbal support but are also embedded within broader family

narratives of sacrifice, responsibility, and shared investment in students' educational outcomes (Auerbach, 2006; Ceja, 2004). In this study, parents/legal guardians did not simply encourage college attendance; they positioned it as a meaningful outcome tied to family effort, reinforcing the idea that educational attainment represents both individual achievement and collective advancement.

Immigration and Educational Opportunity

While all parents/legal guardians describe how they sacrificed and had unrealized educational aspirations of their own, immigrant parents in this study more explicitly connected these experiences to their migration journeys and the opportunities they hoped their children would have access to in the United States. Prior research suggests that for many immigrant families, migration is not only a geographic transition, but a purposeful investment in the future educational mobility of their children, where parents'/legal guardians' sacrifices are closely tied to aspirations for their children's success (Cuevas, 2023; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2020).

Participants such as Veronica, Magaly, and Alejandra described leaving school at a young age in order to support their families financially before immigrating to the United States. For these parents/legal guardians, migration itself was frequently framed as an act of sacrifice intended to create better opportunities for their children. Parents/legal guardians spoke openly about the challenges they faced during and after immigrating, including language barriers, unfamiliarity with educational systems, and economic instability. These experiences often described in the literature as shaping both the opportunities available to immigrant families and the ways they engage with institutions (Cuevas, 2023; Nunez & Bower, 2011), informed how they understood the value of education and the expectations they held for their children. College

attendance was often viewed not only as an individual accomplishment but as the realization of the opportunities that parents/legal guardians sought through their decision to immigrate.

Research on immigrant families has found that migration experiences play a central role in shaping how parents/legal guardians communicate educational aspirations and expectations to their children (Ceja, 2004; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; López, 2001). Studies show that immigrant parents often draw on their own experiences of migration, labor, and sacrifice to frame education as a primary pathway toward mobility and long-term stability (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2023). Within this context, education is not only presented as an opportunity, but as a responsibility tied to the sacrifices made by previous generations.

Research with Latina/o families further demonstrates that these values are communicated through storytelling, encouragement, and ongoing reminders about the purpose of pursuing higher education, even when parents/legal guardians lack direct familiarity with college systems (Chlup et al., 2016; Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). These narratives often shape the expectations parents/legal guardians hold for their children. Immigrant families frequently maintain strong and consistent aspirations for college attendance, even in the face of structural barriers such as limited access to institutional knowledge (Raleigh & Kao, 2010).

This pattern, often described as an *immigrant advantage* in educational expectations, reflects the emphasis many immigrant families place on education as a pathway to long-term stability and upward mobility (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016). These expectations are reinforced through consistent messaging about perseverance, responsibility, and the importance of maximizing educational opportunities, shaping how students understand both the purpose of college and their role in achieving it.

Findings from this study align with existing literature on immigrant family aspirations and the role of migration-related narratives in shaping how parents communicate the value of education and frame college-going as a pathway to mobility (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Raleigh & Kao, 2010; Chlup et al., 2016). Immigrant parents/legal guardians frequently framed their students' educational journeys within broader family narratives of perseverance and sacrifice, positioning college attendance not solely as an individual goal, but as a moment of collective pride that reflected years of effort and determination. In this way, students' educational success was understood as both a personal accomplishment and a reflection of the broader family journey.

At the same time, parents/legal guardians described encountering multiple challenges while navigating the admissions process, including limited familiarity with college application procedures, difficulty interpreting financial aid requirements, language barriers, and uncertainty about how to access reliable information. These challenges often made the process feel unfamiliar and, at times, overwhelming, requiring families to seek out additional support to make sense of institutional expectations (Chlup et al., 2016; Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). Many parents relied on school counselors, college preparation programs, and extended community networks to interpret admissions requirements and financial aid processes, highlighting the critical role of external supports in bridging gaps in institutional knowledge.

While existing scholarship has documented the complexity of financial aid systems as a barrier for FGCS and their families, findings from this study extend this work by illustrating how immigrant families actively respond to these challenges through collaborative navigation. Rather

than disengaging, parents/legal guardians remained involved by working alongside their students and leveraging available resources to interpret and navigate unfamiliar systems.

These findings suggest that unfamiliarity with admissions and financial aid processes does not result in a lack of engagement but instead reshapes how families participate in the college-going process. Despite encountering structural and informational barriers, immigrant parents/legal guardians remained deeply committed to supporting their children's educational aspirations. Their encouragement, persistence, and willingness to seek out resources demonstrate how families actively engage in their students' college-going journeys, even when navigating systems they have not previously experienced. Recognizing these forms of engagement challenges deficit-oriented assumptions and underscores the importance of understanding family involvement as adaptive, relational, and responsive to structural constraints.

Faith, Encouragement, and Meaning-Making

Another aspect that arose from the findings of this study was the role of faith and spirituality in shaping how families navigated the admissions process. In this study, faith and spirituality are understood as systems of belief, practices, and meaning-making that individuals and families draw upon to interpret life experiences, navigate uncertainty, and sustain motivation, particularly during periods of transition (Astin et al., 2011). Several parents/legal guardians described drawing on their faith as a source of encouragement and emotional reassurance during periods of uncertainty.

When the process felt overwhelming or unfamiliar, parents/legal guardians frequently referenced prayer, biblical teachings, or spiritual encouragement as ways to motivate their students to remain committed to their goals. Faith-based encouragement often appeared in

conversations in which parents/legal guardians reinforced perseverance or helped students navigate moments of doubt. Rather than providing technical guidance about admissions procedures, parents/legal guardians frequently drew on spiritual affirmations such as "we will pray about it," "if it is God's will," and "God will make a way," to reinforce their students' ability to succeed. References to faith or divine guidance served as forms of emotional support that helped sustain students' motivation throughout the admissions process.

Research on first-generation and underrepresented college students suggests that spirituality often functions as a source of resilience and coping during educational transitions. Studies have found that faith communities and spiritual beliefs can provide emotional support, reinforce perseverance, and contribute to students' sense of purpose as they navigate higher education environments (Bryant, 2007; Walker & Dixon, 2002). Additionally, spirituality has been linked to students' sense of meaning-making and goal commitment, shaping how individuals interpret challenges and remain engaged in their educational pursuits (Astin et al., 2011).

Religious and spiritual beliefs may also shape how families interpret life transitions, offering moral frameworks that encourage persistence and hope during periods of uncertainty (King et al., 2021). For example, prior research has shown that families often draw on faith-based narratives to reframe moments of uncertainty as part of a larger purpose, encouraging students to remain committed to their goals even when outcomes are unclear (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Within communities of color, scholars have further argued that spirituality functions as a form of CCW. For instance, spirituality can operate as a form of spiritual capital, encompassing the religious values, practices, and networks that families draw upon to navigate challenges and

sustain aspirations for educational mobility (Park et al., 2020). From this perspective, faith is not simply a private belief but a cultural and communal resource that reinforces resilience, motivation, and collective support.

These dynamics were reflected in the experiences described by participants in this study, as parents/legal guardians frequently framed encouragement through spiritual language, emphasizing faith, prayer, and trust in divine guidance as ways to sustain their students' commitment to college-going goals. In doing so, faith-based encouragement reinforced aspirational capital, or the ability of families to maintain hopes and educational aspirations for their children despite structural barriers and unfamiliar institutional processes (Yosso, 2005). It is noteworthy that faith did not replace other forms of support but functioned alongside them as a complementary resource that helped families navigate uncertainty when concrete answers or institutional guidance were not readily available. In this way, spiritual encouragement served as both a coping mechanism and a meaning-making tool, allowing families to interpret challenges not as barriers to success, but as part of a broader journey toward opportunity and fulfillment.

Within the context of this study, faith appeared to function as a meaning-making mechanism through which parents/legal guardians interpreted uncertainty and framed the admissions process as part of a broader, purposeful journey. While not always explicitly framed as a strategy for navigating the admissions process, these spiritual practices served as an important source of emotional reinforcement that sustained both parents/legal guardians and students throughout the journey toward college matriculation. In this way, faith operated as both a personal and communal resource, shaping how families interpreted challenges and maintained confidence in their students' ability to succeed. Ultimately, the findings within this study suggest

that faith functioned as an important cultural resource through which parents/legal guardians sustained aspirational capital, using spiritual encouragement and narratives of perseverance to reinforce their children's belief that college was both attainable and meaningful despite the uncertainties of navigating an unfamiliar admissions process.

Shared Navigation and Student Agency

While parents/legal guardians played critical roles in encouraging and supporting their students, the admissions process was also shaped by significant levels of student agency. In this study, student agency refers to students' capacity to take intentional action in shaping their educational pathways, including seeking out information, making decisions, and navigating institutional processes, often within the constraints of limited access to formal institutional knowledge (Bandura, 2006; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Students described enacting agency as they frequently took the lead in researching scholarships, completing applications, and interpreting institutional information for their parents. Rather than replacing parental involvement, this agency operated in partnership with the emotional and motivational support provided by parents.

Students such as Lonnie, AB, Jared, and Aaron described taking responsibility for researching scholarship opportunities, completing application materials, and seeking guidance from counselors or mentors when questions arose. In many cases, students also served as translators of institutional information, relaying updates about deadlines, requirements, and financial aid processes to their parents. Through this process, parents/legal guardians were not simply observers of their children's college-going journeys; they were also learners. As students

gathered information and shared what they discovered, parents/legal guardians often described gaining a better understanding of the admissions process alongside their children.

These dynamics suggest that navigational capital often arose through a shared and evolving process between students and their families (Yosso, 2005). Parents/legal guardians provided encouragement, reassurance, and consistent reminders about the value of education, while students assumed greater responsibility for managing many of the technical aspects of the admissions process. In this way, the admissions journey became a collaborative effort in which knowledge was developed collectively rather than individually.

This collaborative approach aligns with findings from Means and Pyne (2017), whose study of FGCS highlighted the importance of relationships with institutional agents and support networks in navigating higher education systems. Their work suggests that students' ability to interpret and respond to institutional demands is often shaped through social interactions rather than developed in isolation, reinforcing the idea that navigation is a relational process rather than an individual one. The experiences shared by participants in this study extend this perspective by illustrating how students and parents/legal guardians co-constructed knowledge throughout the admissions process, working together to navigate unfamiliar systems despite limited access to traditional forms of institutional cultural capital. In this way, aspirational encouragement, familial support, community networks, and student agency functioned together to create pathways toward higher education.

The findings of this study demonstrate that student agency operates as a relational process rather than an individual endeavor. Students did not navigate the admissions process in isolation. Instead, their ability to take action was shaped through ongoing interaction with their

parents/legal guardians. While students assumed primary responsibility for researching opportunities, completing applications, and interpreting institutional information, this work was grounded in the encouragement, expectations, and support provided by their families. In this way, student agency was enacted through collaboration, as students and parents/legal guardians learned and navigated the process together.

These findings further illustrate how student agency operates alongside multiple forms of CCW (Yosso, 2005). For example, aspirational capital was evident in the ways parents/legal guardians reinforced students' long-term educational goals, which in turn motivated students to take initiative in completing applications and pursuing scholarships. Familial capital shaped how students understood their educational journeys as connected to broader family goals, influencing their persistence and sense of responsibility throughout the process. Social capital emerged through the relationships students built with counselors, mentors, and college access programs, which they leveraged to obtain critical information. Navigational capital was developed through students' active engagement with institutional systems, as they learned to interpret requirements, meet deadlines, and translate this knowledge for their families.

Together, these forms of capital illustrate that student agency was not simply an individual trait but a practice that developed through relationships, cultural values, and access to support networks. Recognizing student agency as relational and contextually grounded offers important insight for institutions seeking to more effectively support FGCS. Rather than assuming that students must independently navigate complex admissions systems, these findings suggest that institutions should consider how to better support both students and their families as collaborative participants in the college-going process.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study have important implications for educational practitioners working across secondary schools, community-based college access programs, and institutional offices such as admissions, financial aid, and first-generation student support. Parents/legal guardians of FGCS were not passive observers of the admissions process; instead, they served as active participants who encouraged their children, reinforced educational aspirations, and worked collaboratively with them to navigate unfamiliar systems. However, institutional practices, particularly within admissions and enrollment management, often fail to recognize these forms of engagement. As a result, families are frequently positioned as recipients of information rather than partners in the college-going process. The findings of this study, therefore, suggest that admissions professionals, financial aid counselors, first-generation program staff, and family engagement offices must more intentionally design structures that recognize and build on the relational, cultural, and collaborative forms of support that families already provide.

Increasing Counselor Capacity and Advising Structures

Participants in this study consistently described relying on school counselors, mentors, and college access programs to interpret admissions requirements, scholarship opportunities, and financial aid processes. In many cases, counselors served as key intermediaries between families and higher education institutions. For parents/legal guardians Sally, Kiesha, Candie, and Veronica, counselors and school representatives were the primary sources of information and communication regarding the college admissions process. These findings align with prior research demonstrating the critical role of advising and informational support in shaping college access for FGCS (Means & Pyne, 2017; Perna & Smart, 2006). When students and families lack

familiarity with higher education systems, access to knowledgeable advisors becomes especially important.

To address these gaps, state education agencies, school district leaders, and secondary school administrators must invest in dedicated college access advising roles that focus specifically on supporting FGCS and their families across the high school-to-college pipeline. For example, districts can establish K–12 advising positions that partner directly with admissions offices at local colleges and universities, ensuring that families receive consistent, accurate, and timely information throughout the admissions process. In addition, district leadership and policymakers should prioritize reducing counselor-to-student ratios and embedding college advising benchmarks into school accountability systems to ensure sustained support beginning as early as ninth grade. These structural changes shift responsibility away from individual counselors and toward system-level approaches that more effectively support FGCS and their families.

Designing Family Inclusive College Access Structures

Findings from this study also highlight the need for college access structures that intentionally include the entire family, not just students. Parents/legal guardians expressed strong desires to support their students but often lacked opportunities to engage directly with admissions information or institutional representatives. Instead, many learned about the admissions process indirectly through their children or through external programs. These findings affirm existing literature suggesting that traditional models of parental involvement often fail to capture the ways families from historically underrepresented communities engage in their children's education (Kiyama & Harper, 2018).

To address this gap, admissions offices, financial aid offices, and parent and family engagement units within colleges and universities must design programming that positions parents/legal guardians as active partners in the college-going process. This includes implementing family-centered college planning workshops, offering multilingual admissions and financial aid information sessions, and creating structured opportunities for parents/legal guardians to engage directly with admissions counselors and financial aid professionals. Institutions should also develop family-facing communication strategies that do not rely solely on students to translate or interpret complex admissions information.

One example of this in practice is to create college application bootcamp programming that allows FGCS and their families to participate in a mock admissions process. This programming should be accessible as early as freshman year and provide FGCS and their families the opportunity to walk through an admissions process to get a feel for what is required. This includes meeting with admissions representatives, walking through a real admissions application, learning about the different aspects of an admissible application, meeting financial aid officers and participating in a mock FAFSA application, touring campus and residence halls, and gathering an in-depth understanding of how to successfully navigate the admissions process. This bootcamp should be led by current FGCS as camp counselors, so that they can share thier own experiences and serve as an additional resource for the FGCS and families participating. There should also be the option for families to participate in multilingual programming, for those whose primary language is not English.To be successful, these efforts should affirm that families do not need extensive technical knowledge of higher education systems to provide meaningful support, but should focus instead on equipping families with accessible information and creating

welcoming environments where parents/legal guardians feel comfortable asking questions and engaging in the process alongside their children. Research on first-generation families consistently shows that encouragement, expectations, and relational support play powerful roles in shaping students' educational aspirations (Ceja, 2004).

Strengthening School and Community-Based Support Networks

The findings of this study further highlight the importance of strong partnerships between schools and community-based organizations in supporting FGCS and their families throughout the admissions process. Participants frequently referenced programs such as TRIO, Upward Bound, and other college-preparatory initiatives as key sources of guidance, particularly in helping them interpret admissions requirements, financial aid processes, and institutional expectations. For many families, these programs served as consistent points of connection to higher education, offering both information and relational support in spaces where institutional knowledge was otherwise limited.

Federal TRIO programs, including Upward Bound, were designed to support first-generation and low-income students in accessing and persisting through higher education, and prior research has demonstrated their effectiveness in improving college enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The findings of this study reaffirm the continued importance of these programs, particularly as they provide sustained advising, mentorship, and access to college knowledge that extends beyond what many schools are able to offer independently. In this study, these programs functioned not only as informational resources, but as extensions of families' existing support systems, helping translate complex

institutional processes into accessible and actionable knowledge for both students and their parents/legal guardians.

These findings are consistent with existing research emphasizing the role of community-based support structures in expanding college access for FGCS (Perna & Jones, 2013; Means & Pyne, 2017). College preparation programs strengthen families' navigational capacity by helping students and parents/legal guardians interpret admissions requirements, financial aid processes, and institutional expectations, while also connecting them to networks of counselors, mentors, and peers who provide encouragement and guidance throughout the college-going process (Strayhorn, 2018).

In the current higher education landscape, where access-oriented programs face increasing political and financial scrutiny, reaffirming and expanding support for TRIO and Upward Bound remains especially important for FGCS and their families. Institutional leaders, state policymakers, and federal agencies should prioritize sustained funding for these initiatives, while colleges and universities, particularly offices of admissions, enrollment management, and first-generation student support, should continue to strengthen partnerships with community-based organizations.

Expanding these partnerships through shared programming, coordinated advising efforts, and ongoing transition support can help ensure that families have access to consistent guidance throughout the college-going process. Within the context of this study, these networks served as critical navigational anchors for families who were learning and navigating the admissions process alongside their students. Institutions serving similar populations can build on these

insights by intentionally developing cross-sector collaborations that recognize and support the collective efforts of families, schools, and communities in facilitating college access.

Implications for Policy

While individual practitioners play an important role in supporting FGCS and their families, the findings of this study also point to a need to address broader structural considerations within college access systems. Many of the challenges parents/legal guardians described were not rooted in a lack of motivation or involvement but rather reflected systemic barriers embedded within college access systems. Addressing these barriers requires policy-level shifts that reshape how institutions define familial engagement, allocate resources for advising and college readiness, and structure admissions and financial aid processes.

Expanding Definitions of Parental Involvement in Educational Policy

Educational policy must broaden the definition and measurement of parental involvement. Existing policy frameworks and scholarship on family engagement have historically emphasized forms of involvement rooted in visible, school-based participation and procedural knowledge of educational systems, such as attending school events, communicating with educators, or assisting with institutional processes (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012). While these approaches have been widely used to assess parental engagement, they often privilege forms of involvement that align with middle-class norms and prior familiarity with educational institutions (Lareau, 2011).

Findings from this study demonstrate that parents/legal guardians contribute meaningfully to the college-going process through encouragement, persistence, relational

support, and collaboration with their students, which are forms of engagement that are not always captured within traditional policy frameworks. These practices reflect the types of capital described in Yosso's (2005) CCW framework, particularly aspirational, familial, and navigational capital, which emphasize the resources families bring to educational contexts rather than what they lack. Policy should therefore expand definitions of parental involvement to explicitly recognize these relational and culturally grounded forms of engagement. Doing so can help shift institutional perspectives away from deficit-based assumptions about first-generation families and toward more asset-based approaches to family engagement, ultimately creating more inclusive and responsive college access systems.

Reducing Administrative Barriers in Admissions and Financial Aid Systems

Both parents/legal guardians and students frequently described the admissions and financial aid process as confusing, fragmented, and difficult to interpret. Participants explained that key components of the process, including FAFSA completion, scholarship applications, and understanding financial aid packages, were often unclear and overwhelming, particularly for these families who were navigating these systems for the first time. As a result, parents/legal guardians frequently relied on school counselors, mentors, or external college access programs to help translate institutional information, reinforcing how access to guidance, not just motivation, shaped families' ability to navigate the process.

Policy scholars have described these challenges as forms of *administrative burden*, in which the design of public systems creates learning, compliance, and psychological costs for individuals attempting to access resources (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Within the context of college access, these burdens disproportionately affect FGCS and their families, who may lack

prior exposure to higher education systems. These burdens also arise within the context of financial aid. Graves (2023) demonstrates that students of color frequently encounter additional barriers throughout the financial aid process, including inconsistent communication, difficulty accessing support, and limited awareness of available resources, often requiring them to seek help outside of formal financial aid offices.

These findings underscore how the financial aid system extends beyond application completion and instead involves navigating a series of institutional processes that can be difficult to access and interpret. Participants in this study echoed these findings, consistently identifying financial aid as the most difficult and anxiety-inducing component of the admissions process. Students often assumed primary responsibility for interpreting requirements, completing applications, and communicating information back to their families, while parents/legal guardians provided encouragement and support despite limited familiarity with the systems themselves.

Policy should directly address these administrative barriers through targeted structural reforms. First, federal policymakers and the U.S. Department of Education should continue efforts to simplify and standardize financial aid processes, including FAFSA completion, verification procedures, and aid disbursement timelines, to reduce unnecessary complexity and delays. Second, institutions of higher education should be required to improve the clarity, consistency, and accessibility of financial aid communication, ensuring that students and families can easily interpret award letters, timelines, and requirements without relying on external translation.

Additionally, institutions of higher education should consider a cohort model with priority access given to FGCS and their families. This means reserving a percentage of the admissions class, waiving/deferring enrollment and housing deposits to prevent additional financial burdens, creating a living, learning community (LLC) and having a set number of housing options reserved, and providing an early enrollment window for FGCS. Third, state education agencies and school districts should strengthen coordination between K–12 systems and higher education institutions, expanding access to trained college advisors who can provide sustained, accurate guidance throughout the admissions and financial aid process. When applied collectively, these policy actions shift responsibility away from students and families to navigate complex systems independently and instead place accountability on institutions and policymakers to design more accessible and equitable college access processes.

Strengthening Funding for College Advising and Access Programs

In addition to addressing administrative barriers, the findings of this study highlight the importance of sustained investment in college advising and access programs. Participants frequently relied on school counselors and structured college readiness initiatives to help interpret admissions requirements and financial aid processes. However, access to these resources varied significantly depending on school context and funding availability. While some participants described consistent access to knowledgeable counselors and college preparation programs, others were forced to seek support independently, often relying on external programs or informal networks to obtain critical information. These disparities emphasize how uneven advising infrastructures shape families' ability to navigate the college-going process.

Research on higher education finance suggests that funding structures directly influence the availability and quality of advising and student support services within educational institutions (Rosinger et al., 2023). In under-resourced schools, high student-to-counselor ratios and limited access to college readiness programming can restrict the amount of individualized guidance students and families receive during the admissions process. As a result, students are often required to take on a greater share of the navigational labor, reinforcing inequities in access to information and support.

Policy should address these disparities through targeted and sustained investment in college advising and access programs. Federal and state policymakers should expand funding for established college access initiatives such as TRIO and Upward Bound, ensuring that these programs can serve a greater number of students and provide more comprehensive, long-term support. This includes increasing grant funding, expanding program capacity in under-resourced school districts, and prioritizing funding allocations for schools serving high proportions of first-generation and underrepresented students.

In addition, state education agencies and school districts should invest in strengthening school-based advising infrastructures, including reducing student-to-counselor ratios, providing specialized training for college and financial aid advising, and ensuring that counselors have the time and resources necessary to support students throughout the admissions process. Finally, policymakers and educational leaders should support partnerships between K–12 schools, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions, creating coordinated networks of support that provide students and families with consistent and reliable access to college-going information. By expanding investment in advising and college access programs and

strengthening the systems that deliver these supports, policy can help ensure that all students, regardless of school context, have access to the guidance necessary to navigate the transition to higher education.

Expanding Early College Awareness and College Going Infrastructure

Findings from this study highlight the importance of introducing college-going information earlier in students' educational trajectories. Many participants described learning about admissions processes, financial aid requirements, and scholarship opportunities relatively late in the college planning process. As a result, students often assumed primary responsibility for researching and interpreting information for their families, reinforcing the collaborative navigation patterns observed throughout this study.

Research on college access has long emphasized that students' postsecondary decisions are shaped by informational environments that develop well before the application process begins (Perna & Smart, 2006; Klasik, 2012). More recent scholarship further demonstrates that unequal access to college knowledge and planning resources can significantly shape students' educational opportunities, particularly among first-generation and underrepresented students (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017). When students and families lack early exposure to college planning resources, they are forced to navigate complex admissions and financial aid systems within compressed timelines, increasing uncertainty and limiting their ability to make informed decisions.

Policy should address these disparities by expanding early college awareness initiatives and strengthening college-going infrastructure across K–12 systems. State education agencies should require the integration of college and financial aid literacy into middle school and early

high school curricula, ensuring that students are introduced to key concepts such as college pathways, application timelines, and financial aid processes, well before their senior year. These efforts should be embedded within existing coursework or advisory structures rather than offered as optional or supplemental programming.

In addition, state and district-level policymakers should expand funding for early outreach programs, including partnerships with community-based organizations and federally funded initiatives such as TRIO, to provide sustained and developmentally appropriate college-going support beginning in middle school. These programs should be designed to engage both students and families, offering accessible, multilingual resources that demystify admissions and financial aid processes over time. This approach should be paired with institutions of higher education intentionally investing in preparing prospective FGCS for the admissions process early into their high school careers. This means building relationships with prospective FGCS during their freshman/sophomore years, providing opportunities for them to learn about institutional resources, and preparing them to successfully navigate the admissions process when the time comes.

Lastly, institutions of higher education should be required to collaborate with K–12 systems to provide clear, consistent, and accessible information about admissions requirements, costs, and financial aid opportunities, reducing inconsistencies in messaging that often contribute to confusion among students and families. This includes standardizing key information across institutions and increasing proactive outreach to schools serving high proportions of first-generation students. By establishing earlier, more structured, and more equitable access to college-going information, policy can reduce the time, pressure, and uncertainty that families

experience during the admissions process. Rather than encountering complex systems all at once during their final year of high school, students and families would have the opportunity to build knowledge, confidence, and navigational capacity over time, leading to more informed and equitable college-going outcomes.

Implications for Future Research

While this study contributes to a growing body of literature examining the experiences of parents and legal guardians of FGCS (Perna & Jones, 2013), it also underscores the need for more nuanced research that accounts for the relational and collaborative nature of college-going processes. By centering the perspectives of parents/legal guardians navigating the college admissions process, this study highlights the ways families actively construct pathways to higher education through forms of support that extend beyond institutional definitions of involvement.

At the same time, the findings illuminate how institutional structures shape the conditions under which families access, interpret, and act upon information. These insights point to the need for continued research that examines how parents/legal guardians and students collectively navigate the transition to higher education across diverse cultural, institutional, and policy contexts. Expanding research in this area may deepen understanding of how families mobilize various forms of capital while also revealing how systemic conditions enable or constrain their engagement in the college-going process.

Exploring Shared Navigation Between Students and Families

Findings from this study highlight the collaborative nature of the admissions process between students and their families. In many cases, students assumed primary responsibility for researching scholarships, completing application materials, and interpreting institutional

information, while parents/legal guardians provided encouragement, motivation, and relational support. Rather than functioning as independent actors, students and families engaged in a shared navigation process in which decision-making unfolded through ongoing dialogue and collective problem-solving. This challenges individualistic assumptions about college-going by illustrating how educational pathways are co-constructed within family contexts.

Future research should further examine how these collaborative dynamics unfold across different family contexts, particularly how roles shift between students and parents/legal guardians throughout the admissions process. Additional work is needed to understand how families collectively interpret institutional information and how these interactions shape students' college choices. Examining these processes more closely may provide deeper insight into how navigational capital is developed and enacted within families, as well as how institutions can better design supports that reflect the collaborative realities of college-going.

Examining the Influence of Immigrant Experiences on College-Going Aspirations

Findings from this study emphasize the significance of immigrant experiences in shaping how families understand and approach the college-going process. Several participants situated their children's educational journeys within broader narratives of migration, sacrifice, and opportunity, framing college attendance as part of a larger intergenerational pursuit of mobility. These experiences informed how parents/legal guardians communicated expectations about education and encouraged their students to pursue college pathways. Rather than viewing college-going as an isolated decision, families often understood it as deeply connected to the conditions and motivations that shaped their migration. Future research should further examine how immigration experiences shape parental perceptions of higher education and influence the

strategies families use to support their students. Additional work is needed to explore how migration histories inform educational aspirations, how immigrant parents/legal guardians interpret and engage with institutional systems, and how these experiences intersect with cultural and community-based resources that support college-going pathways.

Exploring the Role of Faith and Spirituality in the College-Going Process

Findings from this study highlight faith and spirituality as significant sources of support for families navigating the admissions process. Parents/legal guardians frequently described drawing on prayer, religious teachings, and spiritual encouragement when supporting their students through moments of uncertainty or stress. These practices functioned not only as sources of emotional reassurance but also as mechanisms for reinforcing persistence and sustaining educational aspirations during transitional periods. In this way, faith and spirituality operated as an additional layer of support that complemented other forms of capital mobilized throughout the college-going process.

Future research should further examine how faith communities and religious networks contribute to college-going cultures within families and communities. Additional work is needed to understand how spiritual beliefs shape parental messaging about education and how faith-based support intersects with other forms of community and institutional support. Exploring these dynamics may offer deeper insight into the role of spirituality as a resource that families draw upon as they navigate pathways to higher education.

Examining Policy Structures and Family Engagement in College Access

Future research should continue to examine how institutional and policy environments shape the ways families navigate college-going processes. Participants in this study frequently

described relying on counselors, college access programs, and informal networks to interpret admissions requirements and financial aid processes, suggesting that families' engagement is structured by the availability and accessibility of institutional support.

Prior research has similarly demonstrated that students' college-going pathways are shaped by the broader organizational and policy contexts in which they are embedded, including access to information, advising structures, and school-based resources (Perna & Smart, 2006; Klasik, 2012). Policy scholarship further suggests that reforms intended to expand access can produce unintended structural consequences that shape how resources and opportunities are distributed within educational systems (Guthery & Bailes, 2023). Although this work focuses on teacher preparation pathways, it highlights a broader pattern in which policy changes interact with institutional conditions in ways that can reproduce or shift existing inequalities.

In the context of college access, these dynamics are reflected in how advising infrastructures, financial aid systems, and institutional practices unevenly distribute information and support, often requiring students and families to rely on external networks to navigate complex processes (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2019). Building on these insights, future research should examine how policy shifts related to college advising infrastructures, financial aid systems, and admissions practices influence the ways parents/legal guardians of FGCS engage with and interpret the admissions process. Such work may provide deeper insight into how policy environments shape the information ecosystems surrounding college access and how institutional reforms can be designed to more effectively support FGCS and their families.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine how parents/legal guardians of FGCS conceptualize and enact their role as primary agents in supporting their students throughout the college admissions process, how they identify, access, and mobilize resources to support that process, and how FGCS perceive and experience this support. By centering the voices and experiences of parents/legal guardians navigating college admissions, the findings contribute to a growing body of literature that challenges deficit-oriented assumptions about first-generation families and highlights the active and intentional ways families support their students' educational aspirations.

The findings demonstrate that parents/legal guardians understood their role not as passive supporters, but as primary agents in their children's college-going journeys. Even when they lacked prior experience with higher education systems, parents/legal guardians provided consistent encouragement, reinforced the value of education, and remained actively engaged in supporting their students. At the same time, students often assumed responsibility for researching scholarships, completing application materials, and interpreting admissions information, illustrating how support was enacted through a collaborative process. From the perspectives of FGCS, parental support was experienced as a consistent source of motivation, reassurance, and accountability that helped sustain their engagement throughout the admissions process. Together, these dynamics illustrate how college-going unfolded as a shared effort between students and families rather than as an individual endeavor.

Viewed through the lens of Yosso's (2005) CCW framework, these findings highlight the various forms of capital families bring to the college-going process. Parents/legal guardians demonstrated aspirational capital through the expectations and encouragement they communicated to their students, familial and social capital through the relational support that

sustained students throughout the process, and navigational capital through the ways families identified, accessed, and mobilized available resources to interpret institutional systems. These forms of capital were not static but were actively enacted as families worked to support their students despite encountering systems that were often unfamiliar or difficult to navigate.

Findings also reveal how structural conditions influence families' experiences with the admissions process. Participants frequently relied on counselors, college readiness programs, and community networks to access information and navigate complex admissions and financial aid systems, highlighting the importance of institutional supports in shaping how families engage with college-going processes. These experiences suggest that families' ability to support their students is closely tied to the accessibility and distribution of resources within broader policy and institutional environments. Recognizing parents/legal guardians as partners in the college-going process, rather than positioning them as lacking knowledge or engagement, may help institutions design more inclusive structures that better support FGCS and their families.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding college access not solely as an individual student endeavor but as a process shaped through relationships, resource mobilization, and institutional contexts. By highlighting both parent/legal guardian and student perspectives, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how family support is conceptualized, enacted, and experienced throughout the college admissions process. As institutions continue working to expand access to higher education, recognizing and building upon the strengths families already bring to the college-going process may serve as a critical step toward creating more equitable pathways to educational opportunity.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Email for Parents/legal guardians

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Dissertation Research on Supporting First-Generation College Students

Dear [Parent/Guardian's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Kayla Storrs, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Adult and Higher Education Program through the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation, which focuses on how parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students support their students during the college admissions process.

As someone who plays a crucial role in your student's academic journey, your voice and experiences are incredibly valuable. I am reaching out in hopes that you would consider participating in my dissertation research study. Participation would involve a confidential one-on-one interview, conducted via Zoom, that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. To thank you for your time, you will receive a $15 electronic gift card after participating in the interview.

Your insights and experiences will help deepen understanding of the unique ways that parents/legal guardians support their students and will contribute to future efforts to better serve first-generation college students and their families.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please feel free to reply to this email or contact me at 806-367-1464 or kstorrs@ou.edu.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. Your story matters, and I hope you will allow me to provide you with a platform to highlight that story through this research. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,
Kayla Storrs, MPH
Doctoral Candidate, Adult and Higher Education
The University of Oklahoma
806-367-1464
Kstorrs@ou.edu

Recruitment Email for Students

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Dissertation Research on Supporting First-Generation College Students

Dear [Student's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Kayla Storrs, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Adult and Higher Education Program through the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation, which focuses on how parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students support their students during the college admissions process.

As part of this study, I'm inviting first-generation students and one of their parents/legal guardians or guardians to participate in a one-time, 45–60-minute interview conducted via Zoom. The goal is to better understand the experiences, challenges, and strengths involved in navigating the college admissions process together. To thank you for your time, you will receive a $15 electronic gift card after participating in the interview.

Your participation would be incredibly valuable and will help inform how colleges and universities can better support first-generation families throughout the admissions journey.
If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please feel free to reply to this email or contact me at 806-367-1464 or kstorrs@ou.edu

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,
Kayla Storrs, MPH
Doctoral Candidate, Adult and Higher Education
The University of Oklahoma
806-367-1464
Kstorrs@ou.edu



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS!

*For a dissertation study focusing on the experiences of the **parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students** and the perceptions of their ability to support their student through the college admissions process.*

QUALIFICATIONS TO PARTICIPATE

- ☑ Parents/legal guardians of first-generation college student
- ☑ Has not completed a 4-year college degree
- ☑ Has a student currently enrolled at The University of Oklahoma in their first year
- ☑ Is willing to discuss and share their experiences supporting their student in the college admissions process

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- ☑ Completion of a 5-8 minute demographic questionnaire
- ☑ 60-90 minute Zoom interview with the researcher (Confidential and voluntary)
- ☑ Participants can expect a $15 gift card for completing the demographic questionnaire AND the Zoom interview

IF YOU MEET THIS QUALIFICATIONS, THEN YOU ARE QUALIFIED TO PARTICIPATE!

Scan the QR code or click in link provided to complete the demographic questionnaire

https://ousurvey.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1TAVU36MdW2GTjM



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS!

*For a dissertation study focusing on the experiences of the parents/guardians of **first-generation college students** and the perceptions of the ability to support their student through the college admissions process.*

QUALIFICATIONS TO PARTICIPATE

- ☑ Identify as a first-generation college student
- ☑ Neither parent(s)/guardian(s) have completed a 4-year college degree
- ☑ Is currently enrolled at The University of Oklahoma in their first year
- ☑ Is willing to discuss and share their experiences in the college admissions process

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- ☑ Completion of a 5-8 minute demographic questionnaire
- ☑ 45-60 minute Zoom interview with the researcher (Confidential and voluntary)
- ☑ Participants can expect a $15 gift card for completing the demographic questionnaire AND the Zoom interview

IF YOU MEET THIS QUALIFICATIONS, THEN YOU ARE QUALIFIED TO PARTICIPATE!

Scan the QR code or click in link provided to complete the demographic questionnaire

https://ousurvey.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2f0BAnpTWsz2NWm

Appendix B

Demographic Surveys

Parents/Legal Guardians

1. How old are you?
    - Under 30 years old
    - 30-39 years old
    - 40-49 years old
    - 50-59 years old
    - 60+ years old
2. What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply)
    - Black/African American
    - Hispanic/Latino
    - White
    - Asian
    - Native American/Indigenous
    - Hawaiin/Pacific Islander
    - Two or more
    - Other: Please Specify _____
3. What is your gender identification?
    - Male
    - Female
    - Non-Binary
    - Prefer not to say
4. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
    - Less than high school
    - High school diploma/GED
    - Some college (no degree)
    - Associate's degree
    - Bachelor's degree
    - Master's degree
    - Doctorate degree
    - Professional degree (JD, MD)
5. What is your current employment status?
    - Full-time employed

- Part-time employed
- Self-employed
- Unemployed
- Unable to work
- Retired
- Other: Please Specify _____

6. What is your marital status?
    - Single
    - Married
    - Divorced
    - Separated
    - Widowed
7. What is your annual household income?
    - Under $25,000
    - $25,000 - $49,999
    - $50,000 - $74,999
    - $75,000 - $99,999
    - $100,000 - $119,000
    - $120,000 - $149,000
    - $150,000+
8. What is the primary language spoken in your home?
    - English
    - Spanish
    - French
    - Portuguese
    - Arabic
    - Italian
    - Mandarin
    - Urdu
    - Other: Please specify _____
9. How many students are a parent to?
    - 1
    - 2
    - 3
    - 4+
10. Is this your first student to attend college?

- Yes
- No

11. Did your student participate in any college prep programs (Upward Bound, AVID, College Talent Search, local mentorship program, etc?
    - Yes
        - If so, which one? _____
    - No
12. Did you and your student attend [Rooted] Day?
    - Yes
    - No
13. Did you and/or your student attend any other on-campus events prior to enrolling?
    - Yes
        - Which one (s)? _____
    - No
14. Did you attend any college preparation workshops, financial aid sessions, or parent meetings related to the college process?
    - Yes
        - Which one(s)? _____
    - No

Students

1. How old are you?
    - 17 years old
    - 18 years old
    - 19 years old
    - 20 years old
    - 21 years old
    - 22+ years old
2. What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply)
    - Black/African American
    - Hispanic/Latino
    - White
    - Asian
    - Native American/Indigenous
    - Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
    - Two or more
    - Other: Please Specify _____

3. What is your gender identification?
    - Male
    - Female
    - Non-Binary
    - Prefer not to say
4. What is the highest level of education that your parent(s)/guardian(s) have completed?
    - Less than high school
    - High school diploma/GED
    - Some college (no degree)
    - Associate's degree
    - Bachelor's degree
    - Master's degree
    - Doctorate degree
    - Professional degree (JD, MD)
5. What is your current employment status?
    - Full-time employed
    - Part-time employed
    - Self-employed
    - Unemployed
    - Unable to work
    - Retired
    - Other: Please Specify _____
6. What is your annual household income?
    - Under $25,000
    - $25,000 - $49,999
    - $50,000 - $74,999
    - $75,000 - $99,999
    - $100,000 - $119,000
    - $120,000 - $149,000
    - $150,000+
7. What is the primary language spoken in your home?
    - English
    - Spanish
    - French
    - Portuguese
    - Arabic
    - Italian
    - Mandarin
    - Urdu
    - Other: Please specify _____
8. How many siblings do you have?
    - 1
    - 2

- 3
- 4+

9. Is this your first student to attend college?
    - Yes
    - No
10. Did you participate in any college prep programs (Upward Bound, AVID, College Talent Search, local mentorship program, etc?
    - Yes
        - If so, which one? _____
    - No
11. Did you and your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend Reaper's Day?
    - Yes, my parent(s)/guardian(s) both attended
    - I attended but my parent(s)/guardian(s) did not
    - My parent(s)/guardian(s) attended but I did not
    - No, neither of us attended
12. Did you and/or your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend any other on-campus events prior to enrolling?
    - Yes
        - Which one (s)? _____
    - No

13. What other on-campus events did you and/or your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend prior to enrolling?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Forms

Consent to Participate in Research- Parents/legal guardians
University of Oklahoma

You are invited to participate in research entitled Supporting First-generation Students: Parents/legal guardians' Experiences and Perceptions of their Roles in the College Admission Process.
If you agree to participate, you will complete a demographic questionnaire that will take 5-10 minutes and take part in a scheduled 60-90 minute interview conducted via Zoom, asking about your experiences supporting your student through the college admissions process.
You may experience these risks by participating in this research:
Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made could become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

You may experience these benefits: Although there may not be any direct benefits, to participation, you may find value in being able to reflect on and share your experiences supporting your student through their college admissions journey. You may also take pride in knowing that you are contributing to a deepening of understanding of the supportive role parents/legal guardians play for their students as they navigate the college admissions process.
If you participate, you will receive this compensation: You will be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research in the form of a $15 gift card sent electronically.
Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be: confidential, shared through the use of a pseudonym, and stored securely.
We will not share your data or use it in future research.

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse

any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree for data records to include identifiable information? ___Yes ___ No

Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name?_ Yes ___ No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes___ No

Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes___ No

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? __Yes ___ No

Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:

Kayla Storrs at 806-367-1464 or kstorrs@ou.edu and Dr. Kaleb L. Briscoe at kbriscoe@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT:

Do you agree to participate in this research? ___Yes ___ No

Would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information I've just read to you?
_____ (note response)

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Date of Consent Process: _____

Interviewee Name: _____

Name of Researcher: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

Consent to Participate in Research- Students

University of Oklahoma

You are invited to participate in research entitled Supporting First-generation Students: Parents/legal guardians' Experiences and Perceptions of their Roles in the College Admission Process.

If you agree to participate, you will complete a demographic questionnaire that will take 5-10 minutes and take part in a scheduled 45-60 minute interview conducted via Zoom, asking about your experiences supporting your student through the college admissions process.

You may experience these risks by participating in this research:

Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made could become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

You may experience these benefits: Although there may not be any direct benefits, to participation, you may find value in being able to reflect on and share your experiences supporting your student through their college admissions journey. You may also take pride in knowing that you are contributing to a deepening of understanding of the supportive role parents/legal guardians play for their students as they navigate the college admissions process.

If you participate, you will receive this compensation: You will be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research in the form of a $15 gift card sent electronically.

Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be: confidential, shared through the use of a pseudonym, and stored securely.

We will not share your data or use it in future research.

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree for data records to include identifiable information? ___Yes ___ No

Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name?___ Yes ___ No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes___ No

Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes___ No

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? _Yes ___ No

Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:

Kayla Storrs at 806-367-1464 or kstorrs@ou.edu and Dr. Kaleb L. Briscoe at kbriscoe@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT:

Do you agree to participate in this research? __Yes ___ No

Would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information I've just read to you? _____ (note response)

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Date of Consent Process: _____

Interviewee Name: _____

Name of Researcher: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

Appendix D

Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol- Parents/legal guardians

Study Title: Supporting First-generation Students: Parents/legal guardians Experiences and Perceptions of their Roles in the College Admission Process.

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Kayla Storrs, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma. I'm conducting a research study to better understand how parents/legal guardians of first-generation college students describe their experiences during the college admissions process, and how they perceive their ability to support their students through it. This interview should last about 60-90 minutes and your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or to end the interview at any time. With your permission, this interview will be video and audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Your identity will remain confidential, you will be assigned a pseudonym and any identifying information will be removed or changed in the final report.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Interview Questions

Familial Background and Educational Beliefs (Aspiration and Familial Capital)

- Tell me a little about your family and your student's journey to college.
- Talk to me about your own experience with education?
    - What messages about education did you receive growing up?
- What messages did you pass down to your student about education, specifically college?
- What were your hopes and expectations for your student's education?

Navigating the College Admissions Process (Navigational and Social Capital)

- When did you first start thinking about your student going to college? What thoughts or feelings did you have about the idea?
- How confident did you feel in your ability to help your child with applications, financial aid, and other requirements?
- What networks, if any, did you rely on to help you understand the college admissions process?

Parental Involvement and Support

- How would you describe the role you played in your student's decision to apply to college?
- In what ways did you support, guide, or encourage your student during the college application process?
- What aspects of the college application process were most challenging for you? Do you feel like you had enough support or information?
    - How might have financial concerns, language barriers, or time constraints played a role?
    - How did you work through the through you encountered?
- What role did your community, extended family, or cultural background play in your child's college journey?

Perceptions of Institutional Support (Navigational and Resistant Capital)

- Did you feel included in the college application process? Why or why not?
- How well do you think your child's high school prepared you as a parent for the college process?
    - What workshops, meetings, or other resources available to parents/legal guardians that you were aware of? Did you participate in any of them?
- How well do you think MCU prepared you as a parent for the college process?
    - What workshops, meetings, or other resources available to parents/legal guardians that you were aware of? Did you participate in any of them?
- What types of information or resources do you wish you had received from the school or community?
    - Were there specific individuals (teachers, mentors, community members) who helped you navigate the process?

Reflections and Advice (Aspirational and Resistant Capital)

- What did you learn about the college admissions process through this experience?
    - If you could go back and do something differently, what would it be? Why?
- What advice would you give to other parents/legal guardians who are helping their first child apply to college?
- What would you like colleges to know about supporting parents/legal guardians of first-generation students in the college admissions process?

Concluding Questions

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Interview Protocol- Students

Study Title: Supporting First-generation Students: Parent(s)/guardian(s) Experiences and Perceptions of their Roles in the College Admission Process.

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Kayla Storrs, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma. I'm conducting a research study to better understand how parent(s)/guardian(s) of first-generation college students describe their experiences during the college admissions process, and how they perceive their ability to support their students through it. This interview should last about 45-60 minutes and your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or to end the interview at any time. With your permission, this interview will be video and audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Your identity will remain confidential, you will be assigned a pseudonym, and any identifying information will be removed or changed in the final report.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Interview Questions

Familial Background and Educational Beliefs (Aspirational and Familial Capital)

- Tell me a little about your family and your journey to college.
- What has been your family's approach to, or beliefs about, education?
    - What kinds of messages did you receive about school or going to college while growing up?
- Did anyone in your family talk to you about college when you were younger? If so, what did they say?

Navigating the College Admissions Process (Navigational and Social Capital)

- When did you first start thinking seriously about going to college? What thoughts or feelings did you have about it at that time?
- How confident did you feel during the college admissions process (like applications, essays, financial aid)?
- Who did you go to for help or advice about applying to college?
    - Were there people at your school, in your family, or in your community who supported you? If so, what support did they provide?
    - Where did you receive your information about the college admissions process?

Parental Involvement and Support

- How involved were your parent(s)/guardian(s) in your college decision-making process?
- In what ways did your parent(s)/guardian(s) support, encourage, or guide you as you applied to college?
- In what ways do you wish your parent(s)/guardian(s) were able to better support you in the college admissions process?
- What parts of the college application process do you think were hardest for your parent(s)/guardian(s)? Do you feel like they had enough support or information?

    - Did things like money, time, or language barriers play a role in any challenges?
    - How did they overcome the challenges they experienced?
- How did your community, extended family, or cultural background influence your path to college?

Perceptions of Institutional Support (Navigational and Resistant Capital)

- Did you feel included and supported in the college admissions process by your high school? Why or why not?
- What kinds of college preparation resources or programs did your high school offer, and did you participate in any of them?
- Did you feel like your college (MCU) supported you before you officially enrolled (during the admissions process)?
    - Were you aware of any events, meetings, or programs for prospective students or families?
- What information or support do you wish you had received from your high school or your college before enrolling?
    - Were there any mentors, teachers, counselors, or others who helped you?

Reflections and Advice (Aspirational and Resistant Capital)

- What did you learn about the college admissions process from your own experience?
    - If you could go back and change anything, what would you do differently, and why?
- What advice would you give to other first-generation students who are starting the college application process?
- What do you think colleges should know about how to better support students like you during admissions?

Concluding Questions

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your journey to college?
- Do you have any questions for me?